Life Course Research and Social Policies 15

Janeen Baxter · Jack Lam · Jenny Povey · Rennie Lee · Stephen R. Zubrick *Editors*

Family Dynamics over the Life Course

Foundations, Turning Points and Outcomes

Springer

Life Course Research and Social Policies

Volume 15

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Each of the chapters uses recent, unique and high-quality Australian data. In many cases, the data are drawn from longitudinal surveys funded by the Commonwealth Government of Australia. These include: the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey*, conducted by the Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research and funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services; *Growing Up in Australia*: *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*, conducted in partnership by the Department of Social Services, the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Bureau of Statistics; *Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children*, initiated and funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services; *Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants* survey conducted by the Australian Government Department of Social Services; and the *Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth*, funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment. We are very grateful to the data managers, funders and participants in each of these studies and to the Australian government for their foresight and vision in building such a rich and diverse range of high-quality, publicly available longitudinal data assets for Australia. We hope that the analyses provided here will not only showcase the power of these data for answering critical scientific questions but also provide useful evidence for policy-makers and service providers working at the frontline to reduce social disadvantage in Australia.

The editors would like to particularly thank each of the chapter authors for generously agreeing to contribute their time and expertise to the volume. We are delighted with the quality of the chapters, the depth of the analyses and the coverage of life course stages reported here. We believe the chapters showcase some of the best Australian expertise in life course and longitudinal analyses, and we hope that readers will find the research engaging, informative and useful. The idea for this volume originally emerged at a Life Course Centre research retreat held in Perth, Western Australia, in 2019. As with all research ideas, successful execution requires a great deal of hard work and dedication, and we are grateful to our colleagues who stayed the course and to those who joined the project to ensure it could be delivered.

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Contents

Chapter 1
Introduction

Janeen Baxter, Jack Lam, Rennie Lee, Jenny Povey, and Stephen R. Zubrick

Families are the starting point for life course journeys and all families want to give their children the best possible start in life. As children grow older and transition through key life course stages, such as schooling, entry to the labour market, relationship formation and parenthood, families continue to shape experiences and outcomes. There is ample evidence across many studies of the long reach of family background on opportunities and outcomes well into adulthood and across generations (Bradbury et al., 2015; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Ermisch et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2021; Lersch & Baxter, 2021). But families vary in the extent to which they can provide the resources, skills and environments that enable children and young people to achieve their dreams. Understanding what these differences are, how they vary across social groups and how they are supported or impeded by key social institutions and across different social contexts is the focus of this book.

Our approach is guided by a life course perspective. Life course theory is a multidisciplinary perspective that foregrounds the importance of timing and sequencing of key life events, variations across time and context, connections between individuals through linked lives and agency for understanding variations in pathways and outcomes (Elder & Giele, 2009; Mayer, 2009). As discussed in Chap. 2, different disciplines emphasise different aspects of life course theory, but central to all

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approaches is the notion of connections over time as individuals move through culturally and historically defined stages influenced by past experiences, events and circumstances. A life course approach draws attention to both micro-level individual factors such as cognition, personality and biology as well as social and cultural forces at the macro level, like education systems, labour markets and social and cultural values. Importantly for us, a life course approach emphasises family relationships and resources as key to understanding how individual biographies develop and play out over time in both the short and long-term.

Life course journeys are always somewhat unique. There is debate about whether life courses are becoming more variable and less standardised over time or whether most people follow broadly similar, albeit different to previous generations, pathways (Macmillan, 2005). Some have suggested that individuals are increasingly able to pursue their own individual biographies free from many of the normative expectations and constraints imposed in previous times (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). This may include delaying major life events, skipping some, adding new ones and reorganising the timing and sequencing of others (Macmillan, 2005). On the other hand, there is also evidence that most people still follow broadly normative pathways (Brückner & Mayer, 2005), although with some new stages added, such as emerging adulthood as examined in Chap. 8, cohabitation before marriage as discussed in Chap. 10 and a new stage following retirement but prior to old age, referred to by Moen (2016) as "encore adulthood."

Andrew Cherlin (2004, 2009) elegantly captured some of these ideas in relation to changes in the timing and ordering of marriage. As discussed in Chap. 10, Cherlin argued that many of the norms that once guided marriage have been weakened or lost as societies become increasingly secular and legal institutions recognize a diversity of family types—a process he refers to as the "deinstitutionalization" of marriage. But just as marriage has lost much of its practical significance through deinstitutionalization, it has taken on a new symbolic status according to Cherlin (2004). Marriage he argues, is now something to be celebrated and achieved as the capstone to one's life after other goals, such as having children, buying a house, establishing a career or steady employment, have been achieved. Marriage has thus shifted he argues, from being one early marker of adulthood to a prestige status that is a capstone of adult life.

As argued by Cherlin (2004) and others (see for example, McLanahan, 2004), at least part of the variability in life course pathways is a result of circumstance and opportunity, not choice. Not everyone has the same opportunities to achieve milestones at the same age and in the same way and some may never reach certain milestones. There is also evidence that individuals, especially young adults, are remaking and redefining traditional markers of adulthood, subverting conventional conceptions of adulthood taken-for-granted in prior generations (Hartmann & Swartz, 2006; Manning, 2020). Unfortunately, academic research often lags behind in developing theories and methods to understand the new life course pathways of young adults, beyond the normative and linear approach often undertaken (Manning, 2020; Roy & Jones, 2014) though there have been some new advances in recent years (Sánchez-Mira & Bernardi, 2021). Nevertheless, it has been clearly shown that individuals with fewer socio-economic resources will face larger hurdles in achieving certain life course milestones, such as developmental skills and competencies in early childhood, high school completion or long-term intimate partnerships, than those with greater socio-economic resources.

There have been enormous changes in Australian family life in recent decades, including married women's movement into paid work, increasing social acceptance of alternative family forms, legislative and policy support for gender equality and greater visibility and acceptance of non-conventional forms of sexuality and intimate partnerships. At one level, these changes suggest that families are more egalitarian than ever, and individuals have greater choice and agency without the constraints and restrictions that shaped the lives of previous generations. But we also know that economic inequality is substantial and possibly increasing (Huang et al., 2016; Davidson et al., 2018; United Nations, 2020), gender equality has stalled and is declining on some measures (World Economic Forum, 2019; WGEA, 2019) and social stratification along class lines means there are identifiable groups who continue to have limited opportunities for financial prosperity and wellbeing, as measured by outcomes such as income mobility, financial security, social inclusion and loneliness (Scutella et al., 2009; McLachlan et al., 2013; Productivity Commission, 2018). These inequalities inevitably place constraints on life course choices.

Our aim in this book is to provide unique and up-to-date Australian evidence about contemporary life course pathways in Australia. As might be expected in an edited collection, the chapters vary in the extent to which they articulate how life course theory applies to their topics, but all are guided by broad life course principles in their focus on the role of families and personal relationships in the transmission of (dis)advantage over the life course. While focused on Australia, we hope that the issues covered are of relevance and interest to researchers across a range of countries. We use insights from life course theory and recent high-quality data to examine the transmission of social and economic inequalities within families over the life course. We examine variations across social groups, focus on key life course stages, and draw out the implications of the research for public policies designed to support families and ensure greater equality for all groups.

Although we do not focus explicitly on social class as an organising frame for our analyses, Australia, like many other advanced capitalist countries, is a country with deep class divisions and inequalities (Connell, 1977; Connell & Irving, 1979; Chamberlain, 1983, Baxter et al., 1991; Threadgold & Gerrard, 2022). Many of the outcomes we consider could be examined using the language and concepts of class analysis and our work aligns with the views of class theorists that disadvantage is social and relational and generated by the social positions that individuals occupy rather than individuals themselves. But consistent with the multidisciplinary and applied focus of our work, we use terms like social disadvantage, inequality of outcomes, and differential access to opportunities and resources rather than social class. We believe these terms are consistent with a life course approach, and they resonate more easily across disciplines and to policy makers and service providers charged with improving distributions of resources and access to opportunities.

Australia is in the fortunate situation of having several high-quality, government-funded, longitudinal studies that collect detailed information about life course journeys for the whole population, but also on specific social groups, for example children, humanitarian migrants and Indigenous children. These studies have been running for many years and form the basis for much of the analyses presented in the chapters that follow.

The book is motivated by three broad research questions that have guided our selection of chapter topics:

1. In what ways do families influence the opportunities and outcomes of individuals at specific stages of the life course, and how do these processes vary across social groups?
2. How do families interact with other social institutions, such as schools, higher education providers, labour markets and welfare systems to influence opportunities and outcomes of individuals?
3. What can we learn from research informed by life course theory about family dynamics and social disadvantage and how can these learnings be translated into effective policy solutions?

The Australian Context

Australia is a wealthy, politically stable, liberal welfare country with high living standards, universal health care, relatively low levels of unemployment, a system of government-funded welfare safety nets and a relatively resilient economy. It is in many ways a "lucky country" with Australia one of the few countries that avoided an economic recession during the Global Financial Crisis in 2009 (Productivity Commission, 2018) and experiencing a sustained period of economic growth over the last 25–30 years, in part driven by a mining and investment boom. Labour force participation rates have grown from 63% in 1989 to 65% in 2016, and much more rapidly for women than men, by about 7 percentage points over the same period, and unemployment has dropped from almost 8% in the early 1990s to under 5% in 2021 (Productivity Commission, 2018; ABS 2021). But the Australian economic story is not straightforward and the statistics above mask other trends—rising housing costs, low wage growth, a concentration of women in part-time employment, and rising gender wage gaps—that leave some groups behind and point to persistent economic and social disadvantage (Davidson et al., 2020; Productivity Commission, 2018). This means that not all Australians have the same opportunities to move smoothly along a standard normative life course pathway with some groups consistently missing out. Key social groups that fall into this category include women, migrants (particularly refugees and humanitarian migrants), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, and LGBTQI+ people.

Relative income poverty, defined as half of the median Australian disposable income, is the level deemed necessary to maintain an acceptable standard of living

(Davidson et al., 2020). In 2020, 3.24 million Australians (13.6% of the population) were estimated to be living below this poverty line, including 774,000 children (17.7% of all children) (Davidson et al., 2020). Material deprivation represents the balance between resources and the capacity to meet essential needs and affected just under 12% of Australians in 2015–2016 (Productivity Commission, 2018). Multiple deprivation (lacking at least 2 of a list of defined 'basic needs') is more common among Indigenous Australians (40% of Indigenous Australians), single parents, those with a disability that severely restricts their ability to work, and those receiving welfare as their main source of income (Productivity Commission, 2020).

Gendered differences in lifetime economic earnings for Australian women remain substantial. In May 2020, the average female wage was 86% of the average male wage (full time adult average weekly ordinary time earnings) and had not changed since the previous year (ABS, 2020b). Women are more likely to work part-time, with women forming 68.7% of all part-time employees in 2019 (DESE, 2019). Among parents with a child under six, 94.4% of men participate in the labour force, compared to 65.5% of women, and among these employed parents, less than 10% of men are working part-time, compared to two thirds of women (ABS, 2020b). In 2017, retiring women had 47% less super than men (Dawson et al., 2020).

In addition, Australian occupations are segregated by gender. Only 46.5% of Australians work in gender-mixed organisations; that is organisations which are neither male- or female- dominated (WGEA, 2019). This gender segregation is significant as female-dominated industries continue to pay lower salaries to employees on average. In 2015, the median starting salary for graduates with a Bachelor's degree was $2000 higher for men than for women (ABS, 2016). However, this gap has been decreasing since 2012. Educational pathways also vary by gender, with 40% of women aged 25–29 and only 30% of men having attained a Bachelor's degree or above in 2016, but men aged 15–24 three times more likely to be enrolled in an apprenticeship or traineeship than women (ABS, 2016).

Single parenthood predominantly falls on women. Of the 1 million single parent families in Australia (families classified as two related people, at least one of whom is over the age of 15, living in the same household), 64.8% (663,000 families) have dependents. Of the single parent families with dependents, 81.6% are single mothers (ABS, 2020c). Single motherhood is associated with lower workforce participation compared to single fathers, with 57.6% of single mothers in employment compared with 76.2% of single fathers (ABS, 2020c). Single parents are less likely to be employed when their children are young and become more likely to be employed as their children age, with this trend stronger among single mothers.

Educationally, migrants are not disadvantaged on average in comparison with the general population. Of adult migrants (those who arrived in Australia after the age of 15), 75% have a non-school qualification, compared to 63% of the general population (ABS, 2020d). Around 45% of adult migrants arrive in Australia with one non-school qualification, while 44% complete one (or another one) in Australia. However, there are important differences across migrant groups with some non-English speaking background groups faring considerably worse than their English-speaking counterparts in terms of employment and earnings and in particular, refugees and humanitarian migrants showing much worse outcomes on a range of indicators than migrants entering Australia though other means (Fozdar & Hartley, 2014; Hugo, 2014).

There are stark contrasts in outcomes for Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous populations in Australia. Despite government targets since 2008 for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes across a range of areas including child mortality, early childhood education, school attendance and completion, reading and numeracy, and employment and life expectancy, only two indicators (early childhood education and school completion) were defined as on track in 2019 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). Life expectancy at birth in 2015–2017, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males was estimated to be 71.6 years, 8.6 years less than life expectancy at birth for non-Indigenous males and 75.6 years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females, 7.8 years less than life expectancy at birth for non-Indigenous females (ABS, 2018b). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and children have a suicide rate double that of the non-Indigenous population (ABS, 2020a). In the period 2015–2019, suicide was the leading cause of death among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, accounting for 32.4% of deaths among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In 2017, the Indigenous child mortality rate (0–4 years) was 2.4 times that of non-Indigenous children (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019).

These differences are further differentiated by geographic location. Fifty percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote areas are unemployed compared to 39% in non-remote areas (ABS, 2018a). Only 25% of Indigenous people aged 20–64 years living in remote areas reported completing Year 12 at the 2016 census compared to 39% of those living in non-remote areas (ABS, 2018a). More broadly, for the Australian population as a whole, educational outcomes reflect remote and regional disadvantage. Living remotely is associated with one third of the likelihood of going to university compared to living in a major city (Cassells et al., 2017).

There is also evidence in Australia, like other western countries, of intergenerational inheritance of disadvantage. One example is educational attainment. Nearly two-thirds of people in Australia with a parent who attained a university qualification also attain a tertiary qualification compared to 21% of people whose parents highest qualification is Year 10 or below (Cassells et al., 2017). Another example is government support. Young people from families reliant on welfare are much more likely to receive welfare support themselves. Bubonya and Cobb-Clark (2019) find that the main mechanism is incomplete high school, due to disrupted educational conditions and a lack of financial support.

The Australian welfare system has been categorised as broadly consistent with a liberal welfare democratic regime, according to Esping-Andersen's typology (1990). Countries in this category are characterised by means-tested welfare payments, low levels of social security payments, and a focus on employment as the main pathway to self-sufficiency and independence. But Australia also has a relatively generous aged care pension system and universal health care. The Australian government recently initiated a "Try, Test and Learn" fund based broadly on a social investment approach. The intention of the fund was to support trials of new co-designed social interventions aimed at moving those most at-risk of long-term welfare dependence into employment. Several priority groups were identified of particular concern including young parents, migrants and refugees, older unemployed and young students and carers. Interventions were primarily tailored to individuals in one of three work transition phases: work-ready; developing work readiness; and those with limited capacity to work due to experiencing non-vocational barriers. Evaluation of the trials was undertaken using government administrative data, surveys and some in-depth interviews with participants and service providers. Critics of the fund point to the potential of this approach to surveil the poor by identifying and monitoring outcomes of certain “problem” groups, a tendency to overlook the complexity of individual lives by focusing on a single outcome (employment), and the assumption that movement off welfare is always a desirable outcome (Staines et al., 2020). While these are all valid concerns, it is also the case that the fund was broadly consistent with a life course approach that recognises the importance of intervening early to support new opportunities. The findings pointed to the importance of targeted programs that take account of specific circumstances and especially the level of work-readiness of individuals. Those who are work-ready may benefit from programs designed to support direct pathways into employment including matching with potential employers, support to identify employment opportunities and specific skills training. On the other hand, others may require support to address non-vocational barriers such as health, education and housing to increase their capacity to work or study in the future (Baxter et al., 2021).

Structure of the Book

All editors of the book, and most of the chapter authors, are connected to the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Life Course Centre). The Life Course Centre is a multidisciplinary collaborative research centre investigating the transmission of social disadvantage over the life course and across generations. The editors and authors come from a range of disciplines and backgrounds including sociology, psychology, economics, epidemiology, neuropsychology and social policy, brought together through our involvement in the centre and its ongoing research and policy agenda.

The volume commenced with the idea of bringing together the wealth of research on family dynamics and social disadvantage generated by researchers in the Life Course Centre into a single collection that sheds light on the ways in which families both generate and mitigate social disadvantage. The original idea was to distil key findings into a collection that showcased research highlights from the Centre. As we discussed the structure and format of the book and approached chapter authors about key areas, the volume quickly morphed into a collection of predominantly new research on key life course stages and transitions and social disadvantage.

In all cases we asked authors to highlight how a life course approach informs their research approach and results, the implications for understanding outcomes for socially diverse groups, and the policy implications of their work. Although we expect this book will primarily be read by colleagues in academia, we hope that our research is also useful for those working outside the academy to develop and deliver policy solutions aimed at reducing social disadvantage. Each chapter presents an overview of the latest evidence and issues, uses high quality, recent, data to examine key processes and outcomes, and discusses implications of the findings for public policies and programs designed to mitigate social and economic disadvantage.

The book organises chapters according to key stages of the life course—the early years, adolescence and young adulthood, adulthood and later life. We commence with an overview of life course theory and discussion of recent advances and new directions in life course theory in Chap. 2. Here we outline the main principles of a life course approach, examine differences across disciplines and discuss new advances and directions in life course theory.

The next three chapters focus on the early years of the life course. In Chap. 3, Zubrick, Taylor, Christensen and Hancock use rich national longitudinal data from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* to examine vocabulary growth, literacy and subsequent school attendance in children aged 4 years and upwards. Their results show surprising variability among children in their early vocabulary and literacy growth which in turn lead to substantial gaps in growth and development at later years. Moreover, the circumstances driving these developmental variations vary widely across groups, highlighting the importance of targeted interventions matched to places and circumstances. The authors conclude that while universal interventions for all children are appropriate in the early years, more targeted programs that address specific barriers will be more effective at older ages. Further, fairness, equity and empowerment of individuals, families and communities must be at the heart of services in order to ensure optimal engagement with, and outcomes from, services. These conclusions resonate strongly with many of the chapters in the book, and particularly those examining educational outcomes.

In Chap. 4, Fatima, Cleary, King, Solomon, McDaid, Hasan, Mamun and Baxter examine the importance of cultural identity for the developmental outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This research uses data from a unique study, the *Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children*, designed to assess the issues facing Indigenous children, and their families and communities and to provide research and policy evidence to improve opportunities and outcomes. The authors explore social and emotional wellbeing in Indigenous Australian children and investigate whether cultural identity protects against social-emotional problems. The results clearly show that Indigenous children with strong cultural identity and knowledge are less likely to experience social and emotional problems than their counterparts. While Indigenous children face many of the same circumstances and issues challenging developmental growth of non-Indigenous children, they are also subject to additional challenges brought about by white colonisation, loss of sovereignty and dispossession of lands. This chapter contributes to growing recognition of the role of cultural identity in promoting strong health and social outcomes of

Indigenous Australians and further evidence to support the change from a deficit narrative to a strengths-based discourse for improved health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australian children.

Chapter 5 turns our attention to children of humanitarian migrants (refugees). These children come to Australia under vastly different circumstances than migrants entering the country under other types of visas. Forced migration and displacement due to violence, persecution, or natural disasters, combined with often perilous journeys and time spent in refugee camps and processing centres, mean that these children face enormous challenges in integrating into their new country. Lee and Cheung draw on data from *Building a New Life in Australia*, a longitudinal study of humanitarian migrants in Australia, to examine the origins and premigration experiences of refugee children, the structure of refugee families and households and variations in adaptation and language by national origin and gender of the children. Their results show that about half of the sample of children have post-traumatic stress disorder, with refugee girls faring worse than boys. Girls also have poorer self-rated health but do better than boys on standard measures of strengths and difficulties. There are also important differences in outcomes according to national origin with children from Central Asia, Iraq and Afghanistan faring poorly on health, psycho-social measures and English literacy compared to children from other regions suggesting that prolonged conflict in countries of origin have a large impact on outcomes for refugee children. Lee and Cheung conclude that while policies and programmes around housing, healthcare, education, employment and language programs need to be comprehensive to enable refugee children to transition to full enjoyment of all opportunities afforded in Australian society, targeted policies are also required to address the challenges faced by children from specific countries.

The next three chapters examine outcomes for adolescents, young adults transitioning from education to employment and emerging adolescents. In Chap. 6, Povey, Plage, Huang, Gramotnev, Cook, Austerberry and Western examine parental engagement in adolescent education using data from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* as well as material from in-depth interviews from a recent study investigating the impacts of COVID-19 on education outcomes of highly disadvantaged students. They show that parent engagement with schooling has a positive effect on students' outcomes such as self-concept, mental health and aspirations in early and middle adolescence, even when accounting for family and school context factors. Further, parent engagement in late adolescence, with students from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, continues to be important for positive student outcomes.

Tomaszewski, Perales, Xiang and Kubler focus on young people's journeys into and out of university in Chap. 7. They investigate differences in pathways through the higher education system for individuals from low and high socio-economic status backgrounds using three flagship Australian datasets, the *Households, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* survey, the *Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth* and the *Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset*. They show large gaps in access to university as measured by enrolment by socio-economic status with barriers manifesting among low socio-economic status students at the age of 15, compared to their high socio-economic status peers. At the participation stage during ages 18–22 years, there is evidence of barriers at the individual, area and school levels. Finally, their results show the effects of socio-economic background extend beyond graduation and although there is evidence of a 'catch up' effect for some groups, it can take them several years. Tomaszewski and colleagues argue for early multi-pronged and targeted interventions, well before the age of 15, in order to align educational opportunities and trajectories for low and high socio-economic status students.

Ribar and Wong examine emerging adulthood, the period where young people are legal adults, but without the full responsibilities and autonomy of independent adults. For Chap. 8, Ribar and Wong use data from the *Households, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia* Survey and define emerging adults as those who are either co-residing with their parents or receiving direct financial transfers. They find that the proportion of 18- to 25-year-old Australians who are emerging adults has increased over time with two-thirds engaged in education. Although most emerging adults are in employment, the majority are on casual contracts (short-term positions with no leave entitlements) with low average earnings and low financial resources. The majority attain independence by about age 22, but almost 10% return to the family home in the year after leaving, indicating the fragility of early independence for some groups. Ribar and Wong's analyses provide a rich picture of this new life course stage with their analyses highlighting significant variability in life course pathways for different social groups.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 turn to life course experiences in adulthood including the challenges of combining work and family, entering long-term intimate partnerships and becoming parents. Broadway and Kalb show that the percentage of men and women in full-time employment has decreased in Australia since the 1970s, and particularly for men. This trend, combined with increases in the availability of parental leave and greater opportunities for other kinds of flexible work, including working from home, should lead to better work-family balance for both men and women. But the evidence presented in Chap. 9 shows that the burden of care work still falls disproportionately on women. Not only does this lead to high stress and short-term inequitable outcomes for women, it also presents challenges later in the life course. The consequences include lack of retirement savings and a significant poverty risk for women in older ages. Furthermore, Broadway and Kalb show the impacts of care on employment are often more evident for low-skilled women, which in turn jeopardises children's health, education, career aspirations and future earnings prospects, potentially deepening a cycle of entrenched disadvantage and intergenerational transmission of poverty. Broadway and Kalb provide a convincing case that policies to improve work-family balance will have a multitude of positive benefits, not just for families but also society more broadly.

In Chap. 10, Lee and Baxter examine differences in who gets married, who cohabits and who stays single and the consequences for financial and health outcomes using data from the Households, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey. Like emerging adulthood, cohabitation has developed as a typical new life course stage, with over 80% of Australian couples cohabiting for a period prior to marriage, and about 18% cohabiting at any one time (Qu, 2020). The percentage of people staying single is also increasing (Qu, 2020). Lee and Baxter find that married individuals are more advantaged than their cohabiting and single counterparts across several measures of socioeconomic wellbeing. Married individuals are more likely to be employed, own a home, and have access to emergency funds. Lee and Baxter also investigate outcomes across different partnership statuses to investigate whether marriage selects more advantaged people or has protective effects. There is evidence for both selection and protection effects in these trends, with marriage both selecting more advantaged individuals and providing more protective effects than cohabiting or remaining single. Overall, the analyses show that those who transition from single to married have the strongest mental health and financial wellbeing while those who do not partner have the worst outcomes. These differences persist over time and are consistent for men and women, though men have higher wellbeing, employment, and financial security than women.

Chapter 11 focuses on parenting, arguably one of the most significant life course transitions affecting outcomes for both adults and children. Burke and Dittman explain the importance of individual, family, community and policy contexts in shaping parenting practices and highlight the impact of social disadvantage on parenting styles. They detail the complex interplay between the contextual and individual factors that shape parenting experiences and behaviours and whether aspects of parenting and disadvantage may be passed from one generation to the next. Parental support programs can be very effective in improving parenting practices, but often these programs are delivered to specific groups, ignoring evidence that such programs can be very effective for all parents and are an important means of interrupting the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage. Government funding of population level programs is critical and Burke and Dittman advocate for expansion of such programs to parenting at other stages of the life course, such as during emerging adulthood and grandparenthood.

Family dynamics across generations amongst lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people is the focus of Chap. 12. Campbell and Perales investigate relationships between LGB people and their parents and whether the quality of these relationships affect parenting aspirations later in the life course. They show that despite Australian society becoming less heterosexist, a minority of LGB people surveyed in the *Households, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* study still experience negative relationships with their parents. The data show that these disparities emerge early, with a turning point evident at age 11, and they persist across the life course. They also find that that the less satisfied people are with their relationships with their parents, the less likely they are to desire to have children of their own. Specifically, gay men who express parenting desires were substantially less likely to expect to fulfill those aspirations if satisfaction with their relationships with their own parents was low. Campbell and Perales propose that internalised homophobia, negative self-concept, stigma and low social support may be mechanisms underlying this finding. They conclude that equality of outcomes for LGB people must include support and education for parents, as well as continuing to challenge heteronormative social structures.

In Chap. 13 Lam, Dickson and Baxter shift our attention to the later stages of the life course when adults are potentially at greater risk of social isolation and loneliness. At a time in the life course when individuals may have both a strong need for social connections and support and more time to spend with friends and family, older adults may find themselves more isolated and disconnected due to retirement, fewer resources and declining health and mobility. The degree to which people feel connected and supported has been shown to be related to physical and mental health, as well as morbidity and life expectancy (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Luo et al., 2012). Lam, Dickson and Baxter use qualitative interview data with 50 older adults living in the community to highlight variations in experiences of loneliness. The results show that those who maintain strong social ties over the adult life course report less loneliness, but events such as the loss of a spouse, or relocation are disruptors that can render individuals more susceptible to later-life loneliness. There is also evidence here of the long reach of childhood events and experiences in shaping feelings of loneliness and social connection, pointing to the complex ways in which loneliness is shaped by both contemporary and temporally distant experiences.

There is increasing emphasis in Australia on research engagement and translation of findings to address current social problems and issues. Translating findings from academia to public policy is not always straightforward. Researchers typically design projects around academic interests and in relation to available data and funding scheme priorities, while policymakers normally require more focussed research on a specific issue and with much shorter time-horizons than is usual for academic research. In Chap. 14, Reddel, Hand and Lata take up these issues, outlining some of the history and challenges in translating research on family dynamics and social disadvantage to Australian social policy. Their chapter canvases the way research has influenced key Australian social policies such as the design of the social security system, childcare policies, work-family balance policies, gender equality strategies and support for vulnerable families. Reddel, Hand and Lata conclude by proposing a comprehensive set of criteria to support research and policy impact which would help to reform ad hoc approaches to research and policy partnering and impact and improve outcomes for families over the life course.

Finally, in Chap. 15 we reflect on the key findings from the book, discuss emerging directions and trends in life course research and outline what we believe are some of the key challenges still to be addressed. We argue that life course theory provides a powerful framework for showing that social disadvantage accumulates across the life course and that social institutions shape outcomes and variations across social groups. But we suggest further work is needed to understand the specific mechanisms of change leading to the accumulation of disadvantage and how these mechanisms vary across place, space and time. Individuals occupy multiple social spaces and identities at the same time, as suggested by theories of intersectionality, and contexts and circumstances may change rapidly as shown most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic. Theories that explain mechanisms of change must therefore be contextual and supported by evidence from high quality data and must move away from average outcomes to assess experiences of disparate social groups across place and time.

Families are possibly more important than ever. As Australia, like many other countries, navigates its way through the COVID crisis and the many health, social and economic challenges thrown up by the pandemic, it is likely that families will play an increasingly important role in buffering these negative impacts. It is families that we often turn to in times of crisis, and families that are the backstop for the support and resources we need to survive and move forward when other sources of support fail or prove insufficient. But families are not all equally able to provide these supports. To say that families are important is, of course, only the starting point. The more important task, as social scientists and policy makers, is to unpack how this occurs, under what circumstances families contribute to positive or negative outcomes, how these accumulate or decline over the life course and how they vary across cultures and groups and what supports are needed to bolster family resources. These are the broad goals of this book.

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Chapter 2
Families, Life Courses and the Intergenerational Transmission of Social Disadvantage in Australia

Rennie Lee, Jack Lam, Janeen Baxter, Jenny Povey, and Stephen R. Zubrick

At the most fundamental level, a life course approach means understanding that outcomes for individuals and groups are best explained when we take account of the experiences of previous events and the transitions and pathways followed through life to arrive at a particular point. This is intuitively straightforward. If we are to explain why one child attains high grades and achieves well at school for example, but another does not, it is useful to know something about the life history of each child, their family background and the life events that have potentially shaped their learning outcomes. But a life course approach is much more than simply knowing about pathways and life events. It also means understanding how context and circumstances have shaped the types of pathways available to individuals, the role of important others in opening or blocking pathways, how institutional and organisational settings shape experiences and the importance of timing and sequencing of events and transitions experienced along that pathway (Elder & Giele, 2009; Mayer, 2009). A life course approach therefore seeks to understand the actions, behaviour and experiences of individuals by combining insights about the individual as well as the broader social forces surrounding them.

Compared to some other approaches that either only focus on individual level drivers of outcomes, as is common in some psychological theories, or institutional level factors, as is common in some economic theories, a life course approach is a

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comprehensive and powerful framework for addressing both individual and societal outcomes and the connections between them (Alwin, 2012). Of course, to effectively undertake a life course approach for understanding social outcomes requires collecting, or otherwise accessing, large amounts of information about individuals, families, places, policies, institutions and historical contexts. This approach will often be time consuming and expensive and potentially beyond the scope of researchers. Nevertheless, life course approaches have become very popular amongst researchers and policy-makers, gained currency across disciplines, and developed alongside increased availability of longitudinal panel and administrative data (Mayer, 2009). Such data sources allow us to investigate how lives unfold over time and identify key milestones, transitions, and outcomes across a wide range of areas. A range of disciplines, including epidemiology, criminology, sociology, economics and psychology, have increasingly adopted life course approaches, or some variation, as part of their conceptual toolbox to explain various outcomes (Alwin, 2012).

This chapter provides an overview of the key elements of a life course approach, explains some of the key differences across disciplines and the strengths and weaknesses of a life course approach for understanding the role of families in the transmission of (dis)advantage. We discuss how a life course approach may help to explain intergenerational disadvantage in Australia including in the early years, during adolescence and adulthood and present recent evidence on intergenerational inequality in Australia. In doing so, we outline some of the conceptual and substantive issues guiding the analyses presented in later chapters on the early years, education, labour markets, marriage, parenthood and ageing, as well as explain how a life course approach might assist to understand outcomes for specific social groups such as migrants and refugees, Indigenous children and LGBTQ+ groups.

What Is a Life Course Approach?

What Is the Life Course and Why Should We Study It?

The life course perspective focuses on understanding life-long human development as embedded in historical social context (Elder et al., 2003). Focusing on “changing lives in changing contexts” (Elder & Shanahan, 2006, p. 667), the life course describes the trajectories of a human life from birth to death, structured and shaped by age-graded social roles, and historical and interpersonal contexts (Katz et al., 2012). In life course research, event trajectories are compared across individuals or groups on the basis of timing, duration, and rates of change (Giele & Elder, 1998). The perspective is widely referenced in multiple disciplines because it unites individual and institutional factors, guiding lines of inquiry that are appropriate to studying increasingly diverse populations, in times of substantial social change (Alwin, 2012; Elder et al., 2003).

The Origins of the Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is presented by Elder and Giele (2009) as a research paradigm originating from theoretical developments in the 1960s and growing to great influence in social science over the ensuing half-century. Following a turn in the 1950s towards ‘contextualisation’ of research findings through social history, this theoretical work sought to investigate connections between the significant social changes occurring at the time and life patterns under study, considering historical events and cohort differences. At the same time, as populations aged in the United States and Europe, more academic attention was directed towards later life stages, with theories moving toward understanding ageing as a life-long developmental process (Alwin, 2012; Elder et al., 2003). Work on ageing by Bernice Neugarten in the 1950s and 1960s, and Matilda Riley and colleagues in the early 1970s, has been credited with connecting life course research with temporality, by discussing age-defined social roles and the normative dimension of transitions and timing, and the importance of birth cohort to life chances, respectively (Elder & Giele, 2009; Elder et al., 2003). This focus on time and temporal organisation provides the common foundation for cross-disciplinary collaboration and the accumulation of a body of knowledge, which has contributed to the emergence of the paradigm in social research (Giele & Elder, 1998). This research depends on longitudinal methodologies capable of tracking individuals over time. From the early 1970s onwards, the life course perspective became the model for developing national surveys and quantitative social research (Elder & Giele, 2009).

Differing Definitions in the Life Course Literature

Any review of the literature shows a broad glossary of ‘life’ concepts complicated by overlapping and conflicting definitions for key terminology. Among the terminology which require defining are life stages, life cycles, and the life span. The term life stage is underpinned by a conceptualisation that across the life course, individuals age sequentially through a series of roles or states (Alwin, 2012). These life stages, understood to be biologically- and socially defined phases, such as infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood, help explain the timing, duration and transitions between age-graded social roles within the life course. Life stages do not have defined boundaries and may vary in quantity and duration according to life circumstances and historical and geographical contexts.

The life cycle, using terminology drawn from the biological sciences, describes the complete sequence of life stages between birth and death (Alwin, 2012). The concept is widely regarded to have limited analytical utility in the social sciences, because it arguably implies that this sequence is universal and fixed, failing to reflect the socially-defined nature of life stage transitions and the increased prevalence of divergent life course trajectories, such as in reproductive decisions (Alwin, 2012).

However, Hogan (2001) suggests that because the life cycle describes the framework for age-graded social roles, it sets the standard which then gives meaning to life course studies of transitions and timings. The life cycle concept is also suggested to be useful for understanding intergenerational processes of socialisation, and processes of societal change as cohorts successively replace each other over time (Alwin, 2012; Elder & Giele, 2009).

Life span is used in general terms to refer to the extent of a life, which for life course research sets the scope for inquiry, in which the life course is nested as the life trajectory of transitions and timings (Elder et al., 2003). However, in psychology, the life span theory of human development defines aging as a life-long process of within-person change over time, adapting to individual and environmental contexts (Alwin, 2012; Oris et al., 2009). This definition bears strong similarities with the considerations of life course research. Interdisciplinary work in the early 2000s by scholars from life course sociology and life span psychology initially aimed to link the two concepts, but has since moved into identifying where they diverge, as the life span developmental perspective is primarily interested in changes to functional capacities and behavioural adaptation, looking at the resources available to individuals, and self-regulatory strategies, whereas life course sociology is interested in institutional influences on diverging life course trajectories (Alwin, 2012; Oris et al., 2009; Mayer, 2009). In Elder's theorisation about the life course, he integrates life span by emphasizing that human development and aging are lifelong, continuous processes.

Paradigmatic Principles

Elder outlines four elements to the life course paradigm, which can be understood in a 'hierarchy of generality'—location, linked lives, human agency, and timing. The first, historical and geographical location, highlights that social and historical events affect lives through providing specific opportunities and constraints. This is typically provided by studying birth cohorts, which use a historical definition of age by birth year (Elder & Giele, 2009). The second element, linked lives, underscores how lives are lived in relation to other people and influenced by them, and that these relationships, particularly kinship ties, can be enduring across historical events (Katz et al., 2012). Significant new relationships, such as formed through long-term partnering or marriage, can cause shifts in the composition of social ties. The third element is human agency, which accounts for the variations in life courses within given constraints, as humans 'planfully' construct their own lives. Elder and Giele (2009) describe the discrepancies between individual lives and the age-graded life course as a 'loose-coupling'. Finally, the fourth element is the timing and sequence of life events that influence the life course. The antecedents and consequences of a life transition will be different depending on the event's timing (Heinz & Marshall, 2003). The impacts of the sequence of events in a life course will also depend upon social and normative expectations and the decisions that individuals make in response.

Life Course Approaches and Intergenerational Inequality in Australia

A life course approach is particularly useful for understanding the intergenerational transmission of inequality. Within social science there is a long and strong tradition of research examining intergenerational transmission of opportunities and outcomes showing that disadvantage accrues over generations and that family background plays a key part in shaping outcomes for individuals (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Bowles et al., 2005; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). While debates continue about how much intergenerational inequality exists in different countries, how to measure it and whether more unequal societies have higher or lower levels of social mobility (Corak, 2006, 2013), there is general agreement that family background is important for understanding social disadvantage, including across multiple generations (Bowles et al., 2005).

In Australia, there is strong evidence of intergenerational transmission of inequality. For instance, Huang et al. (2016, p. 373) using panel data from the Households, Income and Longitudinal Dynamics in Australia study (HILDA) found intergenerational earnings elasticity, a measure of the extent to which parental earnings determine their children's earnings, of approximately 24–28%. This broadly accords with earlier studies, although depending on the methodological approach and the data used, measures of earnings elasticity in Australia vary between about 20% and 35% (Leigh, 2013; Mendolia & Siminski, 2016). In recent work, Deutscher and Mazumder (2019) estimate intergenerational mobility using income tax data from 1991 to 2015. They report an elasticity measure of around 18%, significantly lower than estimates based on survey data. Importantly they also show meaningful variations across geographical locations both across the country and within cities.

Intergenerational inequality is not only transmitted via earnings. Other work in Australia has focused on intergenerational transmission of welfare receipt with a systematic review in 2014 identifying about 30 empirical studies on this topic in Australia, substantially fewer than undertaken in many other western countries (Perales et al. 2014). The most recent work in this area shows that children of parents who receive welfare payments are almost twice as likely to be on welfare payments when they are adults compared to their counterparts (Cobb-Clark, 2019; Cobb-Clark et al., 2017). Moreover, there is evidence that children of welfare recipients need more intensive support and for longer time periods. The intergenerational correlation was particularly strong for those on disability payments, payments for those with caring responsibilities, and parenting payments for single parents. Overall, this suggests that parental disadvantage may be more harmful to children's later life outcomes if it is more strongly driven by circumstances rather than personal choice. In later work Bubonya and Cobb-Clark (2021) unpack some of the mechanisms linking parental and offspring welfare receipt correlations. They argue that the primary mechanism is the failure to complete high school. Adolescents in welfare-reliant families experience more disruptions in their schooling and less financial support from their families leading to lower educational attainment.