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# Glen H. Elder: Life Course, Agency, and Time

An Interview by Matthias Pohlig

## **Abstract**

During three interview sessions in early and mid 2011 Glen H. Elder was asked to reflect upon the issue of time and the life course on the basis of his experience and contribution to the development and establishment of the life course approach. His interest in the subject now spans several decades. Recalling his personal history and involvement in life course research Elder reviews the approach's key categories including agency and timing, or the connection between agency and contingency. He discusses conceptual differences between the notions of biography and those applying to biographical, institutional and historical time. He reflects upon the interconnection of social change, historical events and the lives of individuals, and comments on contemporary challenges for modern lives. Finally, he discusses methodological advancements in life course research and his current and future research plans.

## **Glen H. Elder: Lebenslauf, Agency, und Zeit Ein Interview von Matthias Pohlig**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Im Rahmen von drei Interviews, die Anfang und Mitte 2011 geführt wurden, wurde Glen H. Elder darum gebeten, seine jahrzehntelange Erfahrung im Bereich der Lebenslaufforschung sowie seine Beiträge dazu Revue passieren zu lassen. Ausgehend von seinem persönlichen Zugang zur Lebenslaufforschung spricht er über Schlüsselkategorien dieses Ansatzes wie etwa *agency* und *timing* sowie den Zusammenhang von *agency* und Kontingenz. Elder diskutiert Unterschiede in den Konzepten von Biographie und denen der biographischen, institutionellen und historischen Zeit, reflektiert den Zusammenhang von sozialem Wandel, historisch bedeutsamen Ereignissen und dem Leben von Individuen und kommentiert aktuelle Herausforderungen des modernen Lebens. Schließlich spricht er über methodische Entwicklungen im Bereich der Lebenslaufforschung und stellt seine aktuellen und zukünftigen Forschungspläne vor.

### **Introduction**

The following interview is based on a conversation with Glen H. Elder, Jr. on the role of human agency in the life course. Since its inception in the late 1980s, the Collaborative Research Center 186 at the University of Bremen, with its focus on 'Status Passages and Risks in the Life Course', has been involved in a fruitful dialogue with faculty members of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill concerning a variety of life course issues. As a student of life course sociology at the University of Bremen, I had the opportunity, with funding from the Heinrich Böll Foundation, to benefit from this on-going dialogue during a research stay in Chapel Hill in January and February 2011. During this time, I recorded several conversations with Professor Elder on issues related to my Master's research. Upon my return to Bremen, Herwig Reiter, Benedikt Rogge and Nadine Schöneck-Voss approached me with the idea of publishing parts of these conversations as a contribution to this special issue of BIOS on time and the life course. The recordings were initially transcribed by Joy Backhaus and later edited by me. Thanks to the time, patience and trust of Glen Elder I was able to conduct a follow-up interview enabling me to clarify open questions and explore a few additional topics not covered in the original conversations but which present themselves as particularly relevant to this special issue. The outcome is an elaborate reflection on time and life course from one of the world's most distinguished life course researchers. Let me briefly review some of the arguments of the interview together with some important additional references.

Generally, the life course perspective links the past experiences and events of individuals to both the present and the future (see Elder/Johnson/Crosnoe 2003 and Elder/Giele 2009 for an introduction to Elder's approach to life course research). More specifically, this perspective observes time as social category by the concepts of timing, age, and historical time (see Elder 1994). The concept of age, which incorporates sociological, psychological, and biological aspects through the consideration of age norms, life-span development and (biological) ageing within the analysis of social lives, is only partly elaborated in the following interview (see Elder 1994 for more details).

At the start of the interview, Elder outlines the development of his interest from socialization to life course research (cf. his Cooley-Mead address to the American Sociological Association in Elder 1994; see also Elder 1998). Subsequently, his reflections turn to the categories of agency and timing, which are "paradigmatic principles" of life course research (Elder 1994; Elder/Johnson/Crosnoe 2003; Hitlin/Elder 2007). According to Elder, timing is essentially played out at the micro level and thereby relates to the principle of individual agency (cf. Hitlin/Elder 2007, 184). Elder's concept of agency is strongly influenced by Clausen's (1993) social-psychological concept of 'planful competence' and Bandura's (1998) notion of self-efficacy. This is then complemented by a reflection on the connection between agency, shared meaning and contingency. Elder's remarks on meaning, narratives and collective memory underline the fact that life course research, while focusing on the structural level, shares important concepts (such as biography) and references (e.g. Thomas/Znaniecki 1958; Halbwachs 1980) with biographical research. In using the term contingency, Elder highlights the constraints and uncertainties of the life course processes embedded in social relationships. Therefore, contingency has different effects

on agency depending on gender and historical time. Contingency in the lives of women who grew up during the Great Depression is well documented by Elder (1999, 202-239; cf. Clausen 1993, 387-419). A recurring theme throughout the interview is the influence of social change and historical events on individual lives. The Great Depression and the Second World War especially have become main topics in Elder's research (see particularly Elder 1999; see also Shanahan/Elder/Miech 1997 for a brief discussion). Through his long-standing interest in issues of social change, Elder sympathizes with the hypothesis of the acceleration of social time; yet in referring to research dating from before the 1940s he considers acceleration not as a new phenomenon but as one that has always characterized modernity. Despite important advances in life course research, particularly in terms of methods and data, Elder points to the many unknowns: for example, the field of health and the connection between the welfare state and the life course (cf. Mayer 2009). The interview concludes with an introduction to one of the most recent and ongoing comparative research projects that Elder has initiated: a longitudinal study of the effects of the Great Recession on young people in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany.

### Interview

*Pohlig: How did you become interested in the life course, and how did agency become so important in your approach?*

*Elder: A number of things came together. First, the topic I studied – adolescence – prompted interest in the growing agency of the young through exposure to the writings of Jean Piaget. Second, the 1950s and 1960s represent a time when people were discovering the role of agency as in Dennis Wrong's wonderful essay on the "oversocialized man"<sup>1</sup>. I viewed socialization as a link between institutional arrangements and the individual. However, anyone who studies socialization has to realize that self-selection is occurring over the life course. The "life course" paradigm helped to address this limitation of socialization. Besides, psychologists like Richard Lerner, Albert Bandura and German developmentalists advocated an agency role for the individual in shaping their own development – the individual as an agent of his or her own life. I think, at that point, the time had come for a more interactional and proactive concept of the relationship between person and environment.*

*Pohlig: What does agency mean in your life course approach?*

*Elder: People work out their lives by selecting different paths and options. When I was a professor at Cornell, some economists claimed that the life course framework appeared to be past oriented rather than future oriented. However, we know that individuals bring the past to the present, which, in turn, shapes their view of the future. In a methodological sense, we have become more and more preoccupied with the selection of situations by individuals rather than thinking solely in terms of causation. It is the individual sha-*

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1 See Wrong 1961.

*ping the situation rather than simply the situation influencing the individual. This connects then to self-selection into contexts like schools, neighborhoods and activities like sports. In the life course framework, agency represents how individuals construct their future.*

*Pohlig: You mentioned future orientations. How are time perspectives connected to life course agency?*

*Elder: Optimism is a vital part of a sense of agency and entails a concept of the future, the open pathways or opportunities. An efficacious person is likely to be optimistic. That has to do with how a person constructs the future, what the options are and whether he or she has a chance or the ability to make a difference in the world in which they live. Some people have well developed concepts of the future that are part of their time perspective.*

*Pohlig: How important is the ability to reconstruct the past?*

*Elder: Every transition we go through provides an opportunity to reconstruct the past. In fact, it calls upon us to do so. Our concept of the past is fluid, embedded in a constant process of reconstruction.*

*Pohlig: If you conceive agency as a measurable capability as in Clausen's concept of planful competences,<sup>2</sup> and if you think of rationality as a cultural concept like in constructivist perspectives or the new institutionalism: What are you actually measuring if you ask people about their planful competences?*

*Elder: Planful action is basically thoughtful. But many different substantive meanings could be associated with this planful action. In a culture that is diverse, we could have people who score similarly on planfulness but come up with different ways of acting, different prescriptions for the future and different ways of proceeding in their lives.*

*Pohlig: Does this lack of meaningfulness necessitate the integration of narratives in the concept of agency?*

*Elder: We tend to have a situational view of agency. But agency can be represented from a dynamic perspective across people's lives. We need to think of the meaning of agentic actions as we follow trajectories over time. We revise our understanding of possible options as we become more knowledgeable.*

*Pohlig: What is the role of these narratives of life plans?*

*Elder: The question is what initiates a narrative that engages us and prompts thinking about where we are headed and how we are going to do that. Some situations can take you out of life routines. For example, a semester abroad*

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2 See Clausen 1993.

can be something where one has time to talk to people, to think and put something together on what one is going to do. That is very much a narrative formation process. Another institutionalized social space is time in military service. It is a time out from the life course where one may think about life and the big plan for it. That certainly happened to people I know who were in the Second World War. Military service differs from what went on before and from what will go on afterwards. Afterwards, soldiers can embark on this life.

*Pohlig: What triggers this restructuring of narratives?*

*Elder: Every time we experience a life transition, we have to explain to others our decision in a way that makes sense to them. You make a choice of a place to study or to take a job and then peers will ask, "Why did you choose this?" That forces you to think through that matter. You develop a narrative account that ties your life events together in a reworking of the biographic narrative.*

*Pohlig: What do you think about the hypothesis that succeeding in providing a coherent, reasonable narrative shows your agentic capacity and authority?*

*Elder: Yes, it does. But the question is whether one is acting or reacting. You could make meaning of a failure or success and communicate it to others. This process of creating shared meaning brings me to collective memory, which is a social creation, as Maurice Halbwachs has shown.<sup>3</sup> For example, when soldiers get together at a reunion, they tell stories of their experience. Each member of the group fills in a bit and adjustments are collectively made. This collective memory reconstructs the past and produces a shared account.*

*Pohlig: Some scholars argue that non-reflexive action and passivity are also part of agency. What do you think about that?*

*Elder: I use agency as a term for decision or choice making and resulting actions. People evaluate whether an action is effective, whether they are going up the wrong trail or not. Surveys do not measure efficacious behaviour, but instead index efficacy beliefs. Whether one actually makes a difference or not is another question.*

*Pohlig: Do you mean by "implementing a decision" the action or the control over the outcome?*

*Elder: I mean launching or initiating a line of action. If we make a decision and plan to move then we begin to do things that need to be done. A life course process is not instantaneous, it develops over time. During the Cultural Revolution in China, they had agencies that controlled job and marital decisions. Even within those limitations, individuals could make a decision about some-*

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3 See Halbwachs 1980/1939.

*thing they could do under the circumstances and which improved their life.<sup>4</sup> Making a decision entails selecting a plan of action, and this process is consistent with what John Clausen calls planful competence, the extent to which one lays out a plan of action<sup>5</sup>. An implementation process is contingent on all the encounters and constraints along the way. Contingency really tells a lot about the life course. If I would elaborate this, I would definitely elaborate it as an implementation process that brings in planfulness.*

*Pohlig: Could you elaborate on this idea of contingency in terms of the life course?*

*Elder: Everyone is embedded in a network of relationships. The more embedded the person is in these networks and linked lives, the more contingent one's life is. In "Children of the Great Depression", I assessed whether the action of women who went into the labor force was contingent upon their family situation and upon what their husband felt. Whereas when we look at the lives of men, contingency assumed a different form: they could make their choice where and when they would take a job. This was not possible at the time for women if they were married. There are different degrees of contingency. Contingency is another way of thinking about how situational constraints work. Agency is played out in a structured and often constrained world.*

*Pohlig: What is the relationship between the principles of "linked lives" and agency?*

*Elder: Linked lives can be associated with constraints, but they may also be supportive. If we think of linked lives as collaborative and facilitating this, it may be the only way one can be agentic – doing it together with somebody.*

*Pohlig: What do you think about the differences between men's and women's life course agency?*

*Elder: In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we need to keep in mind the time when women and men lived in different worlds. We see this clearly in the archives of the Lewis Terman study<sup>6</sup>, which is a sample of gifted, talented people. The women, despite all their talents and personal gifts, were very constricted by their culture. At the time, girls were put in a very difficult situation, because the brighter they were, the more they were outside the conventional world of adolescence. Many of them became novelists or journalists because that gave them self-expression and was satisfying. Others became volunteers. Another way to describe this time is that linked lives and agency were played out in different*

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4 The examples from China are presented in more detail by Zhou/Hou 1999 and an unpublished manuscript by Elder/Wu/Yuan 1993.

5 See Clausen 1993.

6 For a description of Lewis Terman's "Life Cycle Study of Children with High Abilities" see Elder/Pavalko/Clipp 1993 and Vaillant 2002.

ways by the two genders. Women often chose innovative things like writing that they could do on their own and became sort of entrepreneurial. Moreover, I tried to look at intergenerational patterns between mothers and their daughters. The daughters were born in the post war years during the baby boom period, which can still be perceived as a traditional period. But it was less constraining than the years their mothers lived through. It is fascinating to look at the generations from the standpoint of gender role differences because the lives of women have been transformed in many ways. There is still much distance to go but just think of where we were in 1900.

*Pohlig: What is the relation of the principle of agency to the other principles of life course research (i.e. life-span development, time and place, timing, linked lives)?*

*Elder: They are interdependent. Historical time and place constitute the setting, which can be modified by and for people. A good example in China would be the restriction of migration from rural to urban areas. Even in an urban area, job choices were constrained, but one could make all kinds of choices within such constraints. Agency is expressed in constrained situations.*

*Pohlig: How is timing related to agency? Does it have to do with decision making at turning points or transitions?*

*Elder: The concept of strategy can be tied to timing and agency. Are you going to do something early or later in life? If one does it later, one may be more in control and able to influence the situation. Strategic planning enables one to be more effective. Timing is a key element of strategic planning in life. It is central in determining the context in which to live. If we do something, put it off or do it early, we are able to arrive at a life context that exposes you to social opportunities you would not have had otherwise. Planfulness ties together agency, timing and context.*

*Pohlig: What happens if you encounter an unexpected change in the environment?*

*Elder: The problem with the life course in a fast changing world is that decisions may be initially framed to pursue a course of action, which soon becomes impossible. People thought they could work in the mill just like their parents, and find they cannot and have to retool. That is happening today to many people. The life course is a continual process of adapting to change. As we move through the life course, we rewrite the plan and the narrative of life.*

*Pohlig: How are the concepts of biography and life course related?*

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7 For the paradigmatic principles of life course research see Elder/Johnson/Crosnoe 2003, 10-13.



*Elder: Biography is study of the person over time in their life histories. Life course research has many levels and some of those have little in common with the study of biography. The life course constitutes a structure at the macro level all the way down to the micro level. There are studies of the life course that are focused on pathways, careers and structures rather than on the person or on the influence of careers on the person. Of course, biography and life course are related to each other. One has to look at the changes that take place in the person over time as well as in the environment and the cross-level interactions between both. The common ground between life course research and biographical research occurs when we bring people's lives into a life course project. Research often focuses on one or the other topic, either it is interested in the person and the biography of the individual or it employs the larger picture of institutions, environments and social contexts in general.*

*Pohlig: What would be a good example for the role of the institutional dimension of time and how is it intertwined with individual biography and history?*

*Elder: Especially, schools and education play a large role in marking the life course. John Meyer's work on this topic has been quite significant.<sup>8</sup> For example, the structure of educational institutions and its increased stratification have contributed to the prolonged transition into adolescence.*

*Pohlig: What is the impact of social policy on agency; such as the G.I. Bill, which opened access to formerly unknown career tracks?*

*Elder: The US G.I. Bill lifted a whole generation to a higher level by creating educational opportunities through financial support and opened up a chance for home ownership as well. In this manner, progress in social policy can promote agentic action by empowering people to take initiative on their own behalf. Collective action can have the same impact, especially if politics fails to do so. For example, the recent events in Egypt were not planned by the government. Instead, the government ignored what people wanted for long and this led to the protests we have seen.<sup>9</sup>*

*Pohlig: How would you describe the interaction of biographical, institutional and historical time?*

*Elder: In a simple way, we could equate biographical time with the time span of an individual's life. Similarly, we can think of the formation, the reformation or change and the decline of an institution as institutional time. The substance of historical time is derived from the other levels, the institutions, culture, population, state.*

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<sup>8</sup> Compare especially Meyer's earlier works on the life course and educational institutions, for example Meyer 1986.

<sup>9</sup> During the recording of this part of the interview on 10th February 2011, the revolution in Egypt was at a high point. The government had announced reforms, but not yet resigned.

*Pohlig: Do you think that accumulated changes in biographies can lead to institutional and historical change?*

*Elder: I think so! John Modell, a social historian in the U.S., once alerted me to a missing element in my perspective on the life course, that I was not dealing with how individuals collectively change structures. It is a good example of how one can become so preoccupied with understanding how social change works that we do not turn around to think about how people mobilize to change the world in which they live. I was so focused on tracing the effects of change on people that I did not give much account of the reverse process. In fact, John Modell and I put together a paper, which stresses this very point.<sup>10</sup> The field of social movements and collective behaviour deals with this in a nice way and I had the opportunity to teach it for quite a while.*

*Pohlig: How are the dynamics at the individual and institutional level connected to historical time?*

*Elder: One of the best ways of getting people to remember life events like certain jobs is to put it in historical context. The life event they are talking about is linked to historical events that were going on at the same time. Dynamics at the micro and macro levels of time are interwoven. Temporal demarcations of historical events help to contextualize life events. I started to appreciate that when I was thinking about time and looking across people's lives. The more I focused on timing and temporal processes, the more I became aware of life contexts.*

*Pohlig: After more than 50 years of research into the life course, how would you describe the major changes of life courses?*

*Elder: A great many changes have taken place since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and some interesting ones are related to the transition to adulthood. Leaving home and finding a way in the adult world took a long time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Around 1900, and then particularly after World War II, we see an earlier and earlier entry into the adult world, for example through the age at first marriage or the age at leaving the parental home. Now we are coming back to a prolonged transition, a long journey from dependency to the adult years. Clearly, there are different factors involved: Today, the required amount of education delays entry into work, and the level of affluence make it possible to live a life without getting into a line of work.*

*Pohlig: Some scholars like Hartmut Rosa argue that the pace of life has immensely accelerated since the beginning of modernity. What do you think about this assumption?*

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<sup>10</sup> See Modell/Elder 2002.

*Elder: I guess that we have always lived in times of incredible change, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For an essay, I once drew on a quote from a book by Walter Lippmann where he was talking about the great transformation from an agrarian life to an industrial life in 1914. He said, "There isn't a human relation, whether of parent and child, husband and wife, worker and employer, that doesn't move in a strange situation."<sup>11</sup> The Lynds noted the same thing in their book on Middletown in 1937, "The cumulating rapidity of recent social change [...] is widening in something resembling a geometrical ratio the gap between the things that were 'right' yesterday and those that make sense to the new generation of today."<sup>12</sup> I think we could carry that right up to the present, because technology, media and the globalization of experience give everyone a sense of acceleration today. Nonetheless, change is a kind of exponential process, which accentuates over time. For this reason, the question of how we manage time becomes interesting, how the changes that we are living through change our sense of time.*

*Pohlig: What do you think are the major improvements made so far in the methods of life course research? How do you see the prospects for life course research?*

*Elder: I just looked at a graph which depicts the number of publications that had come out with life course in the title or in the abstract. The big growth period was from 1990 up to where we are today. That was surprising to me, because I had thought that we had really seen a lot of growth in the 1980s. Longitudinal studies have been running since the 1950s in the US. The methods have developed very nicely prodded by the growth of longitudinal studies. We were challenged by a different body of data and we needed to be able to think about how to study people over time. It has taken a long time to crystallize the theoretical ideas in life course research and to find a way of thinking along methodological requirements. There is an incredible growth of life course work in the field of health. The life course perspective has even been adopted by the US Department of Health and Human Services for 'Healthy People 2020' and by the Bureau of Maternal and Child Health in its new strategic plan.<sup>13</sup> But there are many other paradigms out there. Therefore, it is amazing that the life course perspective has become the way of advancing an understanding of health and well-being at the federal level, at the practice level and at the research level. I still think there is a lot to be done. We have not even scratched the surface of how, for example, early dispositions in the prenatal years have consequences for health in the later years. This will be a challenge for us over the next decades. Another issue in life course research is that the list of countries from our body of knowledge is quite limited. For instance, we do not really know very much about Japan as the Japanese government for many years did not fund longitudinal studies in any substantial way. By con-*

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11 Lippmann 1914, 152-153 quoted in Elder 1995, 102.

12 Lynd/Lynd 1937, 168 (Footnote 48) quoted in Elder 1995, 102.

13 Cf. Fine/Kotelchuck 2010.

*trast, China is moving along rapidly in this area of study and we know a lot about social change and health in China. We know very little about the Mediterranean countries and Russia in comparison with the United Kingdom or Germany. Hence, we have much work to do. Many areas have barely been investigated like the connection between the state and the life course in terms of both policy and structuring life. We will have more interdisciplinary work in the future across neuroscience, biology, sociology, psychology, demography, anthropology, and history.*

*Pohlig: What is your current research about?*

*Elder: Together with Walter R. Heinz, John Bynner and other young investigators we are revisiting the "Children of the Great Depression" by comparing the effects of the recent financial crisis and economic recession on youth and their transition to adulthood in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. How are individual lives linked to global economic changes? The severity of the so-called Great Recession varies between these countries, as do the density and the provision of social support provided by the welfare state. Thus, the question is how young people are dealing with the adversities caused by the recession within the institutional settings of the three countries. Has the Great Recession increased the gap between those who attended college and those who did not? What are the effects on young persons from low-income families? Compared to the available longitudinal micro-data on the Great Depression, we now have a very rich source of data from household panels in developed societies. This is going to be a long-term project, as we will follow our young respondents at least ten years into the future. The story of the youth during the Great Recession will be modified over time. Some preliminary findings are to be presented at the end of September 2011 in Bielefeld, Germany.*

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