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Using experiential knowledge in teaching about life-courses

Abstract

Life-courses are a central concept in the social sciences. They describe how lives progress over time, be it for short periods of time or even from the cradle to the grave. Understanding life-courses helps to better assess working careers, work-life-balances, the long-term consequences of health problems, and the consequences of poverty, among other things. Because of their wide relevance, life-courses are a topic in, for example, sociological, social policy, demography and social work courses. This working paper discusses teaching methods for life-course research. In doing so, it highlights the connection between the topic of life-courses and experiential knowledge. Most students have experiential knowledge on the phenomenon of life-courses, but they do not know the corresponding scientific terminology and discussions. This working paper suggests that teachers utilize this circumstance and connect their teaching methods on life-courses to the student's experiential knowledge. Moreover, this paper introduces two exercises that teachers can use for this purpose: to have students draw a model of their life-courses, and to have them write autobiographical essays. Descriptions of the exercises and example solutions are provided. Teachers can use these exercises in their courses.

1 Introduction

Life-course research is flourishing. It studies how human lives develop over time, covering critical time periods or even entire biographies. Example topics are how women strike a work-life-balance after having children, and how a solid education affects the rest of our lives (e.g., Blossfeld & Roβbach, 2019; Settersten, 2018). Because of its wide applicability, life-course research is conducted in many scientific disciplines, such as sociology, demography, social policy, social work, and educational science. Other disciplines use the same approach under other names, such as life history, life story, biographical and narrative research. Among these disciplines are history, cultural sciences, and economics. Consequently, life-course research is of cross-cutting relevance within the social sciences and humanities – and beyond.

The wide relevance of life-course research makes it a common topic in university courses. Students need to know about this topic to understand theories and to prepare for their working lives. Examples of theoretical debates around life-courses are the social investment approach and the concept of life-long learning (Bukodi, 2017; Hemerijck, 2018). Examples of professions that utilize the idea of life-courses are doctors, social workers, and case workers in unemployment agencies. These professionals asses their clients' biographies to determine what problems their clients have, where the problems origin, and what support measures are needed (Fioretti & Smorti, 2014; Johansson, 2015; Pultz & Morch, 2015). These examples underline that teaching about life-courses has a central place in the university community.

This working paper explores a way to teach about life-courses. It discusses the idea of utilizing experiential knowledge for this purpose. Experiential knowledge is the knowledge that individuals accumulate through their daily activities, learning from their own actions and observations (Cooper & Harris, 2013). Moreover, it illustrates this approach with examples from a university course on the topic of life-course structures. This course was help in Poland, at the Jagiellonian University Krakow, in April 2019. The examples are presented in a way that allows interested teachers to also adopt them for their own teaching practices.

2 Teaching about life-courses

Life-courses are a topic that gives much freedom to the teacher. This topic has so many facets and applications that teachers have to make choices and select which aspects to focus on. Thereby, they can steer their courses into any number of directions.

Each class or course dealing with the topic of life-courses will most likely cover a number of central concepts. These most prominent concepts are the life-course, life-events, life-phases, life-course effects, linked lives, standardization and de-standardization, cumulative advantages and

disadvantages, life-course regimes, and lives in time and place. Text box 1 presents explanations of these concepts.

Text box 1: Central concepts in life-course research

Life-course = how our lives develop over time, from the cradle to the grave

Life-event = important experiences we make in our lives, they change our life-courses

Life-phase = homogeneous period in our lives, with constant activities

Life-course effect = influences on how our lives progress, for example influences of life-events

Linked lives = events in the life of one person can also affect the lives of other people

Standardization and destandardization = do the lives of people become more similar
(standardization) or different (destandardization), results from social institutions and social change

Cumulative advantages and disadvantages = positive life-events tend to bring about more positive life-events, whereas negative life-events bring more negative life-events

Life-course regime = how life-courses progress is typical for the type of welfare state they are in, there is a limited number of typical life-course patterns

Lives in time and place = how life-courses progress it typical for when and where people live, different generations have different typical life-courses

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(Kohli, 2007; Komp & Johansson, 2015; Mayer, 2009; Settersten, 2018)

The preferences of the teacher and the orientation of the study programme decide which additional aspects are covered in the course. Usually, the concepts in life-course research are discussed together with questions of work and retirement, gender, generational differences, and health outcomes (Link et al., 2017; Madero-Cabib & Fasang, 2016; McMunn et al., 2015). They can also be discussed as matters of social inequalities, welfare policies, social change, and historical developments, among other things (Kohli, 2007; Komp-Leukkunen, 2018; Kuitto, 2016). All these aspects can be presented to the students though a range of teaching techniques.

3 Experiential knowledge in teaching about life-courses

When teaching about life-courses, teachers are in an advantageous position. The reason is that they can they can considerably help students to understand the topic, if they draw on the students' previous experience (Cooper & Harris, 2013; Peyrefitte & Lazar, 2018). Life-course research describes phenomena that most people experienced before. For example, most students experienced the life-events of finishing school, moving to a different city, and possibly also having children.

Another example, many students experienced the concept of lives in time and place from the stories their parents and grandparents told them. Consequently, students already have experiential knowledge with life-courses and with the central concepts of life-course research. However, they usually are neither aware of this knowledge nor do they know the scientific terms for the phenomena they experienced. Teachers can utilize this situation. They can make the students aware of the scientific concepts and terms, and connect them to the students' previous experiences. This way, the students can understand and remember the concepts more easily. Moreover, they can also access their experiential knowledge to assess and critically discuss the concepts. Teachers can integrate various exercises into their classes for this purpose. On the following pages, two of these exercises will be described.

3.1 Drawing life-courses

A picture can say a thousand words – this common saying may not only inspire our lives, but also our teaching. Life-courses are very concrete phenomena that can easily be captured in pictures. In its most simple form, the life-course is understood as a development over time that takes place in three life-phases: youth, which is dedicated to education and socialization, middle-age, which is dedicated to work, and retirement, which is the time after withdrawing from paid work. This tripartite structure of life-courses is common in modern Western societies (Kohli, 2007; Komp-Leukkunen, 2019). It can be displayed in a figure as shown below.

Figure 1: The tripartite life-course model
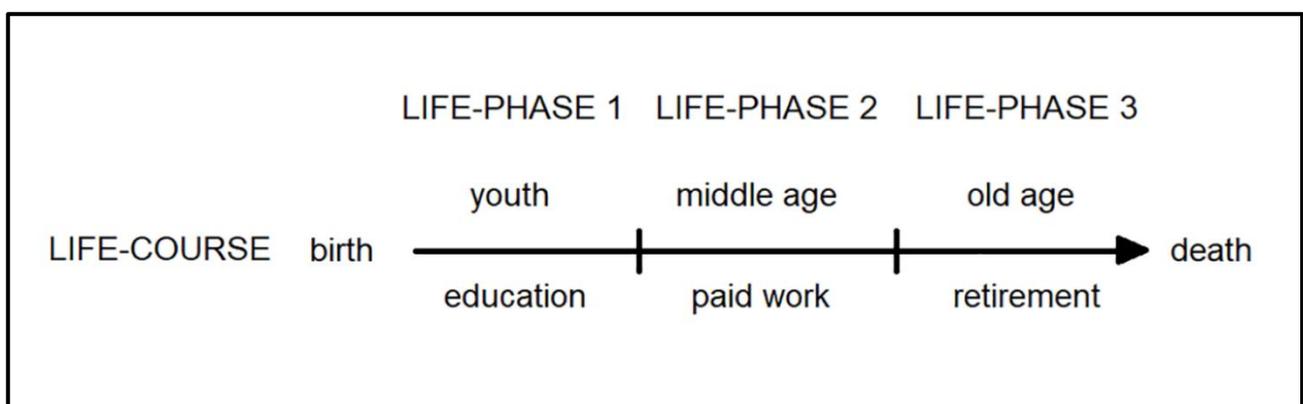
(Komp-Leukkunen 2019: 3)

Although this model is quite simple, it contains several of the main concepts of life-course research. The arrow represents the life-course, showing that lives develop of time. The vertical lines

crossing the arrow represent life-events, although there are not labelled in the model. The spaces between the vertical lines are life-phases, with their characteristics activities being displayed in the model. Teachers can present this model to the students to illustrate a simplified structure of life-courses and to repeat central life-course concepts. Afterwards, they can use it as the starting point for an exercise.

The exercise is that students use this basic model and customize it according to their own life experiences. The instructions for the exercise could, for example be:

"1.) Think about your own life. Which events had a particularly strong influence on how your life progressed (life-events)?

2.) Are there any activities that were important for your life and that you carried out over longer periods of time (life-phases)?

3.) Include your life-events and life-phases in the basic life-course model."

When doing this exercise, it is important to stress that life-events are subjective constructs. Only the person describing their life knows what was a life-event for them. For example, some consider moving out from their parents' home a very important event in their lives, whereas others do not assign much importance to the event. Therefore, there is no single correct solution to this exercise. Rather, each student will come up with their own solution.

To give an impression of what the models presented may look like, two examples are presented here. The first example shows a comparatively simple form of a life-course model, which many students draw. This example was made up to illustrate this common type. It represents the life-course of a student who is 24 years old, graduated from high school at age 19, and started to study right afterwards.

Figure 2: A simple life-course model
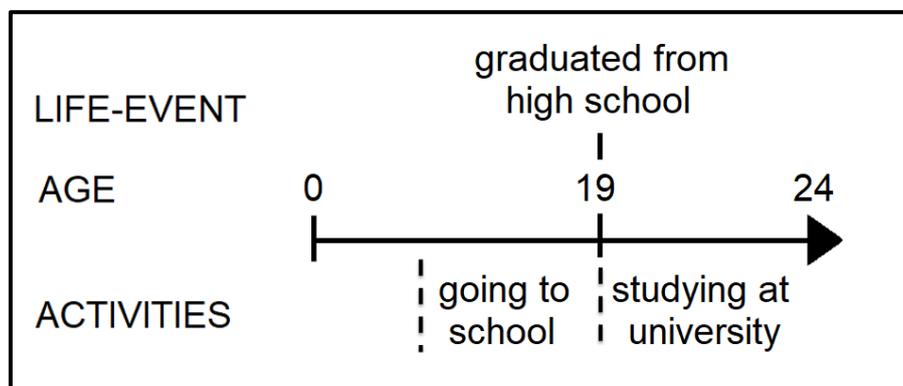
The second example shows a more complex life-course model. A small share of students depicts such more complex life-courses, that include, for example, child births, work, migration experiences, and periods of ill health. The model shows here illustrates the life-course of a students who graduated at age 18, and afterwards started studying while working at the same time. This student had a child at age 24, then took a break from studying and working to look after this child. Later on, this student took up studying and working again. At the moment od drawing the model, the student is aged 29. This model shows the life-course of an actual student, which was slightly modified to guarantee anonymity. The student agreed to have the anonymized model published.

Figure 3: A complex life-course model
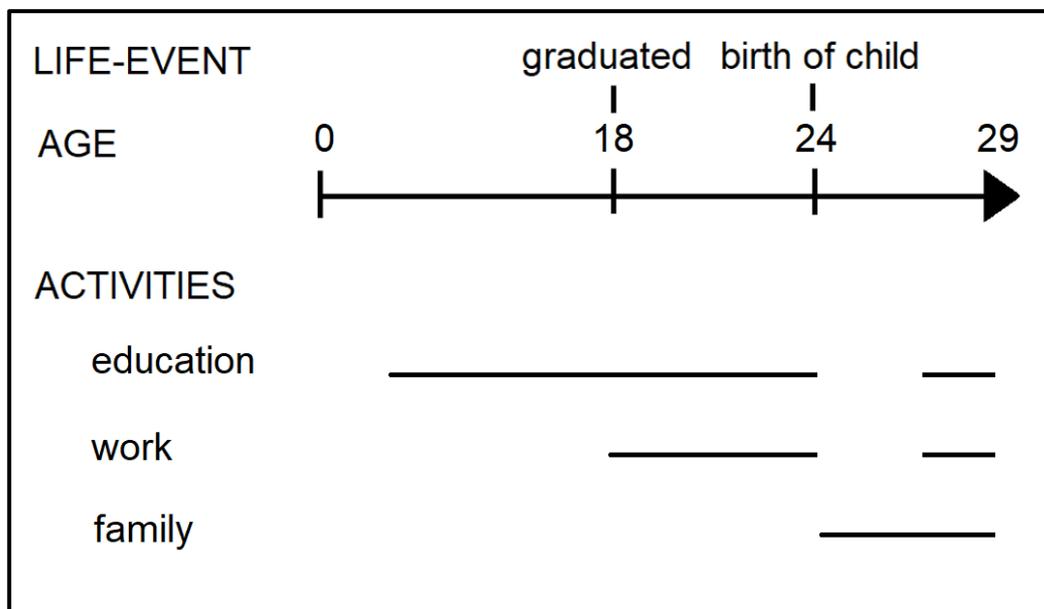
3.2 Autobiographical essays about life-courses

A second exercise for connecting the students' experiential knowledge with life-course concepts is to let them write autobiographical essays (Peterson, 1991; Towers et al., 2017). In these essays, they first choose a central concept in life-course research and explain it, using scientific literature. Afterwards, they look at their lives and find examples when in their lives they observed this concept. In a final step, they discuss the concept in the light of what they observed in their own lives.

This exercise is well-suited as a final exercise in a course on the topic of life-courses, because it acts as a review of the course content, requires the students to transfer the newly acquired knowledge to real life phenomena, and asks them to critically engage with the concepts. Because of

these characteristics, this essay can also be graded. However, it is important to note that the real-life example itself cannot be graded. Rather, the basis for grading is whether the example fits the concept chose, and whether the students can critically reflect on it.

The following pages show excerpts of two such autobiographical essays on life-course concepts. The essays were written by students as part of their course work. Both students illustrated the idea that life-courses are typical for a place and time, using generational differences as an example. To do this, they wrote multigenerational autobiographic essays. For these essays, they chose one concept, wrote down their own observations about their lives, and then also interviewed their parents and grandparents about their observations concerning their own lives. As a result, they receive reports from three generations within a family, all of them describing the same phenomenon at different historical times. A comparison of the reports of the three generations gives insight into the different facets of the phenomenon observes, and into historical change in this phenomenon. The excerpts presented here are from the reports about the students', their parents' and grandparents' lives, and from the reflections on their observations. These excerpts were shortened and anonymized. They are published with the permission of the students.

Example 1: A male student writing about the military service
[…] All three generational subjects had finished high school and started the transition from education to work life. My grandfather had moved out and went to an agricultural college where he studied and worked as a stable boy at the side, he grew up on a farm and this direction came natural for him. My father did not move out but had started working on a farm nearby, as he had a dream of becoming a farmer despite not having any rights of inheriting any farm, both of his parents had moved away from their family farms. I had moved out of my parent's home to a folk high school where I mostly trained and practiced sports […]. My grandfather and father were born at a time where everybody did their military service, except those who claimed to be pacifists, and it was look upon as integral part of men's life. In recent years the military is being look upon as less mandatory, it is very easy to come up with an excuse for not joining, this could be bad hearing, allergies and even saying you do not want to will likely exempt you from the service in peace time.

It should be mentioned that none of the generational subjects had any special interest in the military, but had an "if this is something I have to do, then I should make the best out of it"-attitude. The military service starts off with a two-months recruitment period where you get tested physically, mentally and get the basic soldier education, this period is the foundation of the possibilities you have for where to apply. My grandfather chose to transfer into the medical battalion because of its location […] so that he could spend his weekends with his girlfriend at the

time, now married for 63 years […]. My father was randomly placed at the recruitment school in the medical battalion but was interested in a transportations officer course after the recruitment period. The officers tested them too hard and nobody qualified for the course so they had to go back to the recruits and offered it to my father. I went to the recruitment school of the […] guard and my only reason for choosing this was because of their service is from July to July and not October to October as many of the other branches of the military, this was more fitting for education afterwards. I chose to become a medic […], as my father I thought that when I am here I should try to get as many certificates as possible. […]

For my grandfather, father and myself, I will conclude with that this had no long lasting impact on us, making it no generational difference in the impact of the mandatory military service. The service did, of course, affect us while we were there, with the military discipline, daily routines, training, testing and living in the barracks. This description corresponds with the model of how social institutions affect the life course of the individual, as I mention earlier, at certain points and sequences of the life. We all could agree that we were impacted a little in terms of knowing ourselves and our limits better, more disciplined and more confident in our own abilities. Taking a look at our lives before and after the military, my grandfather went back to his old life unaffected by the military. My father did the same at first but is now a leader in his firm, when I raised the question of the link between his leadership education in the military and his leader position now. He said that he got the leader position out of seniority and that the only thing he could take with him from the military is an example of a leading style he knows he won't be using. I, myself, am in kind of the same situation as my father. I held some medical courses for the recruits after me and this gave me training in teaching and talking before a crowd, but also an example of what kind of teacher I do not want to be. […]

Example 2: A female student writing about expectations towards women
I asked the women in my family to tell me more about how they started their family, whether or not they felt free in their choices, in social pressure had influenced their choices and if so, how. […]
My grandmother started her own family in the most traditional way: after falling in love with her, my grandfather asked her father the permission to marry her. Once they had the family approval, they married and had two children shortly after. Following both religion, tradition and social norms, they had a church wedding and only had children after marrying. Furthermore, they never met alone before the marriage, always in the presence of another family member, like a brother or a mother. My grandmother is a very religious woman, who didn't actually feel the pressure of social norms, since it seemed to her that marrying and having children were the only appropriate things to do.

Nevertheless, during her life-course she was also willing to challenge social norms and tradition, even though most of them are still deeply rooted in her. She has always participated in the labour market, due to the fact that her husband suffered a serious illness and she had to provide for her children.

My mother met my biological father in high school, when she was 16 years old. Of course, a lot had changed since my grandparents met, so my mother was allowed to date by my grandparents and when hen she was 22 years old she got pregnant with me. She is also quite religious, but she wasn't sure about marrying. Still, social norms and tradition prevailed: they married and started living at my grandmother house (my grandfather was dead by then), since they were both young and couldn't afford living alone […]. Then, they divorced after 4 years of marriage and he left home without having any further contact with us. This divorce and its outcome were something unpredictable (or at the very least hard to predict) in my mother's life-course (and in mine). However, my mother met her current partner and decided to start a family with him, but this time she chose to do it by cohabiting […]. When they started co-habiting they had a child shortly after, which at the start created a sort of discomfort in my grandmother, since they weren't married.

My generation […] had more educational opportunities, was exposed to non-traditional ideas and different values that the older ones. For example, younger cohort consider having children as less central to their lives and are more open to voluntary childlessness (Jones & Brayfield, 1997). Definitely, the younger generation's values differ from the older generation's ones. We can certainly state that religion has seen a hug decline in the last decades […]. In conclusion, we can see that the social pressure to marry, have children and strictly follow traditional gender role models, even though it is still existent and has to be considered as an ongoing issue, is definitely weaker than it used to be in the past.

4 Discussion and conclusions

Life-courses are a common topic in the social sciences and humanities. Consequently, courses in sociology, demography, social policy, and social work, among other disciplines, cover them. Because of the far-reaching interest in them, their pedagogical presentation deserves special attention. This working paper contributes to the development of teaching methods for life-course research. It does this by showing how teachers can utilize the students' experiential knowledge when teaching about life-courses.

The utilization of experiential knowledge stems from a practice-oriented perspective on the social sciences (Taatila & Raij, 2012; Teslow et al., 2016). This perspective suggests that the social sciences deal with phenomena with high practical relevance, which we regularly encounter in our

everyday lives. Because of this circumstance, the students already possess knowledge on social science phenomena before they even start to study the social sciences and humanities. The task of the teacher then is less to bring new information to the attention of the students. Rather, their task is to help students reflect and discuss their extant knowledge from a scientific perspective, using scientific methods and terms. Life-courses are a prime example for a phenomenon suited for such a practice-oriented perspective. Every student has previous experience with the different aspects of life-courses, making it easy for teachers to connect to experiential knowledge in this context.

Utilizing experiential knowledge in teaching became more important during recent years, and its importance will continue to increase in the years to come. The reason is that an increasing number of students are working while studying, which keeps them in the university until a late rage (Calderwood & Gabriel, 2017; Owen et al., 2018). Additionally, universities of the third age become more popular, which increases the number of mature students in university courses (Patterson et al., 2016; Talmage et al., 2015). Both developments increase the experiential knowledge that students in the classroom possess, making it more likely that students will revert to this knowledge in their studies. Teachers may not only acknowledge this development, but also react to it in their courses. This working paper makes some suggestions on how they can utilize it to improve their teaching methods.

All in all, experiential knowledge will probably play an increasingly central role in teaching in the decades to come. The social sciences and humanities have the possibility to utilize this knowledge in their teaching, making it easier for students to grasp theoretical concepts and discussions. This working paper makes some suggestions how such an approach can be implemented, using life-course research as an example. Teachers can transfer the approach described to other topics.

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