The Life Course, Human Development, and Health

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Section A

What Is a Life Course Perspective on Health?
A Life Course Perspective

- Conceptualizes health as the reflection of an underlying developmental trajectory

- Trajectory is multidimensional
  - Biological, psychological, behavioral, and social aspects

- What “health” means varies by position on this developmental trajectory (i.e., by age)
Developmental Trajectories

- Some aspects are “hard wired”

- Most aspects are highly plastic

- Specific trajectory reflects transactions between an individual and the contexts in which he or she is embedded
Analysis from a Life Course Perspective

- Examines underlying *developmental trajectories*
- Distinguishes key *contextual influences*
- Identifies biological, psychological, behavioral, and social *processes* linking contexts and health
A Theoretical Orientation

- “Establishes a common field of inquiry by defining a framework that guides research in terms of problem identification and formulation, variable selection and rationales, and strategies of research design and analysis” (Elder and Shanahan, 2006)

- Helps one to make causal connections and should lead to theories

- A powerful approach for explanation, identifying points of intervention, and designing policy
Specific Applications ...


- Symonds. (2009). Nutrition and Its Contribution to Obesity and Diabetes: A Life-Course Approach to Disease Prevention?


General Applications ...

- Alwin and Wray. (2005). *A Life-Span Developmental Perspective on Social Status and Health.*


Focus on long-term origins of disease and/or the natural history of disease, especially chronic conditions

Not new within epidemiology, just more prominent

Three strands of research led to renewed emphasis
- British cohort studies
- Fetal origins
- Health inequalities research
 Origins: Social Science

- Focus on individual lives, social pathways
  - Life course as a concept

- Established by Glen Elder

- Research examines how historical time, place, and social institutions shape lives
  - Transitions, trajectories, turning points

- Principal health outcome mental health; less emphasis on biology and more on social determinants
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Clarifying Terms

- Life span: length of time species is capable of living or length of an individual’s life

- Life cycle: regular and predictable series of life stages or species reproductive cycle

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