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**Multigenerational Adult Development Research  
Project in an Online Graduate Course in Adult Learning**

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**Abstract:** This paper describes research in two arenas. First is a research project using the life course dynamics perspective as a lens to investigate the patterns and timing of life events in multiple generations within extended family. Second is an experiment in the scholarship of teaching to pilot test this research project in an online graduate course in adult development and learning. The course is D505 Adult Learning through the Lifespan. The course description reads: Review of selected adult education literature describing the adult lifespan as it relates to participation in learning projects and adult education programming. Identify how social and cultural forces influence the engagement of adults in the learning process.

**Introduction**

The focus of the first arena is the report of a multigenerational research project using the life course dynamics perspective and techniques to gather life history data and generate findings through qualitative analysis. The framework guiding this research is Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development, a conceptual systems framework to investigate how lives evolve during the life course, and the related stream of life course research generated during the last 30 years. Life course dynamics research by nature and design uses an interdisciplinary focus, incorporating perspectives from sociology, psychology, history and demography. This perspective investigates the complex questions of constancy and change in human development through the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This sociocultural view of development consists of five environmental systems (1979, 1995). The systems are depicted as a set of five nested spheres starting with the Microsystem, containing the individual, at the center. Around this center are the Mesosystem containing the interactions between the individual, family members, and peers. The Exosystem and Macrosystem describe social and political organizations and broader cultural inputs with influence on individuals but are not systems in which the individual plays an active role. The Chronosystem includes the individual patterns of life events and transitions over the life course as well as the broader sociohistorical context.

Elder (1995, 2003) defines the life course as a set of interdependent careers. Each career relates to a life domain (family, work, education, etc.) and describes the changes that occur as the person grows (and ages). According to Elder (2003), there are three unique concepts involved in life course study. These are identified as the life span, life history and life cycle. The life span is the perspective delimited by the years of an individual's life and development, similar to the developmental psychology perspective. Life history incorporates the chronology of events and activities across the individual's life domains. The life cycle describes the sequence of events across lives which link generations through having and raising children, those children departing from their family of origin and having children, thus describing a pattern of generational

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succession. Some individuals choose not to have children and opt out of this intergenerational pattern.

The focus of the second arena included in this project is the feasibility and effectiveness of embedding this research project with a group of volunteer students as an active learning strategy in an online graduate adult education course. The course facilitator, also serving as research project director, wanted to incorporate an opportunity within the course for students to experience authentic research, produce accurate findings and develop meaningful conclusions. There is much support in the adult education literature, especially that which draws upon the perspectives of andragogy and constructivism, that adult learners prefer and engage more effectively in learning events which are life-related, problem-centered and meaningful to them (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The faculty facilitator developed the conceptual focus and process for this research project. A number of documents were provided to the students to direct and support the process of selecting and interviewing respondents about their life histories.

### Research Questions

The following questions were developed to guide each focus of this research project. The first four questions guided the development of the research process and the interview documents used by the students for use in conducting life history interviews. What does qualitative analysis of life history data reveal about:

1. life patterns of individuals during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?
2. life patterns of family members in a multi-generational context during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?
3. the nature and impact of life transitions on individuals during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?
4. the nature and impact of life transitions on family members in a multi-generational context during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?

In the scholarship of teaching arena, these questions guided the development and analysis of this project as a strategy in an online graduate course:

5. Will this group research project be an effective active learning strategy in an online adult development course?
6. Will the students gain an understanding of the process of original research on adult development through participating in this project?
7. Will the narrative life histories and supporting documentation to record life events used in the study produce data with sufficient richness and detail for analysis to produce quality reports to warrant continuing this research project on a regular basis?

### Methodology

The research process implemented life course research as an active learning strategy with a group of individuals who volunteered to undertake it for their final course project. The faculty facilitator, as project director, defined the research focus and questions, created the instruments (adapted from ideas and samples found in the literature: Elder, 1995; Giele, 1995), provided guidance for the students to conduct the research, reviewed and assessed their research reports as final course projects. The project involved seven graduate students identifying at least two other family members (one life history could be the student's own life event history) to gather life event data from three different generations of their family. The interviews of these three-

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generation spanning family members generated recorded life event history data in both narrative form and audio recording. The seven student interviewers generated a total of 22 life course histories (with six of the seven students choosing to include their own life course history). All seven of the volunteer interviewers were mature students, at least 40 years old, with employment experience in professional training, teaching or management positions.

Life course dynamics and processes operate in multiple ways and at multiple levels in the context of individuals' lives. This project used individual life events (their relative occurrence, timing and duration) and transitions as the units of analysis. It should be noted that the time limits of completing this research project within a semester-long course meant that these are brief life histories. These interviews were conducted in one session, lasting typically 1.5 – 2.5 hours. In a few cases interviews with an older respondent were conducted in two shorter sessions.

Five of the students were able to meet with the project director early in the semester to provide orientation to the research process and review the initial research tools. Based on the discussion at this session, an additional set of guidelines for interviews with an outline of the steps to include in an interview and examples of ways to phrase effective interview questions were developed. The final set of documents provided to the student interviewers included:

- Multigenerational Research Project Outline (including Final Project Report Format)
- Multigenerational Research Project Interview Guidelines
- Life Course Events Interview Guide (including Domains and suggested coding)
- Interview Field Notes Table (organized by domain and life decade orientation, i.e. “Twenties” to assist with organizing and focusing the interview)
- Life Course Events Pattern Chart (a table to assist in analyzing data for all respondents )
- Informed Consent Statement (completed by each respondent).

Four students met with the project director in the month after the course was completed for a debriefing meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to review the overall process and documents provided and discuss their recommendations for improvement.

## Findings

Selected observations from the students' analyses presented in the Final Projects include differences in life patterns of relatives in the first half versus later in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including length of formal education, work life events and effects of major events like the Depression and wars. A brief summary of findings from the life histories is provided first in narrative and Table 1 below. Then this report focuses on the interview data and findings as organized by the four research questions related to this arena.

The respondents ranged in age from 91 to 26 years old. The participants included 18 women and four men. One useful way to organize the life course descriptions and group the respondents is to organize them into cohorts by the decade of their birth (e.g., the 19Teens Cohort includes those born in 1910 through 1919, 1920s Cohort is 1920 through 1929, etc.). All but one of the respondents was born of Midwest families and most have spent their adult years in Indiana. The one immigrant from Scotland has lived in Indiana for 85 years. In terms of formal education attainment, 20 are high school graduates, three have some college, one has an Associates degree, nine have Bachelors degrees, one has completed a Masters degree and six are enrolled in Masters degree programs. The increase in formal education attainment during the later cohorts is worth additional comment. Looking at the data of the ten respondents born in the cohorts before 1940, one man had some college and one woman completed a Bachelors degree

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(and then a Masters degree in her 30s). Beginning with the 12 respondents in the 1940 and later Birth Cohorts, two of the respondents (one women and one man) have completed some college, one of the men has an Associates degree, nine (eight women and one man) have completed a Bachelors degree, and seven of these are enrolled in graduate study.

**Table 1: Summary of Selected Data by Birth Cohort.**

Birth Cohort	Gender	Birthplace	Age an adult	Formal Education patterns	NIOEM* Categories of career employment
19Teens Cohort	5 women	3 – Indiana 1 – Kentucky 1 – Scotland	4 – Teens 1 - NR	3 – HS Grad 1 - some HS 1 B.S. & M.S.	1 – n. a. Homemaker 2 – Services 1 – Professional
1920 Cohort	2 women 1 man	3 – Indiana	2 – Teens 1 - NR	2 – HS Grad 1 – some college	1 – n. a. Homemaker 2 – Operators & Labor
1930 Cohort	1 woman 1 man	1 – Indiana 1 Kentucky	1 – Teens 1 – 20s	1 – HS Grad 1 - some HS	1 – Services 1 – Precision Production/Craft
1940 Cohort	3 women 1 man	3 – Indiana 1 – Kentucky	2 – Teens 1 – 20s 1 - NR	1 – some college 1 – BS 2 – BS & current grad students	1 – n. a. Homemaker 1 – Technical Support 2 - Professional
1950 Cohort	3 women	3 – Indiana	1 – Teens 2 – 20s	1 – HS Grad 2 – BS & current grad students	1 – Services 1 – Technical Support 1 - Professional
1960 Cohort	1 woman	1 – Germany (of military family from Indiana)	1 – Teens	1 – BS & current grad student	1 - Professional
1970 Cohort	3 women 1 man	3 – Indiana 1 - Ohio	2 – Teens 1 – 20s 1 - NR	1 – some college 1 – Assoc. Degree 2 – BS & current grad students	2 – Mid-Management 2 - Professional

\*National Industry-Occupation Employment Matrix, U. S. Department of Labor

***Question 1. What does qualitative analysis of life history data reveal about life patterns of individuals during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?***

The life course events reported by respondents provide varied life histories but with some similarities across the cohorts. One question asked at what age respondents considered themselves as adults or assuming adult responsibilities. Thirteen respondents indicated it was in their late teen years (ranging from 16 to 19 years old). Five stated it was in their early 20s, (ranging from 20 to 23 years old). This information was not reported in four interviews. The 19Teens and 1920s Cohorts respondents all reported late teen years. In the other Cohorts, individual respondents reported either the late teens or early 20s. There is an increase in level of formal education attainment starting with the 1940s Cohort. The increased level of education contributes to an increase in employment levels in the NIOEM Categories. Ten of the 12

individuals are employed in Management, Professional and Technical career categories, in contrast to one woman in the ten individuals represented in the cohorts prior to the 1940s.

***Question 2. What does qualitative analysis of life history data reveal about life patterns of family members in a multi-generational context during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?***

As indicated earlier, most reported living and working the major part of their adult life in Indiana, with one interviewer identifying family members mostly being in two adjacent counties. This pattern appears to be very stable. The employment data indicates that three of the 18 women described themselves as full-time homemakers with little or no other employment. These respondents are in the 19Teens, 1920s and 1940s Cohorts. The reports of employment from 13 women, from all the Birth Cohorts, indicated periods of both full-time and part-time employment, with periods of time devoted primarily to being at home with children and/or pursuing their education. Three women, one from the 19Teens Cohort and two from the 1970s Cohort reported not having children. Three men reported primarily full-time employment (except for times of job transition when seeking new employment) until retirement and then continuing to work part-time. This pattern was also described by several of the women about their spouses' employment. One man in the 1940s Birth Cohort reported full-time employment with some years of part-time employment while completing more than 300 credit hours in undergraduate academic programs.

Two questions solicited data about the respondents' age at first marriage and their age when the first child was born. Five women reported their age at marriage as 18 or 19, six as between age 20 – 25, and six between 26 – “30s.” One woman from the 1970s Cohort has not married. Of the four men, three were married at age 20 –21 and one at age 28. The reported age at when the first child was born ranges from one to five years after marriage. Given the limited number of respondents in this sample, there appears to be no discernible variation of pattern of age at marriage and when first child was born across these Cohorts.

***Questions 3& 4. What does qualitative analysis of life history data reveal about the nature and impact of life transitions on individuals and on family members in a multi-generational context during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

The answers to both Questions 3 and 4 are very similar. The life history data from this small sample of respondents includes references to a variety of factors influencing life transitions within all Cohorts. These included the expected historical-cultural events such as WW II, the Depression, and the Vietnam War. Other events described as transitional and/or impacting multiple generations of family members included leaving home (e.g. for college or marriage), the birth of children, moving to different locations, changes in employment, a house fire, chronic illness, and unexpected events such as the early or off-time death of a sibling, child, spouse, parents, grandparents and other close relatives.

In the scholarship of teaching arena, the facilitator's and students' assessment of whether this research project was effective as an active learning strategy in an online adult development course is positive. The students did gain an understanding of the process of original research on adult development through the interviewing and report writing process. The Final Project Reports varied in the narrative formats used and ways data was presented graphically. These variations provided examples of improvements for the future. The guidance and materials provided by the facilitator supported the development of life histories with sufficient richness and detail for analysis to produce quality reports which warrant continuing this research project with some improvements as noted. In the words of one student: “The project as a whole helped

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me follow the path of adults along with real life events and situations. This project added a realistic dimension to the theories discussed. . . . It was beneficial to see true experiences correlated with the processes and phases presented by these theorists.”

### Discussion

The results of these two intertwined projects demonstrate how embedding this project within the course assisted in gaining authentic experience in life-related, problem-centered and meaningful research. Students reported a greater appreciation and understanding of the process of original research. In addition, many voiced increased understanding of the choices made by other family members, such as this one woman’s comment about her mother: “My insight is to accept and honor her choice even though it would not be my choice. I have withdrawn and suspended my judgment regarding the wisdom of her choice because it is HER choice.” This life course dynamics research project, embedded in an online course, contributed at many levels.

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