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
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:

- 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:

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<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>97%</td>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>A-</td>
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<td>B+</td>
<td>87-89</td>
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<td>B</td>
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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](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](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](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:*
- Christine L. Williams, “Kids in Toyland” ch 5 from *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality*

**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:

- Richard V. Reeves, “How to Save Marriage in America” Brookings Feb 13, 2014
- Andrew Cherlin, The Marriage-Go-Round chapters 1 & 8

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:

- Claire Cain Miller, “Millennial Men Aren’t the Dads They Thought They’d Be” The New York Times Jul 30 2015
Week 7 (Mar 2-6) | How will you save for retirement—if you retire at all?

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

Readings:

Take-Home Midterm distributed on bCourses Friday, March 6\textsuperscript{th} 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)
- 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 14\textsuperscript{th} 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 20\textsuperscript{th} 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 30\textsuperscript{th} 2020 1:00 PM

Readings:
· Stephen Moses, “Aging America’s Achilles’ Heel: Medicaid Long-Term Care” Policy Analysis No. 549, Cato Institute, Washington DC Sep 1 2015

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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:**

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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:**
· 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:**
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:
- C. Eugene Steuerle & Melissa Favreault, “Social Security for Yesterday’s Family?” Straight Talk on Social Security and Retirement Policy No. 35

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)