

# 14

## Life course

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Extract from *International Encyclopaedia of Housing and Homes* (2010) Oxford: Elsevier.

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### Introduction

[...]

Personal circumstances – within wider influences – produce opportunities and constraints that affect choices about moving or staying put. Life course has been described as the patterned progression of individual experience through generational time, anchored in bodily growth, psychosexuality, behavioural conditioning, and cognitive development (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995): an intimate relationship with the deep-seated personal experiences of the passage of time.

[...]

From a sociological perspective, social status may be more important than chronological age in reflecting individuals' experiences of life-course transitions. Therefore, factors such as gender and class must be taken into account. In contrast, environmental gerontologists have considered individual competence to be a key factor in the person-environment fit. It has been argued that this competency, in all its complexity, should be considered across a person's life course.

The timing of specific events – such as marriage, divorce, or unemployment – has been shown to have an effect on housing outcomes; although some evidence suggests that their impact may weaken over time. The relationship between earlier experience and later outcomes is not fixed and is subject to other influences. For example, people who receive higher education may not live in high-quality housing for some years as an immediate effect of continuing in education, but may subsequently have the resources to move up the housing ladder rapidly.

The chronological timing of life-course events is also significant. For example, owing to the worldwide financial recession in 2009, young adults in the United Kingdom and elsewhere looking for their first independent adult homes found themselves in a quandary. Their position was quite different from those of cohorts of a few years previously, with regard to the

availability of mortgages, credit, and sufficiently well-paying jobs to give them financial independence.

## Housing and stages in the life course

Life course has been a powerful organising concept for understanding in general terms how, when, and why people move between and experience houses and homes. This further extends to understanding the home range of neighbourhoods and locales beyond the dwelling place itself. In very general terms, the life course of a person from birth to death tracks a pattern of widening personal reach into the environment. This interaction with the environment begins from the cradle at birth; proceeds through gradually increasing access that varies with age, gender, personality, and status to the personal maximum range in adulthood; and then begins to shrink once again in old age towards the eventual grave. Individuals can and do differ in the choices as well as in the timings of their entry into particular ‘life stages’ – such as parenthood or retirement – and in the shape of their reach across the life course into the wider environment. However, these generalised concepts are reflected in standard recognised patterns across populations.

### Early years

The homes that people inhabit at birth and in early childhood are necessarily provided by others. They are based on others’ ability to provide shelter and on changing ideas about what is appropriate: for example, the separation of male and female children at certain ages or levels of privacy and comfort. Traditionally, the child exercises little influence over this ‘parental’ environment; yet, in later life, these are often among the most vividly remembered and emotionally resonant of homes. ... Some studies have suggested that social deprivation in early life can have lasting effects on certain health conditions in later life. Social deprivation is related to poor housing conditions, such as dampness or lack of safety, which can affect health. Children from families that have been homeless for long periods, or which have been long-term residents of temporary or overcrowded accommodation, are at a disadvantage in terms of education and, in particular, health. This may affect their opportunities, as they become adults.

The first transitional stage in housing career, broadly coinciding in many cultures with the lifecourse event of transition to young adulthood, occurs when young people leave the parental home. This is seen as a critical stage in terms of psychosocial development; although ... timing ... and

... circumstances ... vary considerably. Influences may include elements of class and gender. ... Cultural and religious attitudes may be significant here, as are the availability and affordability of housing for people at the beginning of their working lives. In the early twenty-first century, leaving the parental home is not necessarily a once-and-for-all event. It may instead be a process of gradually developing autonomy – with episodes of returning home – before the young persons can establish their own separate households. This ‘boomerang-kids’ phenomenon potentially puts pressures on family resources and creates conflicts between the lifestyles of coresident generations.

### **Middle years**

Much of the literature on life course and housing is concerned with mobility during the extended ‘middle’ period of working life and family formation. ... Marriage and parenthood can precipitate a transition from renting to homeownership, whereas divorce may result in one or both previous partners moving back into renting, at least temporarily. Patterns of household formation thus affect – and are affected by – housing, as partnerships form, split, and rejoin. Consequently, the social aspects of setting goals and negotiating family needs must be considered along with market influences. Likewise, residential relocation in response to the needs of one family member – for example, for reasons of work or education – may have a detrimental effect on the others.

Employment, especially of ... men ..., is considered to have a major impact on household decisions about relocation and the type and tenure of housing, as these households move up, down, and through the housing markets. Traditionally, the employment of the women ... has been less influential because they get lower pay and their employment opportunities are fragmented. The effects of periods of unemployment can be of greater or lesser significance, depending on the frequency, persistence, and the timings of these periods: for example, the long-term unemployed members are more unlikely to become owner-occupiers. Long-term ill health and disability in the middle years, including caring for a disabled child, are also associated with lower income and poorer housing, unless mitigated by social and financial support.

### **Later years**

... As individuals and couples move into middle age and later life, two life-course events have been marked as being particularly significant: the ‘empty

nest', when all children of the family have permanently left home; and retirement, when people take stock of their future options.

### *Adaptation*

For many people these events bring about a change in their relationships with home, which can be exacerbated if there are also persisting health problems. Adapting to the phenomena of personal ageing and a changing person–environment fit may take the form of 'downsizing' to accommodation that is more manageable and affordable. This may also be associated with relocation in pursuit of better climate, amenities, social or cultural arrangements, or proximity to family. For the majority of older people ..., 'staying put' in the mainstream domestic housing seems to be the preference throughout later life. This may make it necessary to carry out adaptations to the dwelling to compensate for disability, ill health, or increasing frailty. In many countries, there is also an increasing move towards the use of assistive technologies. ...

### *Relocation*

Older people seeking a combination of manageable housing and social inclusion – but wishing to maintain independence as householders – may relocate to age-related 'retirement housing', some of which provides accommodation-with-care. A minority of older people, with higher proportions in great old age, move out of independent housing altogether and into a care home. Age-related housing takes many different forms (see Table 14.1), which may include some or all of the following characteristics:

- compact size of unit (typically one or two bedrooms or a studio flat);
- multiplicity of units, often with communal facilities and resources;
- availability of security measures, such as personal alarm systems and personnel;
- design that is age-friendly, ranging from basic adaptations to ergonomically designed 'lifetime homes';
- ethos of maintaining independence; and
- availability of formal care and service.

Research shows the pivotal role of the physical, psychological, and social environment in the lives of older people. However, it is argued that in later life, as at other stages of the life course, the ontological importance of 'home' can outweigh the need for physical change affecting the way individuals manage the person–environment 'fit' in later life.

**Table 14.1:** Housing situations and types across the life course

Age-related?	Age-integrated?
Child foster care	Homelessness
Adult foster care	Living alone
Children's homes	Home sharing
Hostels	Flat (apartment) sharing
Halls of residence (students)	Terraced housing
Sheltered housing	Flats – high rise
Cohousing (adults)	Flats – conversions or adaptations
Extra-care housing	Semidetached houses
Assisted living	Bunglaows
Care homes (adults: residential or nursing)	Caravans or mobile homes
Care housing for people with dementia	Detached houses
Long-stay hospitals	Hospital
Hospices	Hospices

Source: Adapted from Figure 1. Peace S and Holland C (2001, p. 3)

[...]

## Housing histories and the life course

Table 14.2 provides abbreviated data from the three case studies within a study in England. The study used biographical methods to produce data on housing and home across the life course. The three profiles drawn from detailed biographical narratives show how the study of actual life-course experiences gives insights into the relationships between people and their environments. These profiles are situated in a combination of individual, familial, and collective histories where generation, social class, gender, culture, intergenerational transfers, and location have all had an impact. Table 14.3 represents a timeline of how the life-course events and housing histories of the three persons overlap. The life-course events in the individual lives are positioned differently in relation to the common historic events and circumstances. The three narratives are drawn from the study of environment and identity by Peace et al (2006). This study looked at the physical or material, social, and psychological aspects of the person-environment fit in both mainstream and age-segregated housing. To reflect the diversity in housing types and neighbourhoods, the study focused on geographically contrasting areas: metropolitan or urban (the London borough of Haringey); small town, urban, or suburban (Bedford); and small town, village, or semi-rural (Northamptonshire).

## Housing histories and relocation

Housing histories may involve relocation or migration within or between the boundaries of nation states. They can take many different patterns and present with different effects on housing opportunities and experiences of home. In some cases, there are multiple voluntary relocations; in others, migrations forced by political, economic, or environmental circumstances. Clark and Dieleman (1996) related the emotional impact of any move as being either positive or negative. They further drew a distinction between moves that allowed the retention of webs of contacts and those that caused a partial or total disruption of those ties. The life-course approach to housing enables the effects of relocation to be considered alongside the cause.

**Table 14.2:** Housing histories of three residents in the 'Environment and Identity' study

Henry, aged 85 Haringey	Nerys, aged 73 Northamptonshire	Ben, aged 61 Bedford
1917: born in Barking, Essex – lived with parents and brother in private rented accommodation	1929: born in small village in Wales – lived with parents and two older sisters in three-storey terraced house	1940: born in Peterborough – lived in grandmother's house
1939: enlisted in the army (Second World war) – lived in barracks accommodation. Met future wife who lived with her family in Hornsey, North London	1930s: moved because of father's job to a larger town with a secondary school and college	1946: family moved to Potter's Bar
1940s: postwar, moved to Hornsey and married – lived at first in sister-in-law's home	1948: moved to Leeds to work – lived with sister	1961: family moved to London and bought a council house
1950s: moved to own rented flat in Weston Park, commuting to work near Woolwich. Birth of child	1952: moved to Northamptonshire, close to other sister. Met husband (widower with a 7-year-old daughter) who had been posted during the war to the village of Rushden	1987: moved to Bedford for work in law firm – settled with wife and daughter in his own home; enjoyed the river and greenery
1960s: moved to flat in Tottenham, nearer to new work	1954: married and moved to Rushden to a three-bedroomed council house with large garden. Two more daughters	1992: marriage broke up and he had a stroke, leading to his early retirement. Walked with difficulty
Mid-1990s: became a widower	1980s: bought the house	1993: moved to a two-bedroomed council flat in a block where most people were over 40 years of age. Area was peaceful, secure and green
2001: entered care home for rehabilitation after being attacked in the High Street. Hoping to move on to 'sheltered housing' when allowed to go home, because no longer able to cope with stairs within the flat	1999: widowed – living alone	2000: moved to another flat within the same block with easier access for persons with disabilities
<i>Note: Impact of neighbourhood change on safety and security</i>	<i>Note: Ageing in place: attachment to place</i>	<i>Note: Changing person–environment fit in relation to health and well-being</i>

**Table 14.3:** Housing careers of three people of different cohorts in the 'Environment and Identity' study

Date	1990	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	
Context	Private renting		WW1		WW2 NHS		Social housing boom		Social housing decline/mass ownership			
Henry			b			m						→
Nerys												→
Ben												

b = born; m = married; p = parent; w = widowed; d = divorced

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## Glossary

**Age-related housing** The terms age-related and age-segregated are usually applied to accommodation designated and (generally) designed for older people. This is distinct from the types of communal accommodation that are provided for relatively narrow age ranges, such as student residences and military barracks. Forms of age-related housing vary from country to country with respect to amenities, tenure, the provision of care and social services, and the minimum age of residents.

**Ageing in place** Most people age in place, that is, they remain resident in non-age-segregated housing into great old age. This is generally regarded as the preferred option of most of the older people. Initiatives to enable ageing in place include the provision or facilitation of home improvements, adaptations, and domiciliary care.

**Housing career** This is the movement of individuals or households through a series of different dwellings. It has been frequently linked to other aspects of personal biographies including life-course events such as child bearing, employment, careers, and power within markets (availability and affordability of housing).

**Housing history** This is a development of a history of the housing career, used particularly when considering individual experiences rather than predicting outcomes.

**Life course** This concept was developed to encapsulate both individual chronological ageing and the cultural expectations of age-related social roles and statuses, mediated by socialisation and rites of passage. It includes elements of the chronological approach to normative stages in human development found in life-cycle and life-stage studies.

**Further reading**

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