Understanding the Life Course
This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Hazel May Green (1923–2001) and to the memory of my friend, Theo Weaver (1964–2008).
Understanding the Life Course

Sociological and Psychological Perspectives

Lorraine Green
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Introduction

**What this book is about**

This is a book about people’s lifelong experiences from birth to death and how they change, adapt, develop and decline throughout life, although not necessarily in a linear, predictable or progressive manner. Influences on our subsequent life courses include biology, geography and the environment, psychological processes, the socio-historical context, and the national and international political and economic climate. This book is primarily concerned with how sociology and psychology perceive, research and theorize the life course. Understanding these disciplines enables students to think outside of their own parochial experiences, dispelling common misperceptions around people’s behaviour and our society. These misperceptions include the belief that biology and chronological ageing have an overwhelming influence on what we become and how we live our lives, or alternatively that problems or achievements certain groups of people experience disproportionately, are due more to their inherent individual failings or merits than to societal influences. These can result in the adoption of inaccurate stereotypes, many of which centre on age categories/features (sometimes cross cut by discriminatory race/ethnicity, gender or class assumptions). These include the pervading images of the innocent child; the delinquent youth; the virulent, predatory young black man; the unattractive middle-aged spinster; and the infirm, confused older person.

Within everyday conversations, subjective comments about people are frequently expressed as fact. These might include the belief women are ‘naturally’ less technological than men, or more emotional, or that black people are lazy or less intelligent than whites, or even that criminals or drug addicts were born bad or are evil. These are uncritical resorts to (i) biology and (ii) individual/group pathologization. It is therefore important to look at what evidence corroborates or rejects these ‘common sense’ assumptions, what counts as valid evidence and what ideas underlay such assumptions.
Many facets of individuals are the culmination of multiple influences, rendering it difficult to ascertain, for example, to what extent one’s intelligence (in itself a problematic concept) is linked to genes or the environment, or represents an interaction between the two. Complex intersections between the wider structures of society (structure) and the individual’s autonomous behaviour (broadly equating to *agency* in sociology and *planful competence* in psychology), and between nature (biology/genetics) and nurture (society/environment/culture), are important. It is, however, difficult to quantitatively assess their respective contributions.

This book focuses on the United Kingdom (UK), but also has relevance to a Westernized Euro-American or Australasian audience, despite political, social, educational and economic differences between countries – some significant, others relatively unimportant. Although UK research is preferentially drawn upon in this book, where little research is available on a particular aspect or where the key texts are not British, research from similar Western countries substitutes or is used in addition to British literature. Many comparative examples are also drawn on purposively. These emanate from different historical time periods, cultures and countries. They demonstrate how diverse people’s life courses can be across geography, history and culture, detracting from isolated biological or national understandings. Issues of social class, sex and gender, disability, sexual orientation and race/ethnicity will also be analysed in terms of their impact on people’s lives. These differences are often socially exaggerated or distorted and used to create or reinforce significant inequalities. These inequalities may be unseen, unacknowledged, actively denied or even defended (as in the previous examples). Assumed individual weaknesses and strengths and biological explanations are consequently drawn upon as a way of ignoring or supporting injustices that appear to have strong social causes.

The term ‘life course’ is considered by most sociologists and many life course behavioural and social science academics to be more flexible than other prevalent terms often used by psychologists and biologists. These include ‘life span development’ and ‘the life cycle’. Life course is the preferred term here because there are not always clear, linear, chronological trajectories through one’s life which replicate themselves with each generation. ‘Life courses’ may even be a more appropriate term than ‘the life course’ in our modern societies, where we ‘appear’ faced with endless choices about our identities and lifestyles. In post-industrial societies, people from similar backgrounds, sometimes born only a few years apart, can experience fundamentally different lives due to rapidly changing social, economic or political situations which have a lifelong impact. In small
tribal societies one’s life and identity are already largely ascribed and mapped out, changing little with the generations unless disrupted by Western interference.

**Why combine sociology and psychology?**

Many books deal with the entire life course from a single disciplinary angle, such as sociology (e.g. S. Hunt, 2005) or life span psychology (Bee, 1994; Hendry and Kloep, 2002; K. Berger, 2005; Santrock, 2009). Alternatively, particular stages of the life course, such as childhood or old age, are analysed from a single disciplinary or multi-disciplinary perspective. Other literature approaches the life course according to a particular aspect, such as disability (Priestly, 2003) or identity (Hockey and James, 2003). Some recent texts deal with human development either from a particular vocational or a combined multi-vocational angle (e.g. C. Beckett, 2002; Crawford and Walker, 2007; Sudberry, 2009). However, because these are often short books, contain many practice exemplars and frequently are more attuned to psychology than sociology, they understandably offer a less theoretical, in-depth and life course orientated viewpoint than this text. No UK books currently available, with this exception, address the entire life course, combining both sociological and psychological perspectives in a comprehensive and theoretical but, nevertheless, accessible manner.

Although this book draws from many disciplines, including demography, anthropology, social policy, biology, history, law and politics, the two primary disciplines are sociology and psychology. This is because they are most useful for understanding human behaviour across the life course with specific reference to the UK and the intended readership of the book. Biological perspectives are important, but need to be located within their relationship to particular societies and not deployed deterministically or in a reductionist manner. Similarly, anthropological or historical perspectives are useful, particularly in a comparative sense, as they help to dispel notions of the ‘universally natural’ or ‘unnatural’ in relation to behaviour and customs across different societies. That said, these disciplines are not key explicators of contemporary UK life courses, in the way that psychology and sociology are.

**Who this book is for and why it will be useful**

This book was written principally for undergraduate and postgraduate students on vocational qualifying programmes, such as students
in social and community work, occupational therapy, nursing, medicine, counselling and teaching/education. It offers students access to detailed core sociological and psychological theory and research relating to the life course. This knowledge will act as a foundation from which to understand and relate to people and can positively influence professional decisions and form an underpinning for practice. Although not all students will work with people of all ages or emanating from many different societies, some will. Others may work with one specific group, such as primary school teachers working with young children, or nurses working with older people. However, one rarely works with a certain group or age category in isolation. Understanding kinship ties with family and friends, and how their issues and life stage impact upon their relationships with the children, are important for primary school teachers. Similarly, understanding the significance of historical and social events such as wars and rapid technological advances for older people, as well as assessing the impact of how society treats older people (as wise and useful citizens or as weak and a drain on resources?), are imperative. Many older people previously had to pay for medical care before the NHS and an understanding of the impact this had on poor families would be useful for health professionals, whose elderly patients are reluctant to consult them until any medical condition has deteriorated substantially.

This book will be particularly useful to vocational degree students because, although they have less time than pure single honours degree students to study a particular theoretical area or pure discipline in depth, they will often work in and across multi-professional teams or organizations. Therefore understanding trans-disciplinary social science perspectives will be a distinct advantage. The degree benchmarks for some professional degrees, such as social work, furthermore, require students to acquire an ecological and eclectic understanding of human behaviour. This book is also suitable for students undertaking applied or mixed social science degrees, which include sociology and psychology, highlighting similarities, differences, complementarity and contestations in how these disciplines perceive and theorize life trajectories, stages or transitions. It can be read chronologically through successive chapters but can also be used as an occasional resource or reference text since chapters can also be understood standing alone.

This book examines childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, etc., as chronological age/stage markers whilst simultaneously scrutinizing and problematizing them as such, critically analysing common sense assumptions and stereotypes. So, although the chapters are structured fairly traditionally for ease of reading and reference, no
assumptions are made about the inevitability, accuracy or meanings of any of these age categories. They indicate some chronological similarities but also increasingly marked differences and shifts, and historical changes are often evident. Some categories are also relatively new. Adolescence only emerged in the mid twentieth century and, with growing longevity, old age is now often subdivided into a perceived third age of good health and comfort and a more dependent and less healthy fourth age. The book also aims to be strong on empirical examples, constantly interlinking theoretical conceptualizations with research findings and evidence. Interesting examples and pertinent statistics or quotations, furthermore, are used to support or extend arguments.

### Summary of the chapters: brief contents

#### Chapter 1
The first chapter will introduce students to the different theoretical concepts surrounding the life course, stressing linearity and multidirectionality as well as continuity and discontinuity. The importance of adopting a multi-disciplinary perspective and understanding the often indivisible interplay between nature and nurture or genetics and culture throughout the life course will also be covered. As part of presenting an integrated perspective, it will be necessary to define and discuss the different elements and methods of key disciplines such as sociology and psychology, their subdivisions of life span psychology and life course sociology and in what ways they diverge or possess common viewpoints. The importance of critically examining lay viewpoints will be stressed and it will be shown why they are so problematic and need to be questioned and frequently rejected.

#### Chapter 2
Chapter 2 illustrates how infancy and childhood are perceived and theorized through the lens of developmental psychology, which explains how children progressively develop physically, cognitively and psychosocially. Pioneering theorists such as Erikson, Freud, Bowlby and Piaget are introduced and key research studies are explained to show how some of their theories originated, alongside an analysis of their contemporary validity and relevance. Traditional developmental psychology sees growth as an inherently linear, maturational process and reaching certain psychological or physical milestones or stages, at definite predefined ages, as indicative of normal development. The
inability to attain those markers at the required time is often seen as indicating abnormal development. Although more recent developmental psychology takes the social context into account, it pays far less attention to this and structural factors than sociology does.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 both critiques and represents a challenge to traditional developmental child psychology and traditional sociology approaches, drawing on literature from the new critical developmentalists and the ‘new sociology of childhood’ theorists. Developmental psychology is initially criticized for its apolitical conservative stance; its representation of the child as a ‘naturally’ developing being, relatively unaffected by external influences; its overemphasis on measurement; its biological determinism; its relative ignorance of cross-cultural differences and its view of the child as unequivocally deficient. The ‘new social studies of childhood’ conversely illuminates the multiple cultural and historical constructions of children and childhood and shows how children today are far more competent and able to be autonomous than we frequently allow them to be or give them credit for. The new sociology of childhood confirms childhood is a subordinated social status where protectionist, paternalist decisions are frequently made on behalf of children, who are rarely asked their opinions or seriously involved in important decisions about their lives. It also highlights the ways in which children are often both exploited and overprotected today and how social divisions like gender and social class profoundly affect how they are treated and their subsequent life course trajectories.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 examines the early teenage years from the beginning of puberty to early adulthood. Psychologists use the term ‘adolescence’, whilst sociologists disproportionately refer to the term ‘youth’ in preference, although youth refers to a more extended period. Early psychological developmental theory placed great emphasis on biological changes and assumed these caused emotional changes during puberty, although contemporary psychologists are much more cautious about forging causal links. Physical and intellectual development as well as identity, personality and independence are additionally important issues for psychologists of adolescence and therefore will be examined. Sociological themes pertinent to youth covered here include the longitudinal demonization of young people and associated ‘unnecessary’ moral panics; changes in youth
unemployment and higher education; young people’s changing values and political beliefs; their consumption-driven behaviour; the impact of new technology and how social inequalities such as those related to social class, race/ethnicity and gender impact on all of these issues.

Chapter 5

This chapter examines young adulthood, extending from about 18 up to 40 years. Psychology concentrates here on physical, cognitive, moral and psychosocial changes and development. Psychological claims of a new developmental period, ‘emergent adulthood’, are evaluated from both psychological and sociological vantage points. The key sociological topics analysed are the transitions into and markers associated with contemporary adult status; the role work plays for young adults and their dissonant expectations and subsequent experience of work; the importance and function of leisure, sport and new technology and how family, friendship and relationship structures and practices have fundamentally changed. These have become more heterogeneous and flexible due to significant technological, attitudinal, legal and social changes. How social inequalities and divisions impact on all of these is also examined and analysed.

Chapter 6

In this chapter middle adulthood is examined, despite its relative contemporary and historical neglect by both disciplines. Physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes are scrutinized with an emphasis on whether or not concepts once popular in psychology, such as the ‘empty nest syndrome’ or ‘the midlife crisis’, are universally applicable experiences. Assumptions about inevitable physical and intellectual decline are investigated and found to be deficient and overly simplistic. There is moderate physical senescence in middle age, alongside some intellectual decline, although it does not have a significant impact and gains can still be made in some cognitive areas. In the section on sociology, ageing, self-perception and body image during midlife are revealed as very important, particularly for women. The significance of and various changes in leisure pursuits and physical activity are analysed as are various lifestyle changes relating to travel, food and eating. Negative and positive media representations of middle-aged people, depicting them both as an inspiration and as selfish and an impending drain on societal resources, are examined. The demands and stress work places on midlifers, who often have other onerous caring family responsibilities,
are also analysed, with both gender and social class being shown to be important mediators. The impact of the new reproductive technology and attitudes towards it are evaluated with respect to later motherhood, as are different kinship and living arrangements, such as gay and lesbian relationships, long-distance partnerships and single person households.

Chapter 7

In this chapter the concept of old age, potentially the longest life stage, extending from 60 years to a possible 120 years, the known upper limits of our life span, is analysed. Old age is, however, a movable feast and seems more associated with institutional markers such as compulsory retirement and pension ages than any objective or strictly chronological factors. In other societies old age may not be judged by chronological age but by family hierarchy or ranking, or characteristics such as vitality or wisdom. In the section on psychology, various explanatory theories of ageing are examined alongside physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes. The societal negativity surrounding old age and previous assumptions about dramatic physical and mental decline are evaluated and found to be greatly overstated. Psychological studies confirm older people have greater compensatory and adaptive facilities than previously thought, most being very independent. Within sociology, a key theme is that of ageism which can pertain to any age but has been particularly detrimental to how older people are represented and treated. Various theories drawn on to explain the negative treatment of the elderly such as ‘structured dependency theory’ and ‘the civilizing process’ are also evaluated. How one’s specific cohort, generation and associated prior life experiences impact on how one experiences old age is also reviewed, as is the impact of social inequalities which have a cumulative affect throughout life. These can confer either significant advantage or disadvantage in terms of health and longevity, income, housing and lifestyle. Depictions of older people as a demographic time bomb in terms of extensive future care needs are also critically evaluated.

Chapter 8

This chapter is devoted to grief and loss and death and dying. Traditional psychology mostly develops individualistic theories to explain the emotional stages people go through when they know they are dying or when they have been bereaved. However, newer psychological theories appear less dogmatic and less stage orientated.
They are more cautious about labelling different forms of grieving as pathological or problematic and are more aware of the social context than earlier psychologists, but are still not sufficiently attentive to its impact. Sociologists tend to pay little attention to individuals’ emotional states and feelings, being more concerned with the different social contexts death and dying take place within and how these impact upon our attitudes and how we confront and respond to death. Sociologists show how the progressive medicalization and bureaucratization of death in modern societies have led to us having less acquaintance with it. We therefore have become increasingly fearful about how to respond when we are dying or someone close to us dies or is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Sociologists also illustrate how social inequalities affect significantly how and when we will die and what we will die from, following the cumulative advantage or disadvantage argument previously presented. Despite this, sociologists rarely engage with the significant emotions death and dying engender both in us as individuals and in societal responses.

This introductory section has therefore explained why possessing a multi-disciplinary understanding of the life course is important for students on many vocational degree courses and for those studying mixed social science degrees, illustrating how a deficit of such knowledge can leave students resorting to inaccurate, culturally or historically specific and discriminatory lay and anecdotal viewpoints. It has also summarized the contents of the individual chapters and justified why a chronological perspective of the life course, albeit a critical one, is being utilized in this particular text. The following chapter lays the conceptual and theoretical foundations for the subsequent chapters. It explains key aspects of psychology and sociology and their specific orientations to the life course, clarifies key terminology and finally analyses the current state of play in relation to interdisciplinary life course research.
Understanding the Life Course

Introduction

This chapter will introduce you to the concept of the life course and to the disciplines of sociology and psychology through which the life course will principally be investigated. Initially key changes in UK society impacting on people’s lives since the early 1970s will be outlined and summarized, many being discussed further in later chapters. Following this, there will be a consideration of why reality television and lay theories of human behaviour are flawed. The key tenets of psychology and sociology will then be explained, and their relationship to life span psychology, sociology of the life course and general social science research methods will be clarified, with key terms delineated and explained. Finally, the current state of the field of life course studies in relation to multi-disciplinarity and its future potential will be explored, alongside some classic illustrative examples of life course research.

You may find this chapter dense and theoretical in places, in comparison with the other chapters which may appear easier to navigate and understand. This is because this chapter offers a grounding or underpinning for the following chapters and does not presuppose readers have any prior knowledge of social science. The other chapters can be read without this one but understanding this chapter will enrich and deepen the reader’s experience of the rest of the book. It is also a chapter that can be continually revisited to verify meanings and terms used throughout the text.

Changes affecting the contemporary life course in the UK

Changes in Work, the Family, Lifestyle and Education

Any understanding of the life course, as well as being embedded within historical and cultural influences, needs to take into account
societal, technological and political changes. Irwin (2005) cautions that life course analysis frequently fails to engage sufficiently with the enormity of change in most domains of social life in the late twentieth century. These changes include the re-organization of the family (and living arrangements) and expected roles and practices, with particular reference to gender; and the demise of class-based solidarities, whereby families and communities inter-generationally were traditionally allied to political parties and key institutions associated with them, but no longer are, and the associated rise of individualization as opposed to collectivization. This occurs when individuals are more concerned about themselves and their small kinship or friendship groups than the whole society’s wellbeing and feel, often wrongly, that a multitude of life choices are open to them and that age-related life stages are increasingly less relevant.

Rapid technological change is also important (S. Hunt, 2005) and has many social repercussions. Today’s young adults have grown up with computers, the internet and mobile phones. People in their forties upwards, many of whom did not personally encounter computers until their twenties or thirties, will be much less au fait with some aspects of the ‘new’ technology. The recent UK television series *Life on Mars* and its sequel *Ashes to Ashes* provide an excellent fictional illustration. A detective is ‘apparently’ involuntarily transported from contemporary society back to the 1970s. He finds 1970s society completely alien and he is frustrated and initially immobilized by the lack of technological resources at his disposal, no longer being able to use mobile phones, the internet and DNA markers as key work or lifestyle tools.

A transition has also occurred from being a factory-based producing, industrial society to a service-orientated, consumerist society. This, alongside various financial crises, heralded initially by the 1973 OPEC oil crisis, has impacted on the availability of employment and the types of work now obtainable and our lifestyles and attitudes towards purchasing goods. Many jobs today are part-time and temporary, offering comparatively less security, lower pay and poorer conditions than prior to the 1980s – a process known as *casualization* of the labour force. Furthermore, in the UK we have the longest working hours of any country in Europe.

Klein (2000) documents the transition in the late twentieth century from generic goods to branded designer goods, whereby shopping becomes a source of meaning and desire – hence the colloquial term ‘retail therapy’. Many people affiliate to and derive their self-perceived status from possession of the newest offerings from these brands (for example, ‘having to have’ the latest PlayStation console, Apple iPhone or Nike trainers). The rise of consumerism, clearly evident since the
1970s (Garnett, 2007), and associated designer labels also places pressures on poorer families to compare themselves to others, aspiring to ever more expensive goods and services. When poorer families are comparatively worse off than sectors of society they compare themselves to, precluding them from buying items and partaking in activities which would be considered normal for their group, this is known as ‘relative poverty’. In some other countries income may be far lower, but because people compare themselves favourably to others in similar situations, they may experience fewer negative psychological symptoms.

Although few in the UK die today of ‘absolute poverty’ in terms of starvation or lack of shelter, some old people still die of hypothermia nearly every winter because they cannot afford heating and some communities are dispossessed and alienated, ravaged by poverty, crime and violence. Education has also changed and, despite political rhetoric surrounding lifelong education, this has never been incentivized and older people do not have access to higher education loans. The demise of means-tested ‘liveable’ grants may also have deterred many potential working-class and mature students from going to university. Nevertheless, more and more young adults are encouraged to enter higher education or, alternatively, to engage with post-18 vocational training.

Demographic Changes

Life expectancy has increased phenomenally as the birth rate has (until recently) steadily declined, leading to families becoming smaller and a rapidly ageing ‘greying’ population, in which older people are living longer and growing proportionally larger compared to other ages in the population. This links with many other changes, such as the death of a parent in middle age now becoming a life course marker. Life expectancy rose because of vastly improved environmental conditions and diet, alongside major advances in medical knowledge and technology. The birth rate initially declined for a number of reasons. The advent of successful contraception, such as ‘the Pill’ in the 1950s, the increasing social and economic independence of women alongside sex equality laws, long working hours and the steady decrease in full-time housewives have all contributed. However, both birth rates and life expectancy vary according to age, gender, race and ethnicity, disability and social class and interactions between these. One reason for recent increases in the birth rate is immigration, alongside, more marginally, many women bearing children at much later ages than previously. The number of people living in Britain in 2009 exceeded 61 million. There were 408,000 more people living in Britain in 2008 than
in 2007, the biggest increase in the population in one year since 1962. In 2008, Britain’s birth rate was also at its highest for fifteen years, with 19,000 extra births in that one year, compared to the previous year (Savage, 2009). Although 24 per cent of all births in 2008 were to women born outside the UK, 56 per cent of the additional 19,000 births in 2008 were to those immigrant females, with the largest number emanating from Pakistan, closely followed by Poland (Savage, 2009; Bosely and Saner, 2009). Interestingly, both countries are very pro-family and patriarchal. In Poland, Catholicism is the dominant religion and forbids contraception, although it is not illegal. In Pakistan, 97 per cent of the population are Muslim and, although Islam’s teachings mostly permit contraception, there is significant resistance.

Globalization

Globalization is a contested, complex concept but challenges the view that nation states such as England and France are self-enclosed, self-governing territories with ‘native’ citizens and clear national behaviour and cultural attributes. It puts forward the viewpoint that the globe is becoming more interconnected as people increase their knowledge of other parts of the world and have greater access to and communication with them. National boundaries, practices and identities are therefore becoming weaker and loosening. Economic globalization is related to the expansion of capitalism through international trade and economic imperialism forged by multinational corporations. Political globalization focuses on transnational governance, for example the United Nations or the European Union. Cultural globalization describes the interconnectivity between the global and the local in terms of social practices and customs.

The ‘global village’ metaphor referring to the whole world becoming smaller (Robertson, 1992) holds true in relation to the potential that new technology, including computers, telecommunications and air travel, holds for instant/rapid communication and fast access to previously difficult-to-reach places of the globe (Urry, 2000). However, some people have more opportunities and access than others. A girl in India who puts together computer components for a Western company may have a negligible chance of being able to purchase or even use a computer and even less possibility of ever being able to travel outside her country. Some theorists consequently see globalization as entrenched Western imperialism of the globe, whilst others view the whole process as being ‘up for grabs’ once it has been set in motion, and Western countries are increasingly concerned about the potential power of nations like China (Jordan, 2006).

Temporary and permanent immigration in the UK have increased,
particularly with the influx of new countries into the European Community and unrestricted movement within it. This augments previous immigration from the New and Old Commonwealth countries, significant from the 1940s onwards. Alongside recent emigration from the UK and refugees and asylum seekers, these changes suggest the UK is now a country of many different ethnicities and ‘colours’. The number of mixed-heritage people, furthermore, tripled since the turn of the century (Song, 2007). According to the 2001 census, 1.2 per cent of the population self-identified as being of mixed heritage (many being under the age of 16), rendering it the UK’s biggest ethnic minority group.

A key feature of globalization is hybridity, in which different cultural tastes, pastimes and goods are fused. The term ‘Asian fusion cuisine’ is now becoming mainstream in the UK. Curry has replaced the traditional Sunday roast as the favourite meal and is a strong competitor with the traditional fish and chip takeaway. Musical styles such as rock and Asian music – Bhangra – and Celtic and African music are mixed to create their own distinct forms. Globalization may therefore result in very different mosaics of people living together in the same urban agglomerations, with some having very little understanding of each other or mutual interaction. Using an example to relate this to age and the life course, an elderly white, outgoing British female may never meet her neighbour, a first-generation elderly Asian female immigrant. Her neighbour perhaps never worked outside the home or learnt English fluently and, since the death of her husband, is lonely and isolated as her children live elsewhere and she fears travelling much farther than the corner shop. In contrast, another second- or third-generation West Indian teenager may embrace some characteristics associated with her West Indian heritage and other characteristics associated with mainstream British behaviour and pastimes.

### Unreality TV, people’s perceptions of human ‘nature’ and lay theorizing

#### Unreality TV

Until around the turn of the century in 1999–2000, few media programmes dealt with understanding ‘real’ people’s actions, motivations and lives. We, or at least the TV and radio channels, seemed to think it was more important to understand the minutiae of plant or animal life or interior design than to understand ourselves. Now an endless amorphous, cheap-to-produce mass of reality TV is appearing. This appears to ‘aim’ to help people to control their ‘difficult’
Understanding the life course

children (SuperNanny), ‘unruly’ teenagers (Boot Camp) and ‘antisocial’ dogs (It’s Me or the Dog, The Dog Whisperer); to understand why and how they relate to their relatives (Wife Swap); to attract a partner through grooming them both in behaviour and dress sense (Trinny and Susannah); to eat properly (You Are What You Eat); or to keep their apparently health-endangering abodes sanitary (How Clean Is Your House?).

What distinguishes all these programmes from genuine social science and the natural sciences is that they are made solely for entertainment value. They are featuring people who will inevitably be behaving unusually and probably differently from how they might customarily behave in their everyday lives, and who will not be representative of the ‘ordinary’ person because they have selectively volunteered, have been chosen for their interest value and know they are being filmed. Can you, for example, imagine collecting your faeces and giving them to an expert who will evaluate your bowel health in front of millions of viewers in any real-life situation (You Are What You Eat)? Similarly, when/if you clean your kitchen, do you routinely place dirt under a microscope to examine bacteria (How Clean Is Your House)?

If you view confessional chat shows, such as those hosted by Jeremy Kyle and Jerry Springer, would you volunteer to go on if you had a personal issue? Most probably you would not, but these programmes still attract prurient and voyeuristic curiosity in their many viewers, arguably through exploiting those already marginalized and disadvantaged. Some viewers potentially may also take the messages they convey seriously or believe they are helpful in understanding human beings and their life courses.

These programmes frequently draw on simplistic and repeated formulae, often based on behavioural (reward and punishment) psychology and modelling (copying). They therefore tend to focus on the individual and individual change in a superficial manner. For example, in both Wife Swap and Supernanny, some men leave all housework and childrearing to their wives. Although the programmes may encourage them as individuals to change their behaviour, if it is adversely affecting the family, how society encourages both males and females to behave very differently, but ‘naturally’, is never considered. The founding modern reality TV programme, Big Brother, features an analysis of group interaction and individuals’ personalities and motivations by psychologists. However, the individuals in Big Brother are distinguished more by their immense vanity and exhibitionism than any randomly selected group might be. They are also placed in a very artificial short-term environment, where only certain aspects of their behaviour are screened and analysed, again dependent upon their evaluated entertainment value. If we shift attention momentarily from social to natural science and take Ben Goldacre’s justified and
humorous criticisms of the self-styled nutritionist and entrepreneur, Gillian McKeith, who researched and authoritatively presented You Are What You Eat, we discover not only that she purchased her ‘fake’ Ph.D. off the internet, but also that many of the scientific claims she propounds in her programmes and books are quite simply wrong and ‘bad science’.

Therefore, although we might think we are learning a lot about people or science from these ‘reality TV’ programmes, we should be guarded about taking them too seriously, as we should also be when reading isolated journalistic accounts of particular groups of people. In relation to age-based assumptions and stereotyping, unless we look to talent shows such as The X Factor and Pop Idol, it is notable that most reality TV shows featuring older children and teenagers represent them as problematic and troublesome, reinforcing prejudiced beliefs – which will be critiqued later – based on or influenced by the repeated and historically enduring demonization of young people in media and public representations.

Lay Theories and Human ‘Nature’

This book should help you to understand people throughout the life course and relieve you of any belief that these TV programmes approximate reality or are scientific. Sociology is concerned with the impact society and its institutions have on our behaviour and understandings, with particular reference to power structures and relationships between individuals, groups and the wider society. Psychology is more concerned with the individual per se: their physical, cognitive, moral, social and personality development; individual differences and how people learn and become motivated – although social psychology focuses more on group processes. Sociology and psychology are academic disciplines which take human behaviour seriously, studying it rigorously through scientific research techniques, although much ongoing debate about what constitutes valid science, useful research or transferable knowledge exists within both disciplines.

The general public place great faith in numbers and statistics, but they are mostly unaware that these can be manipulated or that the studies they are based on may have been conducted incompetently, or the results deliberately or inadvertently misinterpreted. Similarly, what may be regarded as fact and the truth for hundreds of years may be revised or discredited at any time, so no theory or results from a research study can ever be shown to be unequivocally and timelessly the eternal truth (Magee, 1973). Nonetheless, a theory becomes more credible and stronger the older it is and the more researchers have tested it in different areas and repeatedly confirmed it. The general
public also tend to associate research methods with either natural science laboratory experiments or questionnaire surveys. Most are unaware that many different, often competing, research methods, designs and frameworks of understanding reality exist or they dismiss them without understanding them.

There are key differences between lay and good social science theories, and whilst some lay theories may be correct (even if the reasoning behind them may be flawed), many others are counter-intuitive (Furnham, 1989). Perhaps because people tend to think they are experts on human ‘nature’, they consequently draw on simple ‘common sense’ explanations and their own parochial experience of reality to explain complex and multi-faceted phenomena. The main problem with lay theories is therefore that they are often derived from people’s small pool of personal experience or hearsay; contain unacknowledged assumptions or contradictory premises people are either unaware of or do not see as problematic; frequently confuse cause and association and cause and effect; rarely look for disconfirming examples and are often resistant to modification in the light of changing evidence (Furnham, 1989).

If we take masculinity and femininity as examples, these comprise of certain behavioural or personality characteristics people often associate unequivocally with being male or female. Most social scientists today (with the exception of some evolutionary psychologists) would accept, on the basis of many years of research and theory that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon. Many lay people, however, often assume gender is a biological, sex-based inevitability. For example someone could put forward the theory men are ‘naturally’ better managers because they are more in control of their emotions than women. It may later be asserted by the same person that rape or male violence should be condoned because men are ‘naturally’ ‘sexually incontinent’ or are aggressive, without the lay person discerning the contradiction inherent in the two statements. If pressed further, behaviour may be attributed to biology, with lay people talking vaguely about hormones or evolution but being unable to offer any deeper analysis.

In contrast, social science theory and research will be well specified and will follow logical principles and procedures. Social scientists therefore will not assume, if two events seem related to one another, or occur together, or one follows the other (sometimes known as correlation or association), that one necessarily causes the other (causation). For example, if I start taking a particular medication and begin feeling tired, I may assume it is the side effect of the medication, which it could be, but it may equally be something very different such as an emerging underactive thyroid problem. Lay theories also
almost always resort to the individual or their biology, and rarely are social factors considered. People most often object to sociological or social science findings because they claim they state the obvious (Giddens, 1987). They therefore need not be rigorously researched, many claim, as ‘common sense’ offers a cheaper and quicker alternative. Conversely, if findings run counter to common sense, the general public often reject and ridicule them (‘of course that can’t be the case because everybody knows otherwise, or that wasn’t my or my Aunty Nelly’s experience, so of course it’s wrong . . .’). This is particularly the case if research findings challenge widely held, emotionally important beliefs of individuals or problematize political agendas. One notable example is the recent dismissal in 2009 by the government of one of their key scientific advisors on illicit drugs, Professor David Nutt, for suggesting government policy ran counter to the scientific evidence on the effects of drugs. Although, admittedly, far less conclusive evidence exists on illicit drugs, compared to legal drugs such as tobacco and alcohol, because of the obvious difficulties in gaining ethical clearance to conduct experimental studies, the evidence available suggests alcohol and tobacco cause far more damage than Ecstasy. Nutt was prepared to state this openly, humorously revealing fewer deaths occur from Ecstasy than from horse riding or eating peanuts (Wolff, 2009), and, although he has been criticized for this, his intention was to locate the problem of Ecstasy in a realistic and less sensationalist context.

Social science findings are, furthermore, frequently contrasted unfavourably with the unrealistic perception that natural science conclusively finds out certain facts which can be instantly applied to improve all our everyday lives. Yet there is as much dispute about and modification to natural science results as there is to social science findings, and often years of research are needed before the few successfully transferable findings can be applied. Another criticism is of the incomprehensible nature of social science jargon, but every discipline uses some terminology as a form of insider’s shorthand. The findings of natural laboratory scientists in white coats who use incomprehensible jargon and impressive technology are frequently revered and seldom challenged (Sapolsky, 2000), but their findings are rarely interpreted as emotionally threatening in the way social science findings may be. What the lay person also generally fails to realize is that the more successful social science concepts and findings are, the more invisible they become. They tend to be absorbed generally into our everyday understandings, for example, the concepts of in-groups, stigma, charisma and institutionalization, and, despite politicians often debunking social science, they enthusiastically – though somewhat hypocritically – apply research which might benefit them, such as
that identifying the features which promote interest and applause during public speeches (J. Platt, 1989).

To sum up, lay theories are problematic because they are generally based upon anecdotes or an individual's own narrow experience or understandings, which are accepted without question, and most lay critics of social science do not have an awareness of the logical premises and research methodology social science is based upon. The general public also tend to experience social science research they disagree with as emotionally threatening and therefore reject it, or they alternatively dismiss it as unnecessary because it confirms what they thought they already definitively knew in terms of their 'common sense'. However, although some of this 'common sense' could originally have emanated from social science but then slowly and unconsciously become embedded in their everyday understandings of social situations.

**Sociology and psychology**

**Sociology**

Sociology is a nurture discipline based around understanding the significant influence society has on us at different levels. These range from the micro context of friends, family and small groups to the mid or meso level of organizations or similar-sized structures. The macro level of political and social norms, major economic and other institutions, attitudes and legislation and the interconnections between all levels and the individual are also important. Consequently our peer group (acquaintances and friends of similar age, often with similar backgrounds and interests) may have a profound influence on how we behave and our likes and dislikes. However, they are in turn also influenced by the family they live in (micro context), the schools they have attended and the neighbourhood environs they reside in (meso context), contemporary and past educational structures, media attitudes about young people, legislation, and prevailing wider political and social attitudes (the macro context). Therefore, other than 'its empirical grounding in careful observation and description of facts, sociology as a discipline is characterized by its rigorous search for interconnections among different domains of society and its systematic use of comparisons' (Beteille, 1996: 2361)

**Thinking sociologically**

C. Wright Mills (1959) claimed sociology is about understanding the relationship between society within its wider historical context and
our own biographies and inner worlds, thus comprehending where we and others are located and why. If, for example, one person suffers long-term unemployment, then this is a personal issue with many potential causes or solutions. When thousands of people endure long-term unemployment, then this becomes a social or political problem which cannot be blamed on the individual, individual solutions being largely ineffectual. P. Berger (1963) sees grasping sociology as progressing from being in a puppet show where we are unaware others are pulling our strings to having a wider awareness of how the society we live in works and influences us, and therefore to perhaps resisting societal pressures and norms and, through this process, thereby changing ourselves or others. Bauman (1990) describes sociology as the sharpening up of our critical social thinking, whereby we continually examine and scrutinize everything we have accepted as normal, natural and inevitable or preordained up until now. Abercrombie (2004) believes sociology’s main moral enterprise is to investigate basic, often ‘common sense’, assumptions about social life, however personally upsetting they may be for us. Bruce (1999) contends sociology is more complex than the so-called ‘hard’ natural sciences because it deals with human goals, motivations, beliefs and values in the context of complex societies. A common theme threading these viewpoints together is one of complexity, critical thought, coherence and consistency and not taking anything for granted about society and one’s place within it.

Socialization

For many years sociologists used the term socialization to refer to the potentially lifelong process of individuals learning and acquiring the norms (expected ways of behaving and thinking) and values of their societies. These were seen as being endowed via both individuals and institutions such as school, work, the media and families. Lately there has been much criticism that socialization has been represented as an over-psychologized one-way process (from society hypodermically into the individual, e.g. Stanley and Wise, 2000) and should be viewed as much more dynamic, diverse and multi-directional. Behavioural approaches within psychology, such as Bandura’s social learning theory, also explain socialization through learning via copying and modelling, and reward and punishment. There are also many competing and complementary perspectives within sociology. These involve continual debates as to how far the society (social structure) shapes and moulds the individual versus the extent to which the individual is able to effectively exercise ‘objective’, autonomous choices over their lives (individual agency) and whether our society is generally a fair and democratic place or grossly corrupt and massively unequal.