

Sociology 111L Sociology of the Life Course

Spring 2020 | UC Berkeley

Instructor: Dr. Linus Huang, Continuing Lecturer

Office hours: drop-in, Wednesdays 2:15-4:00 PM, 487 Barrows

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Final exam: format and time TBD

Overview

Society is ordered by *age*. Age is not the only ordering dimension of society, but it is a central one. A *life course perspective* represents a sociological way of understanding how age structures society. Our lives progress through a sequence of socially constructed stages—childhood, adolescence, middle adulthood, and later adulthood. A life course perspective is particularly interested in the rules and norms that govern transitions between these stages. How do you know when you have become an “adult” in the U.S.? How is the answer to this question different today than in the mid-20th century? How is it different for affluent vs. impoverished persons? Men vs. women? Immigrants vs. U.S.-born? Blacks vs. Whites? Urban- vs. rural-based adolescents? What does this story look like in the U.S. vs. in other industrialized nations?

And when we finally leave the workforce and transition into retirement, where will our incomes come from when we’re no longer receiving a company paycheck? Where will our medical insurance come from? Should eligibility for federal programs like Social Security and Medicare be based on chronological age alone, or should these benefits be targeted more narrowly at those most in need—perhaps regardless of age altogether? Will entitlement programs like Social Security still be financially solvent in 40 or so years when many of you will be nearing retirement? If not, will you have to work far longer into your older years than the Baby Boomer generation nearing retirement today?

Is old age a time of individual leisure (for those fortunate enough to be able to afford it)? If so, is this because society has largely declined to offer older people a positive, productive role to play? The family is the main institution where people from different generations are socially integrated. But other social institutions—especially school, but to a certain degree the world of work as well—are more *age-segregated*. What might a society look like that is more age-integrated rather than age-segregated? Would such a society be more desirable?

The course will begin with *childhood* and *adolescence*. We will examine how inequality in childhood “accumulates” and gets re-produced in young adulthood, independent of other factors. We will then turn to the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Traditionally, markers such as entering the paid workforce and marriage have signaled the arrival of adulthood. For a variety of reasons, achievement of these milestones are increasingly delayed for adolescents today. Are we remaining adolescents longer than before? Or do we re-define what it means to be an “adult”?

In *middle adulthood*, we build our own families and our own careers. Compared to people in other Western societies, Americans are far more likely to marry, divorce, re-marry, re-divorce, etc.—what sociologist Andrew Cherlin calls “the marriage go-round”. Why is the U.S. unusual

in this regard, and what should we do about it? With the rise of dual-earner households as women are ever more likely to develop their own careers in the paid workforce, how can Americans achieve a balance between work and family? What effect will the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, the decline of organized labor, the disappearance of defined-benefit pension plans from the private sector, and other changes in the world of work all have on Americans' prospects for a secure retirement in the future? Is it even desirable for people to leave the workforce permanently just because they have reached a certain chronological age?

The majority of the course will focus on our *later adulthood*. We will examine debates surrounding welfare, health care, and inequality, as well as re-visit the institution of retirement—all of which are unfolding in the context of scarce public resources that some say have pit older generations against younger ones.

The course will operate at both a macroscopic level and a microscopic level in which we will be encouraged to cultivate what C. Wright Mills calls “the sociological imagination”—understanding how our personal biographies are products of social structure as well as of our individual personalities and circumstances. The course will provide both a foundation for further sociological study of aging but also practical knowledge about the ins and outs of everyday life throughout the duration of the life course.

Readings

All readings for this course will be made available either on PDF format on the bCourses site, in PDF format through the UC Berkeley library's website, or both. There are no textbooks or course readers to purchase.

The following e-books are available if accessed via a UC Berkeley IP:

- ✦ Annette Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods 2nd edition*.
- ✦ Mary C. Waters, Patrick J. Carr, Maria J. Kefalas & Jennifer Holdaway, eds. (2011), *Coming of Age in America: The Transition to Adulthood in the Twenty-First Century*.
- ✦ Corey Abramson (2015), *The End Game: How Inequality Shapes Our Final Years*.

Instructions will be given about how to access the above readings through the library website.

Additional required readings will be made available through bCourses.

Grading

Your course grade will come from five components:

- ✦ **Response papers**, which will account for a total of 20% of your course grade. There will be 10 such papers (2% each), due roughly weekly in advance of the topic to be discussed during

the week. The response papers are intended to give you an incentive to read and think about the readings. Although there will be more than a little freedom in determining how you want to respond to a given week’s readings, I will provide suggestions to steer you toward addressing particular problems.

- ✦ **An interview plan** (10% of the course grade). During the semester you will interview an older person (65 years or older), which can be—but does not have to be—a family member. In class we will discuss what sorts of questions you should be asking, which will vary from student to student depending on who the interviewee is and what your relationship to them is. The plan for this interview will be due in advance of the actual interview.
- ✦ **An interview report** (25% of the course grade). Based on your aforementioned interview schedule, you will conduct your interview and then write an approximately 10-to-12-page paper summarizing the results of your interview and appropriately connecting them to the themes of the course. Your general objectives and strategy for this paper will be discussed in class as the semester unfolds.
- ✦ **One take-home midterm exam** (25% of the course grade). This will be about 4 to 6 questions of “short essay” format, which will be discussed further as the midterm nears.
- ✦ **One in-class final exam** (20% of the course grade), administered during the university’s officially scheduled timeslot for the course. The exam will be cumulative and multiple choice in format.

The course grading scale is as follows:

A+	97+	A	93-96	A-	90-92
B+	87-89	B	83-86	B-	80-82
C+	77-79	C	73-76	C-	70-72
D+	67-69	D	63-66	D-	60-62
		F	0-59		

When it comes time to compute overall course grades, I will round to the nearest whole number using standard rounding conventions. It doesn’t really matter what the letter grade on the individual assignments are.

There are no other discretionary considerations, nor opportunities to earn extra credit on an individual basis, that will factor into your grade.

There are no surprises in how I calculate course grades. The GRADES section on bCourses will incorporate the weightings above and will accurately keep you apprised of your course progress. During the semester, with a little arithmetic, you can figure out how you need to do on subsequent assignments in order to earn a particular grade.

Disabled Students Program (DSP)

DSP students should have their arrangements made by the third week of instruction. The DSP office will automatically send me a digital copy of your letter, with explanation of your accommodations. It will not be necessary to also provide me with a physical copy of the letter.

Recommendation Letters

Writing recommendation letters is an aspect of an instructor's job which I embrace readily. However, it is difficult for me, and unhelpful to all parties involved, to write letters for students I do not know very well. I do have, and have exercised, the discretion to decline to write letters when I don't know students beyond what grades they've earned in the course. If you anticipate asking me to write a letter, it is in your interest to participate in class discussion, visit me during my office hours, etc., and let me know what your plans and interests are above and beyond course material.

Resources

The Academic Accommodations Hub (<https://evcp.berkeley.edu/programs-resources/academic-accommodations-hub>), courtesy of the Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost, lists a wide variety of resources and references for students, including:

- Classroom climate (learning, not physical, climate)
- Academic Integrity and Honor Code
- Academic Accommodations
- Support Resources
- Conflict, Resolution, and Troubleshooting

There are a variety of resources available to sociology students, both for course-related matters as well as for research opportunities, student organizations, advising, what one can do with a sociology major, etc. These are available on the department website at the following URL: <https://sociology.berkeley.edu/undergraduate-resources>.

Academic Honesty & Classroom Conduct

The UC Berkeley Honor Code states that "As a member of the UC Berkeley community, I act with honesty, integrity, and respect for others" (<https://teaching.berkeley.edu/berkeley-honor-code>). I expect you will follow these principles. You may not copy specific text or ideas from others, whether from fellow students, from authors of our readings or other material you find, without specific attribution. To do otherwise is to plagiarize. You may not cheat on any of the exams by bringing in illicit outside material, copying from fellow students, or engaging in other dishonest practices. Violation of these rules will result in an immediate **-0-** on the *entire* assignment in question, plus a report to the Office of Academic Affairs at my discretion.

You may of course discuss the lectures and readings with your fellow students. Forming studying groups on your own is encouraged, especially since there are no discussion sections to accompany this course. If these groups are used to struggle through ideas or debate topics (both are also good uses of class time, by the way!), then the effort expended can be very rewarding.

However, if groups are used simply to memorize a classmate's notes by rote, to subsequently recite on exams, **this is effectively another form of plagiarism** as far as I am concerned. I use this specific example because it has popped up in my courses before.

Study group meetings should be suspended during periods where a take-home exam is active. They can begin again after the exam due date has been reached.

Use of laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc. in class. I use my laptop for virtually everything and do not expect students not to utilize the various digital technologies we have at our disposal today. However, if you are texting, Twittering, Facebooking, watching YouTube or Netflix, or some other such thing in class, you are likely distracting others and I will ask you to leave.

Reading, Assignment, and Exam Schedule

All readings listed below are required and must be completed prior to the first meeting of the indicated week. All readings will be available either through the library website, on bCourses, and/or on the open Internet.

Week 1 (Jan 22-24) | Introduction: what is a sociology of the life course?

No readings.

Part I: Childhood and Adolescence

Week 2 (Jan 27-31) | Constructing childhood

Readings:

- Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* intro + ch 3
 - Christine L. Williams, "Kids in Toyland" ch 5 from *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality*
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Week 3 (Feb 3-5) | How inequality during childhood accumulates into adulthood

Response Paper #1 due on bCourses Monday, February 3rd 2020 1:00 PM

Reading: Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life (Second Edition)* ch 1 (but only p. 1 to the top of p. 10) + ch 13 (all)

Week 4 (Feb 10-14) | How do adolescents become young adults?

Response Paper #2 due on bCourses Monday, February 10th 2020 1:00 PM

Readings:

- Patrick J. Carr & Maria J. Kefalas, “Straight from the Heartland: Coming of Age in Ellis, Iowa”
- Linda Borgen & Rubén G. Rumbaut, “Coming of Age in ‘America’s Finest City’: Transitions to Adulthood Among Children of Immigrants in San Diego”
- Richard A. Settersten Jr., “Becoming Adult: Meanings and Markers for Young Americans”

(The above are, respectively, Chapters 1, 4, and 5 from *Coming of Age in America: The Transition to Adulthood in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Mary C. Waters, Patrick J. Carr, Maria J. Kefalas & Jennifer Holdaway.)

Part II: Middle Adulthood**Week 5 (Feb 19-21) | Does the institution of marriage need saving?**

Note: Monday, February 17th 2020 is President’s Day (no class).

Response Paper #3 due on bCourses Wednesday, February 19th 2020 1:00 PM*Readings:*

- Laurie Shrage, “The End of ‘Marriage’” *The New York Times* Nov 4, 2012
 - Richard V. Reeves, “How to Save Marriage in America” *Brookings* Feb 13, 2014
 - Andrew Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round* chapters 1 & 8
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Week 6 (Feb 24-28) | How will you balance family and work?**Response Paper #4 due on bCourses Monday, February 24th 2020 1:00 PM***Readings:*

- Lara Bazelon, “Opinion: I’ve Picked My Job Over My Kids” *The New York Times* Jun 29 2019
 - Claire Cain Miller, “Millennial Men Aren’t the Dads They Thought They’d Be” *The New York Times* Jul 30 2015
 - Claire Cain Miller, “Women Did Everything Right. Then Work Got ‘Greedy’” *The New York Times* Apr 26 2019
 - Claire Cain Miller, “Why Mothers’ Choices About Work and Family Often Feel Like No Choice at All” *The New York Times* Jan 17 2020
 - Olga Khazan, “Give Up on Work-Life Balance” *The Atlantic* May 30 2019
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Week 7 (Mar 2-6) | How will you save for retirement—if you retire at all?

Response Paper #5 due on bCourses Monday, March 2nd 2020 1:00 PM

Readings:

- Economic Policy Institute, “The State of American Retirement Savings” Dec 10 2019
- Francis G. Caro, Scott A. Bass & Yung-Ping Chen, “Introduction: Achieving a Productive Aging Society” from Bass, Caro & Chen, eds, *Achieving a Productive Aging Society* (1993)
- Marc Freedman, *Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America* excerpts TBD (1999)
- Ronald J. Manheimer, “Ten Keys to a Creative Retirement” (2017)

Take-Home Midterm distributed on bCourses Friday, March 6th 2020 2:00 PM

Part III: Later Adulthood

Week 8 (Mar 9-13) | Does old age have meaning?

Readings:

- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* excerpts TBD (1972)
- John Rowe & Robert Kahn, eds, *Successful Aging* (1998) pp. 36-37, 48-49, 51-52
- Erik Erikson, Joan M. Erikson & Helen Q. Kivnick, *Vital Involvement in Old Age: The Experience of Old Age in Our Time* excerpts TBD (1986)

Take-Home Midterm due on bCourses Saturday, March 14th 2020 12:00 PM (noon)

Week 9 (Mar 16-20) | Cumulative inequality in later adulthood

Reading: Corey Abramson, *The End Game* excerpts TBD

Interview Plan due on bCourses Friday, March 20th 2020 1:00 PM

March 23-27 Spring Break!

Week 10 (Mar 30-Apr 3) | Should families provide for their own?

Response Paper #6 due on bCourses Monday, March 30th 2020 1:00 PM

Readings:

- Peter J. Strauss & Nancy M. Lederman, “Medicaid and Long-Term Care” from *The Elder Law Handbook: A Legal and Financial Survival Guide for Caregivers and Seniors* (1996)

- Jane Bryant Quinn, “Shame of the Rich: Making Themselves Poor” *The Washington Post* June 3 2001
 - Stephen Moses, “Aging America’s Achilles’ Heel: Medicaid Long-Term Care” Policy Analysis No. 549, Cato Institute, Washington DC Sep 1 2015
 - C. Jean Blaser, “The Case Against Paying Family Caregivers: Ethical and Practical Issues” *Generations* Fall, 1998, 22:3 pp 65-69
 - Suzanne R. Kunkel, Robert A. Applebaum & Ian M. Nelson, “For Love and Money: Paying Family Caregivers” *Generations* Winter, 2003-2004, 27:4 pp. 74-80
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Week 11 (Apr 6-10) | Should we ration health care for older people?

Response Paper #7 due on bCourses Monday, April 6th 2020 1:00 PM

Readings:

- Daniel Callahan, “Why We Must Set Limits” in P. Homer & M. Holstein, eds, *A Good Old Age? The Paradox of Setting Limits* (1990)
 - Peter Ubel, *Pricing Life: Why It’s Time for Health Care Rationing* (2000) pp. xvi-xix
 - Nat Hentoff, “The Pied Piper Returns for the Old Folks” *The Village Voice* Apr 26 1988
 - Howard Brody, “From an Ethics of Rationing to an Ethics of Waste Avoidance” *New England Journal of Medicine* 366: 1949-1951 (2012)
 - Daniel Perry & Robert Butler, “Aim Not Just for Longer Life, but Expanded ‘Health Span’” *The Washington Post* Dec 20 1988
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Week 12 (Apr 13-17) | How should people near the end of life be cared for?

Response Paper #8 due on bCourses Monday, April 13th 2020 1:00 PM

Readings:

- Robert A. Pearlman & Helene Starks, “Why Do People Seek Physician-Assisted Death?” (2004)
 - Charles F. McKhann, *A Time to Die: The Place for Physician Assistance* excerpt (1999)
 - Leon Kass, “Neither for Love nor Money: Why Doctors Must Not Kill” *The Public Interest* 94 (1989)
 - Roi Livne, “The New Economy of Dying” ch 1 from *Values at the End of Life: The Logic of Palliative Care* (2019)
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Week 13 (Apr 20-24) | Should age or need be the basis of entitlement?

Response Paper #8 due on bCourses Monday, April 20th 2020 1:00 PM

Readings:

- Lester Thurow, *The Future of Capitalism* excerpts (1996)

- Gary Burtless, “A Generational War Over the Budget? It’s Hard to See It In the Numbers” *Brookings* Dec 2 2015
 - Astra Taylor, “Opinion: Out With the Old, In With the Young” *The New York Times* Oct 18 2019 (interactive feature online: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/18/opinion/old-age-president-2020.html>)
 - John B. Williamson, Diane M. Watts-Ray & Eric R. Kingson, “Introduction” from *The Generational Equity Debate* (1999)
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Week 14 (Apr 27-May 1) | What is the future of Social Security?

Response Paper #8 due on bCourses Monday, April 27th 2020 1:00 PM

Readings:

- Peter A. Diamond & Peter R. Orszag, *Saving Social Security: A Balanced Approach*. Brookings (2004)
 - Ramesh Ponnuru, “The Necessity and Desirability of Social Security Reform” *National Review* (2016)
 - Lawrence H. Thompson, “Social Security Reform and Benefit Adequacy” from *The Retirement Project*, Brief Series, No. 17, March 2004, pp. 1-7
 - C. Eugene Steuerle & Melissa Favreault, “Social Security for Yesterday’s Family?” *Straight Talk on Social Security and Retirement Policy* No. 35
 - AARP, “The Future of Social Security: 12 Proposals You Should Know About”
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May 4-8 Reading, Recitation and Review

Interview Report due on bCourses Wednesday, May 6th 2020 11:59 PM

Final Exam format and time To Be Determined (TBD)