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## Cradle to grave? The sociology of childhood, youth, adulthood and old age

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<b>Credit / award</b>	Non-accredited		
<b>Start date</b>	26 January 2017	<b>End date</b>	23 February 2017
<b>Day and time</b>	Thursdays, 19.00 – 21.00	<b>No of meetings</b>	5
<b>Venue</b>	Madingley Hall Madingley Cambridge		
<b>Tutor</b>	Dr Nigel Kettley	<b>Course code</b>	1617NWR001

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**To book** See: [www.ice.cam.ac.uk](http://www.ice.cam.ac.uk) or telephone 01223 746262

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### Tutor biography

Nigel has had a wide ranging teaching and research career in the fields of sociology, education studies, research methods and initial teacher education. Before joining the Institute of Continuing Education in 2007, he was a Research Associate in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, and earlier still an MPhil and PhD student at Wolfson College. He is an active researcher in the areas of widening participation, educational attainment and lifelong learning more generally with a particular focus on issues of gender, social stratification and theory formation. Nigel teaches on a variety of courses for the Institute, supervises MSt. and PhD students, and is Senior Lecturer and Academic Director for Education and Social Science courses at the Institute. His major publications include *Educational Attainment and Society* (2007, Continuum) and *Theory Building in Educational Research* (2010/2012, Continuum). He is also a Governing Body Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge and a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts.

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## Course syllabus

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### Aims:

1. To promote an understanding of the social construction of the life course i.e. that the various transitions that people experience throughout their life are not biologically fixed or related to ageing per se, but rather are socially defined and made meaningful;
2. To introduce students to the concepts, methods and theoretical models which sociologists have developed to investigate and explain transitions throughout the life course;
3. To explore and evaluate sociological research and explanations of specific stages of the life course including childhood, adolescence and youth, adulthood and parenting, and old age;
4. To examine the strengths and limitations of life course research as a means of understanding how individuals make sense of their daily experience and construct their biographies.

### Content:

Research into the life course indicates that the various stages and transitions experienced throughout our individual biography, including childhood, adolescence and youth, adulthood and parenting, and old age, are not simply determined by biology or the ageing process. Instead, these periods of the life course are also socially defined, made meaningful by society and marked by specific transitions and rites of passage. In this course you will explore specific stages of the life course through a sociological lens. Topics covered will include an introduction to the concepts, methods and theories sociologists have used to investigate and explain change throughout the life course. The course will then explore: the social construction and crisis accounts of childhood; the meaning of adolescence, the formation of youth cultures and their disintegration over time; and the meaning of adulthood and variations in styles of parenting (and their effects on children). The course will finish by examining the experience of old age in contemporary society and consider how sociologists have studied dying, death and bereavement. Therefore, you will examine the impact of various social, economic and historical forces on individual biography from the cradle to the grave.

**Session 1 (26 January):** *Cradle to grave? An introduction to the concepts, methods and theories of the sociology of the life course*  
Tutor: Dr Nigel Kettley

The term 'life course' is used in sociology, according to Mayer (2002, p. 2), to 'denote the sequence of activities or states and events in various life domains which span from birth to death'. The life course is, therefore, often divided into specific stages (childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age) marked by transitional events. In this first session we will: define some of the key concepts sociologists have deployed to make sense of the life course (socialisation, roles, stages, transitions and turning points); examine some of the methods that have been used to study the life course including cohort studies, documents of life, interviews and life histories (Plummer 1983); and consider theoretical positions which have been developed by sociologists to explain biographical change and transitions in their structural context (George 1993). It will be argued that the life course is not simply biologically constrained and determined, but rather socially constructed.

**Session 2 (2 February):** *Constructions of childhood: Is there a contemporary crisis of childhood?*  
Tutor: Dr Nigel Kettley

In this session we will explore various definitions of childhood and critically review historical and theoretical evidence concerning the argument that childhood is socially constructed (Aries 1962; Shahar 1990; Archard 1993). We will also examine evidence related to the experience of being a child in modern developed and less developed societies (Smart 2001). Subsequently, we will consider the emergence of 'crisis accounts' of childhood in politics and the mass media in modern Britain and the USA (Postman 1983; Winn 1984). Finally, we will examine reasons for the development of crisis accounts of childhood and explore the possible futures of childhood in an age of austerity. It is argued that both childhood *and crisis accounts of childhood* are social constructs.

**Session 3 (9 February):** *Rebels without a cause? Adolescence, youth and youth culture*  
Tutor: Dr Nigel Kettley

The stage of adolescence in the life course is often depicted by social commentators, the media and politicians as a period of growing personal independence, rapid change and rebellion (Cohen 1987). In this session, we will take a fresh look at: the meaning of the term adolescence as a specific stage of the life course; examine the experience of being an adolescent in modern society; explore processes resulting in the formation of youth cultures; and consider some cases studies related to the practices of specific youth cultures (Brake 1980; Hodkinson 2007; Brill 2008). It is argued that sociological studies of adolescence and youth have tended to focus on delinquent and rebellious behaviour, to the neglect of 'ordinary kids', and downplay the short-lived characteristics of most youth cultures as adolescents successfully negotiate the transition to adulthood (Jenkins 1983).

**Session 4 (16 February):** *Adulthood and parenting in an age of 'risk', 'uncertainty' and austerity*  
Tutor: Dr Nigel Kettley

Many sociological studies have treat adulthood as a homogeneous category in the life course. In this session, we will explore the diversity of adulthoods in modern British society by differentiating biographical experience by gender, ethnicity and social class. The diversity of adult experiences will then be explored in terms of parenting roles (motherhood and fatherhood), housework and paid employment (Marsiglio 1995; Abbott, Wallace and Tyler 2005). Given improved healthcare, most adults can now anticipate living to old age. However, many adults experience increased stress and pressure related to their gender, family and employment responsibilities as social life becomes more 'risky' and 'uncertain' in an age of austerity (Beck 1992). In addition to exploring adulthood in late modernity, we will also examine variations in parenting styles and their potential effect on children (O'Connor and Scott 2007; Chan and Koo 2008).

**Session 5 (23 February):** *Old age, death and bereavement*  
Tutor: Dr Nigel Kettley

This final session will explore the experience of old age, death and bereavement drawing on sociological research and theory. Whilst old age often conferred increased social status in many traditional societies, withdrawal from the labour market frequently results in reduced social status and income for many in industrial societies. Here we will explore the process of ageing and the transition to old age, associated with retirement, and disaggregate the experience of being elderly in an ageing society (Fennell, Phillipson and Evers 1988; Phillipson 1998; Settersten and Angel 2011). In particular, we will examine the issues of family and household arrangements, social isolation, poverty and medicalisation experienced by many elderly people. More optimistically, we will also examine the idea of the 'third age' where retirement may mark the start of new opportunities for education and leisure. Finally, we will evaluate the ways in which social scientists have studied and theorised dying, death and bereavement (Kübler-Ross 1969; Walter 2008).

**Presentation of the course:**

Structured questions and discussions during the sessions.

Interaction with students on the VLE and by email outside sessions.

**As a result of the course, within the constraints of the time available, students should be able to:**

1. identify, define and explain a range of concepts and methods associated with studying the life course including socialisation, roles, transitions, turning points, cohort studies and life histories;
2. explain the strengths and weaknesses of a range of research evidence related to processes of change at specific stages of the life course (childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age);
3. critically assess a range of sociological explanations (theories) of processes of change at specific stages of the life course (childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age);
4. understand and critically reflect upon the relationship between individual biography, social context and wider socio-economic processes.

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## Reading and resources list

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Listed below are a number of texts that might be of interest for future reference, but do not need to be bought (or consulted) for the course.

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Author	Title	Publisher and date
Archard, D.	<i>Children, Rights and Childhood.</i> (2 <sup>nd</sup> ed.)	2004. Abingdon: Routledge.
*Green, L.	<i>Understanding the Life Course: Sociological and Psychological Perspectives.</i>	2010. Cambridge: Polity.
Hodkinson, P. and Deicke, W. (eds.)	<i>Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes.</i>	2007. London: Routledge.
Holdsworth, C. and Morgan, D.	<i>Transitions in Context: Leaving Home, Independence and Adulthood.</i> Chapter 6, Adulthood, pp. 106-124.	2005. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Plummer, K.	<i>Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism.</i>	2001. London: Sage.
Seale, C.	<i>Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement.</i>	1998. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Settersten, R. A. and Angel, J. L. (eds.)	<i>Handbook of the Sociology of Aging.</i>	2011. New York: Springer.
Smart, C.	<i>The Changing Experience of Childhood: Families and Divorce.</i>	2001. Cambridge: Polity.

\* **Recommended reading.**

**Website addresses: None.**

**Note** Students of the Institute of Continuing Education are entitled to 20% discount on books published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) which are purchased at the Press bookshop, 1 Trinity Street, Cambridge (Mon-Sat 9am – 5:30pm, Sun 11am – 5pm). A letter or email confirming acceptance on to a current Institute course should be taken as evidence of enrolment.

*Information correct as of:* 10 November 2016