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Towards a socio-structural framework for life course analysis

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Abstract: In spite of several decades of development, the theoretical underpinnings of life course research go rarely beyond the five general principles formulated by Elder. This article proposes a socio-structural framework based on a definition of the life course as an individual movement through social space. It integrates structural and cultural aspects, but gives priority to the former, and considers social space to be defined by three basic dimensions of differentiation: hierarchical ranks, specialisation, and system levels. In a second part, we discuss how Elder's principles relate to and can be used in the framework we propose. Since several disciplines are interested in this topic, our approach includes a series of docking points not only for other theoretical perspectives from sociology, but also from other disciplines such as social psychology or political science.

Keywords: life course – social stratification – social mobility – gender – agency – institutionalisation

Introduction : life-course research, life-course paradigm, life-course theory

Life-course research has developed considerably in the last decades and become a multidisciplinary phenomenon, including such disciplines as sociology, social and developmental psychology, demography, history, economics, and others (Mortimer and Shanahan, 2006; Heinz, Huinink and Weymann, 2009). In line with its recent evolution, it has no explicit and encompassing theory, but scholars frequently refer to the life-course paradigm or life-course approach, generally identified with the five heuristic principles Elder repeatedly presented (e.g., Elder 1995; Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson and Crosnoe 2003, Alwin 2012). These principles are sufficiently ecumeni-

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