Staying the Life Course: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic Years

Elise Murowchick
Robin Yaure

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Staying the Life Course: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic Years

Elise Murowchick, Ph.D., CFLE
Seattle University

Robin Yaure, Ph.D., CFLE
Pennsylvania State University

ABSTRACT: Four themes within Life course theory will be explored. The interplay of human lives and historical times, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency will be explored along with perspectives on gender, feminism, and intersectionality in order to examine current teaching challenges and impact on faculty and students by inequality in the United States. In addition, ways that some inequalities have been exposed and addressed with in the family science field and higher education merits attention. Acknowledging these issues in conjunction with issues related to access to technology and the need for caring for the whole person's life and family context is addressed. Family scholars will need to build upon these gains to continue repairing the racial and social inequalities in our institutions and organizations as we continue transverse this new trajectory.

Keywords: Life course theory, race, feminism, intersectionality, inequality
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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

— Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

The years 2020 and 2021 have been replete with challenges and tragedies, including the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating death and economic tolls (World Health Organization, 2020). The pandemic magnified structural inequalities and fuels the continued reckoning with racism within the United States. George Floyd’s death and its aftermath of protests and counterprotests added to the key contextual and intersecting issues. We the educators and students in the field of Family Science are used to dealing with complexity. As we consider how to deal with our future, within a time the Oxford English Dictionary proclaimed “unprecedented” (Oxford Languages, 2020), using our theories will give us guidance to deal with wide-ranging situations both within and outside higher education have been experiencing (Prime et al., 2020). The life course approach (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Bernardi et al., 2019; Daaleman & Elder, 2007; Elder, 1994; Settersten et al., 2020) combined with gender, feminist, and intersectional perspectives (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020) helps elucidate the impact this period has had on individuals, families, and groups within their complex social ecologies. Our framing here is meant to provide a model to incorporate work in the field of family science moving forward for colleges. In this paper, we are focusing on the impact on those within the higher education context, particularly faculty and students, using these two frames to understand what has happened and what may be envisioned for the future.

The life course perspective is often thought of as a bedrock upon which family science rests (Eccles, 2008). The life course approach highlights four key themes, according to Elder (1994): “the interplay of human lives and historical times, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency in choice making” (p. 5). Recent connections to its relationship with equity (Gee et al., 2012; 2019) and across diverse lives (Franzese et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2021; Salerno, et al. 2020) make it even more relevant to the current situation. These four themes organize this article as we integrate the new work on gender, feminism, and the intersection approaches (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020).

Gender, feminist, and intersectional approaches (GFI) identify the variability of power, privilege, and inequalities that exists (Birdsong, 2020; Bowleg, 2020; Braverman, et al., 2011; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Fish & Russell, 2018; Gee et al., 2012; 2019; Protonentis et al., 2020; Wint et al., 2021). Bids to make lasting changes in our teaching, institutions, and with our students’ futures will be more effective when acknowledging different historical legacies, contexts, age, identity, stage, and experiences of the individuals (Bowleg, 2020; Braverman et al., 2011; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Protonentis et al., 2020; Salerno et al., 2020; Rice, et al., 2021; Russell, 2019). The use of this augmented theory of life course with GFI is the framework that can guide this change without reducing the complex varied lives to simple single variables. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate why using the gender feminist intersectional perspective put forth by Few-Demo and Allen (2020) combined with a life course perspective (Elder, 1974; 1994) allows us to articulate the ways that teaching during COVID influenced students and faculty. This theoretical orientation provides a context for understanding
variation that occurred prior to the pandemic, during the pandemic, and a way of making predictions in a post-pandemic world while allowing us to target interventions and teaching changes as well as predict the variation we may see. Maintaining the two-fold mission of schools (Waters et al., 2021) to promote learning and the well-being of students, faculty, staff, and our family’s needs to be paramount as we move forward as we stay the course guided by our theories.

It is our plan not to discount the significant tragedies suffered by many throughout the world with countless deaths and disability, economic devastation, personal loss, as well as the results of systemic racism, but instead to notice the signs that resilience and human agency have emerged and will continue to influence the lives of many. While using the combined theoretical approach, it may also be helpful to employ the model of Kintsugi in which broken artifacts, such as Japanese pottery, are repaired with gold to both honor and emphasize their unique history (Mantovani, 2019). In this spirit we behold the broken, seek to repair the cracks, and recognize how we, students, faculty and our families, can grow stronger. Like other theorists (e.g., Waters et al., 2021) noticing our history and what might be important moving forward will sustain our work. Many models of change and development find that times of unrest and challenge are places where larger changes become possible. The plethora of work at an individual level of post-traumatic growth also captures our hope here (Waters et al. 2021). These ideas are central to the application of a theory because without a way of acknowledging the strengths and hardships of the past—in a context of developing the future—there may not be hope (Masten, 2001). And while many schools have had a focus on wellness or well-being, the number of challenges experienced and the number of people who have experienced this means the cracks and battle scars will be there and filling them with care, programs, policies, and sensitive theoretical understanding are needed moving forward.

**Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Times**

Elder (1994) indicated that the interplay of human lives and historical times where every person has had to adapt to changes and adopt new behaviors must be considered. Due to COVID-19, the term “unprecedented” highlights the unusual nature of the current situation and suggests that this will have far-reaching effects on those living through them. In the Family Science field there is awareness of the cohort sequential effect, as evidenced with key historical examples such as the Great Depression, and the age and gender differential impacts noted by Elder (1974) and Brady and Gilligan (2020). We can anticipate that the variation in experiences within and across our institutions will produce different outcomes because of different internal and external factors (cf., Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). As noted by Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004), there often are overlapping social changes with some occurring suddenly and others slowly. In our present circumstance the ways in which faculty and students have had to adapt reflect a multitude of timeframes. The rapid movement to online teaching and learning can be compared to other changes such as the slower progress of the COVID-19 vaccination effort with individual variation in the impact of the economics and racial disparities. Timing and tempo of changes across domains impacted by COVID-19 give information to contextualize the impact of changes over the long haul.

Novel ways to understand this interplay may be to map the life course onto stages of a disaster as Elder (1974; 1994) did. Moen et al. (2020) and Wint et al. (2021) provided examples with education where the timing of events and transitions mattered. Moen et al. (2020) found
young women impacted most by unemployment and evidence of prior college education providing protection from unemployment. Students and faculty able to continue to work and earn a living, maintain their health, manage family circumstances without much difficulty, and who had good access to the internet likely experienced less disruption in their lives, while others who experienced one or more problems with these basic tasks and resources likely will feel the results of those for years to come.

Looking at transitions such as the move from high school to college, dorm to home, and teaching on-line to in person, may also explain how variation in the timing cases in the pandemic (Holshue, et al., 2020; Protonentis, et al., 2020; Skagit County Public Health Blog, 2020) in locations with early or late cases likely will have different impacts over time (Protonentis, et al., 2020). The variation across colleges in responses to the pandemic, infection rates, and vaccine requirements will add to variation of life courses to be considered.

Timing of Lives

According to Elder (1994), the “timing of lives” determines how one is affected by historical events as well. Thus, one’s place in the life course influences the type and intensity of the impact of these events. Other factors, such as gender and race or ethnicity intersect with this timing as well (cf. Wint et al., 2021). The legacy of the differential impact of the Great Depression by intersections of gender and cohort identified by Elder (1994) will be important as we examine when students experienced COVID. Likewise, faculty and students have been affected by the pandemic and its intersection with their identities, career stage, positionality, and social lives.

Students, many in their late teens and early twenties, have contended with losses in their expectations of life’s milestones associated with college life (St. Amour, 2020) and postponed or suspended their college attendance (Nadworny, 2020). Pre-pandemic levels of anxiety, depression, and other types of mental disorders (Auerbach et al., 2018) were widespread and exceeded the capacity of mental health services at many colleges and universities. We are beginning to understand how the pandemic has affected the rates of mental disorders in students (Brown, 2020). During the pandemic, LGBTQ+ students had to move home where they often had less acceptance of their gender and sexual identities (Bowleg, 2020; Gin et al., 2021; Gonzales, 2021; Morgan, et al., 2021; Protonentis, et al., 2021; Salerno et al., 2021; United Nations, 2020; White, 2020). Thus, the timing of their lives in terms of their identity development and the onset of the pandemic and their return to often less-than-ideal circumstances have coincided to increase the level of challenges these students experienced.

In parallel to the lives of the students are the lives of the faculty who teach them. The emphasis on differences in social timing noted in the life course approach (Daaleman & Elder, 2007; Elder, 1994) and echoed in GFI (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020) reminds us of the importance of “conceptualizing oppressions, disparities, and inequalities as being contingent and variable” (p. 329). As with many aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects on faculty have been found to be moderated by gender, employment status (e.g., tenure-line vs. adjunct), race, ethnicity, age, family responsibilities, and the like. Factors such as whether one has school-aged children at home, one’s health and family’s health risks, where one is on the tenure-track or other promotion timelines, and what types of responsibilities for care of aging parents or other family members, have impacted the level of disruption faculty have experienced (Mickey et al., 2020).
Again, learning how one’s cohort and myriad interpersonal and societal factors have impacted developmental trajectories positions us to consider remedies moving forward.

Linked or Interdependent Lives

The life course perspective considers not just the intertwining of the individual within the historical or lifespan context but within social milieus. Thus, the third theme of linked or interdependent lives is an essential component of this perspective. Problems or fortune may become intergenerational as individuals’ lives are impacted by the wellbeing of others. Even in the time of “social distancing” when we were warned to stay six feet away from all but a small “pod” of those whose direct environments we were sharing, we were affected by the actions of others in potentially life-threatening and life-sustaining ways. Within the higher education context, there seems to be more potential for greater understanding of the interlocked lives that students and faculty lead and the spillover that can occur as this is an academic interest within our field (cf. Brown et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Ferree, 1990; Fish & Russell, 2018; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Heskiau & McCarthy, 2021; King & Frederickson, 2021; Van Steenbergen, et al., 2007). Additionally, it became evident from university policies that explicitly state that students could not be required to turn on their cameras during remote classes (e.g., “Requiring Webcams”, 2020), recognition of the manner in which students’ educational experience and their private lives may be complicated by these linked lives. Holding this recognition moving forward will help us stay the course to retain learnings post-Covid.

The pandemic altered the living circumstances of many within higher education (Fry et al., 2020) reminding us of our intertwined, intergenerational lives. For example, Aucejo et al. (2020) found that students’ ability to repay their debt or graduate was affected by the financial or health problems experienced by a family member. For faculty and students alike, childcare and child education responsibilities were added to their duties. Many faculty reported feeling more concerned than ever about student wellbeing, although younger faculty reported more concern than older faculty (Flaherty, 2020b). Additionally, faculty often altered their teaching methods to avoid putting themselves at risk for the virus or exposing family members (Mickey et al., 2020). While some stories of “Zoom-bombing” by cats or children are charming, these are also evidence of how enmeshed work and home became for all involved. New efforts were required by many to create boundaries of their home and work, again demonstrating repairs informed by our field that may continue to be needed.

The GFI perspectives allow a deeper understanding of these issues with a heightened awareness of the salience of intersecting systems of oppression and privilege in different contexts. During the pandemic as people were present at home, more light was shed on some of the second shift and invisible labor often in the world of women (Hartley, 2017, 2018; Manne, 2017), for those who are working and learning from home in ways that have prompted national and international conversations about issues like childcare (Dean et al., 2021; Lewis, 2020) with some viewing the gender imbalances as being visible in heterosexual couples (Schulte & Swenson, 2020) and harmful (Reardon, 2021).

The awareness of the multiple spheres in individuals’ lives, home, school, and work being coincident maps well onto the history of our field where separate spheres of home and work were touted as the norm (Ferree, 1990; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Heskiau & McCarthy, 2021). This also may give others a chance to see the work previously hidden (Goode, 1992;
Schulte & Swenson, 2020) and may expand our communal notions of family and work (Birdsong, 2020, Fish & Russell, 2018). Learning from diverse family and couple types that share workload better will be important moving forward (cf. Goode, 1992; Murphy et al., 2021).

**Agency**

The fourth theme from the life course approach relates to the concept of human agency, which has to do with beliefs and actions related to whether one has a sense of control (Eccles, 2008, Pagnini et al., 2016). Elder (1994) suggested that how individuals and families make choices affects their life course. Acknowledging that the types of choices that one makes can be affected by the sociocultural context, familial influences, and historical framework within which one lives is crucial as well (Beatty Moody et al., 2021; Bowleg, 2020; Eccles, 2008; Daaleman & Elder, 2007; Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004; Rice et al., 2021). The individuals’ ability to cope is also influenced by their perceptions of the changes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The specifics about the individual actors taking action in their lives are influenced by how they view their shadow of the past and their shadow of the future (Bernardi et al., 2019), their sense of agency (Bandura, 2006; Eccles, 2008), social-cultural norms (Cheng, 2020; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Franzese, et al., 2021; Hruschka et al., 2018) and social address (Moen et al., 2020).

While the response to the death of George Floyd and others by higher education institutions has been considered inadequate (England & Purcell, 2020), college students have demonstrated their agency, being actively involved in protests (Kamenetz et al., 2020) and are in good company with their peers on this issue and others (“Our Climate Voices”, 2019; Taylor-Collins, 2019; Villarreal, 2020). They have spoken out about their experiences during the pandemic relating to their college experiences, mental health, and help they need (Jones, 2020). For example, many students chose to keep their cameras off during their online classes for a variety of reasons, from “Zoom fatigue” to managing stress and anxiety, privacy, and economic (Moses, 2020). Cameras off affords individual agency and autonomy. The reasons for the cameras off encompassed the environmental and social links in the student’s world, potential inequalities and other issues normally private. Students lobbied for increased flexibility of deadlines and learning modes to fit their needs. This included emailing professors about protests near their dorm, about their feelings regarding the need to take action, and about strong emotional responses impeding their ability to focus. Additionally, students demanded alternative grading systems to decrease the impact of the pandemic on their academic records (Flaherty, 2020c). Polices of having on-line classes, recorded sessions, and more flexibility served the complex demands on individuals lives and times as well as making things more democratic and promote agency (Abramson, 2021). The existence of the policies has served as a safety value even if not used and gives students more agency in their lives.

Faculty also demonstrated agency in many ways, including being involved in the Black Lives Matter (Harris, 2020) and other protests (Lee & Rose, 2021). Additionally, faculty moved quickly at the onset of the pandemic as they moved to entirely online instruction in March 2020 (Lederman, 2020), while managing their own and their family needs as well as supporting their students (Flaherty, 2020a). Many faculty rose to the challenge and were able to construct meaningful experiences for their students. Some chose to see the pedagogical challenges as an opportunity, transforming higher education dramatically (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020) and reviewing how to do assessment in a more equitable manner (Blum & Kohn, 2020). Moreover, the on-going work on positive psychology that many had been involved in has taken on a new
salience and provided a tool for faculty as well as students to cope with concurrent stressors (Bransford et al., 2020, Waters, et al., 2021) and extending this to families (Chen et al., 2020). This ability to step back and reflect on pedagogical processes (Blum & Kohn, 2020; Ittig et al., 2020; Ledgerwood et al., 2021; Prime et al., 2020; van Eeden-Moorefield, et al., 2020) and also on systems of oppression (Bowleg, 2020; Hulko, 2009; Krieger, 2021) continue to provide other faculty and students with practice for developing skills to negotiate through the unfolding legacy of the pandemic and beyond. These practices combine with the positive psychology allow for navigating in uncertain times with more agency (Grant, 2012; Masten, 2001; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Nelson et al., 2016).

Moving Forward

Family Science’s emphasis on the interlocking nature of relationships and systems provides the opportunity to understand the complicated nature of the challenges experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and concurrent events which will continue to impact students, staff, faculty and their families (Bowleg, 2020; Borah, 2021; Gee et al., 2012; Gibbons & Stock, 2018; Hulko, 2009; Krieger, 2021; Li & Samp, 2021; Ledgerwood, et al., 2021; Letiecq, 2019; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2021; Salerno et al., 2020; Wint et al., 2021). Highlighting how life course perspective, augmented with GFI views, can continue to benefit students and faculty as well as bear fruit for researchers and practitioners. Using these perspectives, we acknowledge the complexity of age, life events, cohorts, as well as myriad personal and societal factors (Gee et al., 2012; 2019; Elder, 1994, Liu & Lim, 2020, Rice et al., 2021). Continuing to attend to both individual level issues and variation (Abes, 2016; Borah, 2020; Gonzales, 2021) and to forge meaningful policy changes to afford agency and flexibility will support individuals nested in their diverse families more effectively (Birdsong, 2020; England & Purcell, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Mickey et al., 2020; Protonentis, et al., 2020; Reardon, 2021).

Following best practices and addressing the tough issues of the pandemic and its aftermath (Arneback & Jämte, 2021; Brooker & Vu, 2020; Huston & DiPietro, 2007) as well as provide a welcoming environment for faculty, students, and staff to the strongest degree possible (see the term “radical hospitality”, Educational Innovator, 2017; Ledgerwood et al., 2021) and with support for the individual and collective traumas (Borah, 2021; Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020; Salerno et al., 2021) have potential to help with the current challenges and their emotional legacy. The awareness of the effect of social environments and importance of social support for individuals and their families also makes our institutions more equitable for many individuals (Elmer et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2012; 2019; Gibbons & Stock, 2018; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Schur et al., 2020).

Encouragement for specific policy changes from administrators and faculty governance bodies (Shanahan et al., 2020) to address systemic inequalities is a key step (King & Frederickson, 2021; Ledgerwood et al., 2021). Often such changes do not occur except when a crisis is underway and the multiple crises that are occurred during the pandemic helped effect change. Actions were taken to lessen previously undocumented or unaddressed inequalities and to help deliver a whole-person curriculum and student services (cf. Abramson, 2021). Policies about grading flexibility and considering intersectional privilege will need to be continued (El-Alayi et al., 2018; King & Frederickson, 2021; Lewis, 2020). Affording students agency will likely increase their success over time (Brady & Gilligan, 2020). Increased flexibility of delivery
mode and deadlines, recognition of inequalities, focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, increased focus on student wellbeing are all changes that have occurred during this time (Schur et al., 2020). Specifics such as dissemination of computers, cameras, and wi-fi hotspot as well as on-line trainings for those who needed them are important concrete steps for equity. Institutional and departmental policies to extend tenure clock and increase flexibility regarding attendance in class or meetings should be retained as well.

These small steps of agency granting are linked to both student development and improved educational outcomes (Abes, 2016). Students who felt marginalized due to gender, race, setting, health, caregiving duties or any number of other factors had a choice in how they showed up but were still invited to show up (cf. Abramson, 2021; Birdsong, 2020). The extension to faculty and staff cameras off during administrative meetings acknowledged the need for flexibility given their diverse lives.

Coming out of this and moving forward, the cracks will continue to show. As we repair these, we will not want to forget them. The models provided by Kintsugi and regarding healing from trauma frame our view of how we should move forward. This turning point in history can set us on a different trajectory. The need to honor the linked lives of students, faculty, and their families is an opportunity for our pedagogy and practice to meet the road. Work suggesting how to remedy gaps due to gendered work for women faculty in the area of teaching and research has been suggested (King & Frederickson, 2021) and should be extended to the student who were caregivers of children or parents too. Work that has highlighted the strengths and resilience of those doing more than their share (El-Alayli et al., 2018; Hartley, 2017; 2018; Manne, 2017) and noting families where equality is more prevalent. “Novel” solutions such as support for childcare and improve family leave (Colantuoni et al., 2021) are surfacing and getting political attention. The legacy of patriarchy prior to the pandemic was often invisible (Hartley, 2017; 2018; Manne, 2017; Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020) in unequal labor in the home and academy (El-Alayli et al., 2021). Prior work on strengths of coping with work life balances as well as avoid exclusively focusing on families from a heteronormative perspective (Fish & Russell, 2018; Van Steenbergen, et al., 2007) may provide guides moving forward. Being thoughtful and inclusive about policy changes with alternative grading and policies on if meetings should be live or virtual and recorded are also key steps moving forward.

Family Science’s history of dealing with social change has meant we have a rich set of models to draw from to understand the multiplicity of interacting trajectories and to help move forward with improvements in our shared condition. Our call for teaching strategies and polices that recognize the complex, intersectional, and longitudinal concerns (Braverman et al., 2011; Krieger, 2012, 2021; Richman & Stock, 2018) when extended to the academy and our classes will allow us to build on are discipline’s rich history and help promote justice (Fish & Russell, 2019; Russell, 2019). Keeping the systems that have afforded agency and flexibility will aid those who are most marginalized over time. Continuing to focus on both education and mental health (cf. Waters et al. 2021) will also be necessary. Using our expanded GFI model to understand cohort impacts will also be needed.

Like repairing anything that has been broken for a long time, careful examination of the parts and how to fit them back together will take time, dedication, and effort. The fault lines in our society and within the academy that have become more apparent are places we can seek to understand and remediate. While anger is justified due to these more visible inequalities the call
for “respair”, an older word that means “fresh hope, a recovery from despair” and combined with hope which “requires a confrontation with the bittersweet truths—a recognition of just how bad things are” (Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 607) to move forward honestly.

Elise Murowchick, Ph.D., CFLE is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology, Seattle University

Robin Yaure, Ph.D., CFLE is a Professor of Teaching, Human Development & Family Studies and Program Coordinator, HDFS and Psychology at Pennsylvania State University, Mont Alto Campus
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