

Constructing a Life Course

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INTRODUCTION

I consider myself a *life course* scholar, because I am interested in patterns and pathways at all ages and stages, as well as the strategies individuals, couples, and families adopt in the face of expected and unexpected change (Moen & Wethington, 1992). My research spans the adult life course—from the early parenting years through retirement and life after retirement (Moen & Yu, 1999; Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1989, 1992; Moen, 1997). A central focus of my research and writing is *gender*: the ways that gender shapes the choices and life chances of men and women as they move through roles and relationships (Han & Moen, 1999a; Han & Moen, 1999b; Moen, 1995, 1996, 2000; Moen & Han, 1999; Quick & Moen, 1998). This points to the importance of a *role context* approach, placing lives in the context of gender, cohort, and other markers of location in the social structure (see a discussion of the role context approach in Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1989).

In thinking about my own biography, I can see the value of taking a life course approach in the study of lives. Who I am today, and what I do, reflects the interaction of various life course processes: *context, linked lives, transitions, and trajectories*.

CONTEXT

Historical Location

I was born in 1942, the year after America entered World War II, which meant that I have moved through life just ahead of the large Baby Boom

cohort born in the years following the war. I imagine my parents might not have even married had it not been for the war, but they did so hastily right before my father, an officer in the army, was shipped out to fight in Europe.

The war affected my life directly in two ways. First, my father, who I assume experienced stresses related to his combat experience, wrote my mother to ask for a divorce. (His father had always opposed the marriage.) Second, since my mother became a single parent and had to support us both, she worked full time as a hairdresser and put me into one of the excellent day care facilities created to encourage women to join the workforce during the war.

Historical circumstances have continued to shape my life course. As a teenager in the '50s, I was spared the drugs and disillusionments common to the Baby Boomers coming of age in the 1960s. I loved sports but wasn't given the opportunity to play, although I was permitted to be a cheerleader for the Little League. In high school we could play basketball but were restricted to half the court since the full court was "too strenuous" for girls. (Also we could only dribble three times before passing the ball so as not to tax our "female organs.") And even then, we could play only when the boys' teams weren't using the court. Upon graduating from high school, I began college but then married at the age of 18! Marriage was common to young women in Georgia in 1961, and 18 did not seem "early" to me.

I became a full-time housewife and soon the mother of two girls. I did not feel I could go back to school to continue college until my preschoolers were also in school. So I took correspondence courses and an occasional class at night. When I did return to school, graduating with undergraduate and graduate degrees in the 1970s, I benefited from the spirit of the women's movement as well as student loans that opened new opportunities for me. At the same time, I felt I was going against the grain of the times; most mothers of school-aged children that I knew (by then I was living in northern Minnesota) remained homemakers.

Other Contexts

I was born in the South (Hazelhurst, Georgia), which has shaped my identity, my food preferences, and my life-long love of iced tea. But much more consequential to me was the fact that I left Georgia at age six. My mother had remarried and, with my stepfather, a professional in the Army, we frequently moved and lived all over the world. This was key to my developing an understanding of the importance of *cultural context*. When I was six, we moved to Frankfurt, Germany, where I marveled that "their" Santa Claus and "their" Easter came on different days than ours. I then made what was one of my first independent decisions: I decided to celebrate "theirs" and "ours" to get more goodies!

Moving back to the United States (to the Presidio in San Francisco) at age 10 was a culture shock. There were things I hadn't experienced before: popsicles and paper dolls. There were people who ate differently than we did and talked differently (I still had my Southern drawl). I also learned even more about cultural relativity and the importance of *situational context*. In the fifth grade I was seen as nothing less than brilliant in that I already had learned fractions (as no one else in my class had). But then my status plummeted. I didn't know how to speak even as well as kindergartners in San Francisco: I pronounced "Yosemite" phonetically as Joesmight, "San Jose" as San Joe's. Unfortunately I did this in a presentation before the whole school. What I learned from this important incident is that identity doesn't simply lie within the individual, but changes as the context changes.

Notions of *cultural relativity* and the *flexible self* were reinforced when we moved to Japan, where I attended three different military high schools, as well as when we moved back to Georgia for my senior year. The topic in the public eye that year was *Brown v. the Board of Education* and whether our school was going to have to be integrated. I had attended "integrated" schools all my life and had had friends from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, so this was a difficult time for me. The South was in turmoil, with sit-ins, bus boycotts, and the thundering rhetoric of Martin Luther King. I remember taking the only seat left on a bus, in the back, and being berated by a young black woman for trying to "save" her people. Actually I wasn't reading a Bible (as she accused me), but another book and was too embarrassed to tell her. I had never before been on a bus that had a color line drawn in the middle. I could not believe there were "white" and "colored" drinking fountains. All in all, it was the United States, specifically "my" South, not Germany or Japan, that provided the most culture shock.

Linked Lives

Urie Bronfenbrenner (my colleague and dear friend at Cornell) always says, "You are the people in your life," and I believe this is true. Yet I also think that the people *not* in your life matter as well. My biological father (who never saw me when he returned from the war) was always in the recesses of my mind. I've always wondered why he divorced *me* as well as my mother.

But the ones who were in my life remain with me in who I am today. My grandfather's unstinting love, no matter what. My mother's style of helping out and caring for others. (Though her emphasis on personal looks and stylish clothes made me feel that I could never manage to meet her expectations [she was a strikingly beautiful woman].) My stepfather opened up a new world of books and learning. Before he came into my life, I had had only one book, an alphabet picture dictionary. He got me a library card! Read to me! Actually

discussed things with me. Without a doubt, he raised my awareness of the intellectual dimension of the world around me. But he too was a product of his *historical location*, having come of age during the Great Depression and losing all his savings for college when the banks closed. He never did go to college, but instead instilled the desire and expectation for higher education in me.

My brother Dennis came along when I was almost ten. I had so wanted a baby brother and saw him as much “my” baby as my mother’s. I babysat with him from the time he was born (even though I now realize I was far too young then to do so). Over the years, my sense of responsibility for Dennis has not faded, and events since (his leukemia, brain damage, loss of memory) mean that I continue to care for him.

My first husband, Arnie, and I both grew up together, since he was not yet 21 at the time of our marriage. The real reason we got married was that my mother felt it would be improper for a young girl and a boy to travel by bus from Georgia to Minnesota, where he wanted me to meet his family. Rather impetuously, we decided to marry so she would not object to our traveling together. We not only visited northern Minnesota, but eventually moved to a small farm there, raising Arabian horses while he supported us (barely) by working as a medical technologist at a local hospital. To me this was just another in a series of moves, since I had spent my life moving. But I found myself isolated on the farm with only my two girls for company, and started taking night classes and continuing with my correspondence courses. Soon after I had received my bachelor’s and then master’s degrees at the University of North Dakota, 20 miles distant from our farm, we learned that my husband had cancer.

A key person in this time of trial was the pathologist who was also our friend. Everyone said, “You can beat this thing,” recalling all the people they knew who had been cured of cancer. But the doctors’ sober expressions belied their words of encouragement. Our pathologist friend volunteered to examine the tissue slides and give a second opinion. After doing so, he bluntly told me, “You are married to a dead man. He will be dead in three months. What are you going to do after he is dead?” This brusque way of talking took my breath away, but it also made me angry. I glared at him and said, “I am going back to school to get my PhD.” He quickly said, “Then show me your application next week.” My anger with him encouraged me to do it, and I soon sent the application in. Had that not been the case, I doubt that I ever would have had the strength to apply then or even consider it three months later when, in fact, Arnie was dead.

Arnie taught me much about love and life. But his greatest legacy was seeing how thoughtfully he handled dying. We talked about everything, and he underscored his confidence in me to “carry on,” raise our children, and

build a life without him. His confidence gave me the strength I needed to get through the grief and depression that made me want to end my own life as well. In April I received a letter from the University of Minnesota, saying that not only had I been accepted but that I would receive a trainee scholarship, working with a professor I had never heard of, Reuben Hill.

The notion of *linked lives* underscores not only the ways individuals influence one another but the ways that lives are lived in tandem. My two girls, Deborah and Melanie, experienced all these changes with me, but from a different vantage point. Only 12 and 10 when their father died, they lost not only Arnie but also the social network and lifestyle they had known, as we moved from the farm to student housing in Saint Paul. They blamed this wrenching change on me, not on the death of their father. And then, in another three years I uprooted them once again, this time to move to Ithaca, New York, where I had accepted an offer from Cornell. My two daughters provided me with a sense of purpose in life when I thought all was lost. I had to be cheerful for their benefit, taking them to the zoo instead of crying in my bed. And I had to get a job and support us all so they too could go to college.

My ongoing source of emotional support during graduate school was Carla Howery, my office mate at the University of Minnesota, and Janet Kelly (now Janet Kelly Moen after she married my former brother-in-law), who helped me go on when I thought it was impossible to do so. The first day I met Carla, I placed a heavy burden on her. I told her that my husband had just died, that I had two kids who were unhappy that we had moved to the Twin Cities, and that I knew no one there. I needed a friend and asked her to be my friend. Even though she was in her early 20s (I was only 32 but felt *much* older), she rose to the challenge and has been my close friend ever since. Jan also has always been there for me, from our first days in the master's program at the University of North Dakota. She was like a sister to me and an aunt to my girls long before she married my brother-in-law. She received a PhD from Cornell and now teaches sociology at the University of North Dakota.

Another aspect of *linked lives* is, as Robert Merton reminds us, the fact that our intellectual development occurs because we stand on the shoulders of giants. The "giants" in my life have been Reuben Hill, Jeylan Mortimer, Glen H. Elder, Jr., Robin M. Williams, Jr., and Urie Bronfenbrenner. Reuben Hill challenged all of his students to be all they could be. His emphasis on the *life cycle* sparked my life-long interest in locating people and families by where they are as well as where they have been in their life course. I found his (then) recent book on three generations fascinating. Jeylan Mortimer, who was a junior faculty member at Minnesota while I was there, became something of a role model. She impressed upon me the importance of persistence. She also taught one of the first courses, I am sure, on women's labor force participation, sparking my interest in gender, work, and family. Glen Elder

came to the University of Minnesota to give a talk. When I picked him up at the airport, I was surprised that someone so young could have written such an important book (*Children of the Great Depression* had just been published in 1974). He has been a mentor and a model of the way one engages in life course research. When I came to Cornell, Urie Bronfenbrenner offered what Vgotsky said was the key to optimal development: maximum demand and maximum support. And Robin Williams became a mentor, a collaborator, and a good friend.

Others have offered encouragement and assistance along the way. At Minnesota, Robert Leik served as my dissertation advisor while Reuben Hill was on sabbatical. Joe Galaskiewicz raised my sights from seeking jobs at only junior colleges in Minnesota and marked up the employment bulletin to indicate the schools to which I should apply. When I accepted the Cornell job, my department chair, Phil Schoggen, helped me to locate a house, let me put his name down on school records (“in case of an emergency . . .”), and encouraged me to follow my own interests in research. Phil and his wife Dikkie, along with Urie and Liese Bronfenbrenner and Robin and Marguerite Williams, became close friends as well as colleagues. In fact, my second marriage took place at Phil and Dikkie’s house.

Graduate students, faculty, and staff over the years have made work fun, taught me much, and have become lasting friends. I’ve been blessed with a wonderful network in Ithaca: Donna Dempster-McClain and John McClain, Joan Jacobs Brumberg and David Brumberg, Mon and Eva Cochran, John and Cathy Eckenrode, Jenny Gerner, Steve and Mary Agnes Hamilton, Ritch Savin-Williams, Joyce and Henry Walker, Jerry and Pat Ziegler, Ron Breiger, Xueguang Zhou, Irene Pitcher, Kim Rosenstein, and Sarah Jaenike Demo.

I have had the pleasure of co-authoring articles, books, and chapters with many scholars, including Penny Becker, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Marin Clarkberg, Glen H. Elder, Jr., Vivian Fields, Francille Firebaugh, Leonard Goodwin, Shin-Kap Han, Carla B. Howery, Jungmeen Kim, John Krout, Kurt Lüscher, Karl Pillemer, Pat Roehling, Alvin L. Schorr, Steve Sweet, Pamela Tolbert, Nancy Tuma, Henry Walker, Elaine Wethington, Robin M. Williams, Jr., and Yan Yu.

I have also had the pleasure of writing and publishing with former students Ellen Bradburn, Donna Dempster-McClain, Mary Ann Erickson, Kay B. Forest, Heather Hofmeister, Stacey Merola, Melody L. Miller, Heather E. Quick, Julie Robison, Deborah B. Smith, Ken Smith, and Loreen Wolfer.

The last chapter in the *linked lives* process brings me to meeting (through Donna Dempster-McClain) and marrying my husband, Dick Shore. Even though we had a commuting marriage for years (he was at the Department of Labor in Washington, DC), we have been together in Ithaca since 1990. Dick is my confidant, critic, companion, colleague, and closest friend. Both the

professional and personal aspects of my life have benefited from his wise counsel, common sense, and wry sense of humor.

TRANSITIONS AND TRAJECTORIES

Transitions

The key transitions that have shaped my life course thus far include my two marriages, becoming a mother, becoming a stepmother (of Linda Shore and Roberta Maguire), becoming a grandmother (of James, Kiri, Tara, and Matthew), going back to school, getting a PhD, securing a job at Cornell, becoming a program director at the National Science Foundation (while on leave from Cornell), and institution-building at Cornell (the *Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center*, the *Cornell Gerontology Research Institute* [with Karl Pillemer], and the *Cornell Employment and Families Career Institute*). I focus here on the academic transitions, but want to stress how even academic transitions are embedded in relational contexts.

I took the job at Cornell because Ithaca seemed like a good community in which to raise children, and, of all my three offers, it was the closest to Georgia, the home of my mother and brother. I didn't realize at the time that I had unwittingly made another choice: to go into a department of Human Development rather than Sociology. Though I became a member of the Sociology Department at Cornell as well, my Human Development colleagues have really impressed upon me the importance of cross-disciplinary research.

I went to work as Assistant Director and then Director of the Sociology Program at the National Science Foundation in 1987, frankly to be able to live with my husband Dick in Washington, DC. It turned out to be a transformative experience. Robin M. Williams, Jr., gave me this advice about going to work for a federal agency: "Keep your back to the wall and keep looking in both directions." He was right! The mostly male, mostly natural science environment at the Foundation challenged me in ways I can't begin to describe here. The result was that I became an advocate for the social sciences and for women scientists. Working with various "bosses" as well as collegial program directors in sociology, law, psychology, political science, and economics—Stanley Presser, Murray Webster, Bob Althaus, Felice Levine, Roberta Miller, Dan Newlan, and Mary Clutter—broadened my understanding not only of sociology but also of social research more generally and of science policy "writ large." It became clear to me that if sociology is to make a contribution, it must be seen (and see itself) as a legitimate science, one that may use a range of methods (from qualitative to quantitative to simulation), but that is

as rigorous and as cumulative as the natural sciences. I also was reassured as to the importance of fundamental (basic) science in addressing issues of societal concern.

I returned to Cornell from NSF in 1990 and experienced a bit of culture shock. While I had been dealing with the “big picture” at NSF, I was suddenly focusing only on my own research. Donna Dempster-McClain, Robin M. Williams, Jr., and I continued our work on the *Women’s Roles and Well-Being Project*, funded by the National Institute on Aging. Following up women that Robin had interviewed in Elmira, New York, in the 1950s, we reinterviewed them 30 years later in 1986, as well as their (by then adult) daughters. The analysis of this exciting panel data produced fascinating findings regarding women’s lives: the importance of multiple role occupancy for longevity, health, and well-being; the complex links between caregiving, employment, and psychological well-being; the ways that daughters and mothers changed and influenced one another along with the concomitant changes in women’s roles in the larger society.

I believe, because of my experience at NSF, that I followed up on Dean Francille Firebaugh’s interest in establishing a center on aging. After a series of breakfast meetings with faculty from a variety of disciplines (food always helps to bring people together!) and a stimulating visit by Vern Bengtson, it became clear to me that we lacked the numbers to establish a center on aging, and so I convinced Dean Firebaugh that what we *could* do was create a center on the life course. Thus, the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center came into being, a university-wide center named in honor of a psychologist who has always emphasized the importance of person, process, context, and time. Its mission is to engage in fundamental life course research addressing issues of national concern.

When Karl Pillemer came to Cornell, he and I became codirectors of CGRI (*Cornell Gerontology Research Institute*), an institute under the umbrella of the Bronfenbrenner Center supporting applied research on social integration and aging. From the funds provided by the National Institute on Aging in support of this institute came the *Cornell Retirement and Well-Being Study*, a three-wave, six-year study of older workers and retirees from six employers in upstate New York. Findings from this study of a pre-baby boomer cohort include: (1) a mapping of their various pathways to retirement (and how women traverse many paths, while men are located in two), (2) how caregiving affects the timing of retirement (encouraging women to retire, delaying men’s retirement), (3) the correlates of retirement satisfaction, (4) how community participation promotes well-being among retirees but not among the not yet retired still in their career jobs, (5) how marital quality changes with the retirement transition (the transition itself produces more conflicts and less marital satisfaction), (6) the ways couples perceive each spouse’s influence

regarding the other's retirement transition (he sees her as having more influence than she felt she had), and (7) the way life after retirement affects psychological well-being. We found that men in post-retirement jobs married to women who are not employed report the lowest depressive symptoms (Moen, 1998; Moen, Fields, Meador, & Rosenblatt, 2000; Moen, Fields, Quick, & Hofmeister, 2000; Quick & Moen, 1998; Smith & Moen, 1998).

I am now engaged in a study, also funded by NIA, of the Baby Boom Cohort and their plans and expectations regarding retirement (the *Midcareer Paths and Passages Study*). The retirement transition of this group will be a unique experience for the large Baby Boomer Cohort; we are interested in comparing them with the pre-Baby Boomers in the *Cornell Retirement and Well Being Study*. (Other research by Karl Pillemer, Elaine Wethington, and Nina Glasgow has also been conducted for this Institute, but I am reporting here on *my* life course!)

The most recent "transition" for me was the establishment in 1997 of another institute under the umbrella of the Bronfenbrenner Center, the Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute, a center for the study of working families funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The Cornell Careers Institute has solidified my interest in the intersection of work and family roles at all stages of the life course. It has supported work with Shin-Kap Han to chart men's and women's career pathways, and with Penny Becker to show how working couples with children scale back their obligations. Other foci are defined by Marin Clarkberg on variations in work time and work-time preferences among couples as well as by Yan Yu on who feels successful at work *and* at home. Finally, a related area is specified by Jungmeen Kim and Heather Hofmeister on changes in marital quality in late midlife (Becker & Moen, 1999; Clarkberg & Moen, 1999; Han & Moen, 2000; Moen, Kim, & Hofmeister, 1999; Moen & Yu, 1998). A signal contribution of the Cornell Careers Institute has been its focus not only on work/family issues over the life course, but also on how *couples* strategize about their three jobs-his, hers, and their families.

Trajectories

Becoming a professor at Cornell was my first full-time job, though the nature of it has evolved as my experiences and research/teaching interests have developed over the past 21 years. But I can see threads of continuity in my intellectual agenda. First, I have had an ongoing interest in policy, writing two chapters on family policy in the editions of *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (Moen & Schorr, 1987; Moen & Forest, 1999. See also Moen & Firebaugh, 1994; Moen & Jull, 1995). I want to do work that addresses contemporary concerns, and that helps to define and frame key issues. One of my favorite courses has been *Families and Social Policy*, in which we look at

the deliberate and unintended impacts of social policies on families, couples, and children. A second thread throughout my intellectual biography is a focus on continuity and change, the *transitions* and *trajectories* so fundamental to life course research (Robison & Moen, 2000; Erickson et al., 2000; Krout et al., 1998).

These threads became clear to me in my first study on women and work. Using data from the 1977 *Quality of Employment Survey*, I looked at women who worked part time versus full time, noting all the significant differences between them. Then I turned to the *Panel Study of Income Dynamics*, finding that women who worked part time one year were often either working full time or else had moved out of the labor force the next year, and that women who worked full time one year typically moved to part-time work or full-time home-making the next year. This impressed upon me the need to get data both on where people are now and where they have been. Data of this kind could be acquired either through prospective studies following people over time or by collecting life history data in cross-sectional studies. This research made me question cross-sectional research on the impacts of mothers' paid work on their children—they may be working or not working at the time of the interview, but in the previous year they could well have been in the opposite circumstance. Capturing past trajectories of roles and relationships has characterized all my own data collection: the *Women's Roles and Well-Being Study*, the *Cornell Retirement and Well-Being Study*, the *Cornell Couples and Careers Study*, and now the *Cornell Midcareer Paths and Passages Study*. In 1992, in recognition of my life course scholarship, I was awarded an endowed chair; I am now "The Ferris Family Professor of Life Course Studies."

A third thread of continuity concerns what Reuben Hill emphasized as the importance of *comparative analysis*. He said we should always think as comparativists. True to his training, I always look for differences, primarily by gender, but also by class and race. I wrote a book on working parents in Sweden (see Moen, 1989; Moen & Forest, 1990) comparing and contrasting, where possible, the Swedish cultural and policy climate with that in the U.S. And my work with Nancy Tuma and Xueguang Zhou has examined the labor force experiences of men and women in China (Zhou, Moen, & Tuma, 1998; Zhou, Tuma, & Moen, 1995, 1997).

Reflections

This life-course approach to my own biography illustrates the ways choice and chance—along with constraining and changing opportunity structures—have opened some doors and closed others. I am a product of my times (the pre-baby boomers), my childhood experiences, and the people in my life and my work as a sociologist. I look forward to the next life course stage!

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