This graduate-level course introduces students to the theories, methods, and substantive topics that exemplify the life course paradigm. The life course paradigm is based on four themes: (1) human lives are embedded in and shaped by historical context; (2) individuals construct their own life course through their choices and actions, within the constraints of historical and social circumstances; (3) life domains, including work, family, health, and social background are intertwined; and (4) the developmental impact of a life transition is contingent on when it occurs.

Life course research is interdisciplinary by nature and design. Studies of the life course typically incorporate sociology, history, psychology, demography, and – in recent years – behavioral genetics, and often tackle the complex debate over constancy and change in human development. With respect to substantive areas, the foci of life course studies range from social psychological outcomes such as stress, self-esteem, occupational values and cognitive complexity, to family roles, marital and fertility patterns, educational and occupational attainment, retirement, and deviance. A single semester can provide only a sampling of the current range of theory and empirical work on the life course. The objective is to acquire a way of thinking which can offer a point of departure for one’s own research.

Course Objectives: Students will be able to (1) identify and critically assess the core themes of the life course paradigm; (2) understand the basic quantitative and qualitative research methods used to study the life course; (3) evaluate the ways that social context, social history, and social structures affect individual life courses; and (4) develop an independent research project that draws on the themes, concepts and methods of the life course paradigm.

Prerequisites: Graduate standing or permission of the instructor is required. Some familiarity with quantitative research methods also is recommended.

Required Reading: PDFs of all required journal articles and book chapters will be available via the course Sakai site.

Recommended Readings: Recommended readings may enrich your knowledge of the life course paradigm. Most recommended articles are either reference/background sources, innovative empirical evaluations of theory, or recent controversial works in the area of life course studies. Recommended books include influential classic and contemporary works in the field of life course studies and human development. Students are not expected to read the recommended books during the semester; rather, these books are suggested for future reference only. Recommended articles and chapters are available via the course Sakai site.
Overview of Course Requirements and Grading:
The course is organized as a seminar. I will provide an overview of each week’s readings, but instruction also will take place in the context of student discussions, presentations, and exchanges focused on the readings. Course grades will be based on three requirements. I will not give grades of “incomplete.”

1. **Leading a class discussion (10 percent of class grade).**
   Each week, one student will lead class discussion. The student leader(s) may base the discussion on the questions submitted by class participants, or may design a discussion that incorporates both assigned readings and his/her own research interests. Each week, class members will email 3-4 discussion questions to the discussion leader and professor, no later than noon Monday on the day prior to class.

2. **Participation in weekly discussion (20 percent of class grade).**
   This grade reflects participation in discussion, and the quality of the questions submitted each week. Students should read carefully so that they come to class with both insightful comments and questions. Students who read materials that are not on the syllabus but that are germane to the discussion should feel free to contribute this knowledge to the discussion; the class as a whole will benefit from the specialized knowledge of all participants.

3. **Final research paper or proposal (70 percent of class grade).**
   The main course requirement is the preparation of an original research paper or research proposal (about 20-25 pages, double spaced). Each student will present a brief synopsis of their research project during the final class session. Paper topic and methodology will be chosen in consultation with the instructor. The paper should define a research question, review relevant prior studies, and either: (1) analyze suitable data, and present the findings and their implications (research paper) or (2) propose a detailed strategy and justification for conducting an original research project (research proposal). Students are encouraged to use this class project to develop a qualifying paper, conference paper, dissertation prospectus, or journal article. Completion of the paper/proposal will proceed in four steps:

   1. Each student will submit a brief (2-3 page) proposal by the start of class on October 16th. This brief proposal should describe your research question, the data or methodology to be used, and the analyses to be undertaken. You are encouraged to meet with me early in the semester to discuss your research plan.

   2. OPTIONAL. A first draft of the paper/proposal is due by 7 p.m. on Monday December 3. Students who submit early drafts will receive feedback by Friday December 7, so that they may incorporate this feedback into their final class presentations.

   3. Each student will make a 15 minute presentation to the class on December 11.

   4. The final draft of the paper/proposal is due no later than Monday December 17 at noon. I will not accept papers submitted after that deadline.

For students planning to conduct secondary data analyses, many data sets are available through University of Michigan’s Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (http://www.icpsr.umich.edu). Among these data sets are the Adolescent Health Study (Add-Health), General Social Survey (GSS), Health and Retirement Survey (HRS), Longitudinal Study of Aging.
(LSOA), Midlife in the United States (MIDUS), Monitoring the Future (MTF), National Longitudinal Study (NLS), National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS). Information on accessing data sets will be made available during the early weeks of the seminar.

READING SCHEDULE

I. Introduction to the Life Course Paradigm

September 4: Introductions and Brief Overview of the Life Course Paradigm & Methods

Required Readings:

Recommended Books:
Carr, Deborah (Ed.). 2009. Encyclopedia of the Life Course and Human Development, Volumes I-III. Farmington Hills MI: Gale/CENGAGE Learning. (Note: Table of Contents is available at: http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~carrds/TOC.pdf. Please let me know if you would like PDFs of particular entries and I will post them on Sakai or email them to you.)

September 11: Life Course Paradigm: Foundations, Themes and Expansions

Required Readings:

**Recommended Articles:**

**Recommended Books:**

**September 18: Life Course Methods, Models, and Data Sources**

**Required Readings:**
Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:

II. Paradigmatic Themes

A. Lives in Historical Time and Place

September 25: The Influence of Birth Cohort and Historical Context

Required Readings:

Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:

B. Human Agency and Structural Constraints

October 2: Agency and Planful Behavior

Required Readings:

Recommended Articles:


**Recommended Books:**


**October 9: Constraints to Human Agency**

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Articles:**


**Recommended Books:**


**C. Linked Lives**

**October 16: Intergenerational Influences**

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Articles:**


**Recommended Books:**


**D. Timing, Transitions and Trajectories**

**October 23: The Meaning of Transitions, Trajectories and Turning Points (IMPORTANT: Class will meet from 1:10-3:50 p.m. today)**

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Articles:**


Recommended Readings:

October 30: Transition to Adulthood

Required Readings:

Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:


**November 6: “Non-Normative” and “Off-Time” Transitions and Trajectories in Young Adulthood (ELECTION DAY! Please remember to vote!)**

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Articles:**


**Recommended Books:**


**November 13: Class cancelled for Gerontological Society of America annual meetings**

**November 20: Work Transitions and Trajectories**

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Articles:**


Newman, Katherine S. 1988. *Falling from Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class.* New York: Vintage Press. Ch. 2 “The Extent of Downward Mobility” (pp. 20-41) and Ch. 4 “The Downwardly Mobile Family” (pp.95-142).


**Recommended Books:**


**November 27: Family Transitions in Adulthood**

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Articles:**


**Recommended Books:**


December 4: Death, Dying and End-of-Life Issues

Required Readings:

Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:

December 10: Student Presentations

Have a nice winter break!!