

The Life-Course



Using examples, explain why sociologists have developed the concept of the *life-course* and what insights this concept has produced into the experience of ageing.

This question appears to ask for a lot of information. However, if we unpack it, a basic structure for a two-part answer is embedded within it. The best place to start is with the chapter's key concept – the life-course – which is introduced on pages 295-6. Adopting the life-course as a key concept is a recognition by sociologists that apparently natural 'life-cycle' stages such as childhood, youth, middle age and so on, are culturally variable and indeed, change over time within societies. Good answers will note the influence of social constructionism on this conceptual shift, briefly explaining this approach (discussed in Chapter 5 and the book's Glossary).



More than definitions are required here though. The question also asks for some examples to show why sociologists (and social gerontologists) prefer to use the life-course in their work. The danger here is that you might be tempted to try and cover the whole life-course, but that would be a mistake. It is better to carefully select a few relevant examples from the chapter, which make your points most effectively. For example, you could discuss childhood (pp. 296-9) as a culturally and historically variable life-course stage, including the work of Ariès and more recently Prout, both of which emphasize the social creation of particular conceptions of childhood. Youth and teenage (pp. 299-300) would also provide an opportunity to demonstrate why a life-course approach provides a better understanding than life-cycle. Adolescence, middle age and later life could also be discussed as part of the life-course.

In the second part of the essay it will be helpful to discuss the idea of 'ageing' in a sociological way. Ageing is defined (p. 305) as 'the combination of biological, psychological and social processes that affect people as they grow older'. Briefly outlining the biological and psychological aspects of ageing would be appropriate here, but the central emphasis of the question is on the *social*. As with other phenomena such as sexuality, 'race' and disability, which appear at first sight to be biological categories, the case being made here is that the material changes in the ageing body are shaped by social conditions (such as diet, working conditions, availability of clean water) and also made meaningful by social and cultural practices.

Considered in relation to the life-course, studying the experience of ageing can tell us important things about societies and you will need to discuss some of these to address the final part of the question. For instance, Bytheway's work on ageism and the categorization of people in later life as 'the old' or 'the elderly' shows how such categories operate to legitimate the separation and management of this particular social group (pp. 317-20). In addition to the negative stereotypes associated with ageism, one of the consequences of our constructions of 'old age' is the separation of 'the elderly' from paid employment. This has enormous implications both for the individuals concerned and for policies in the area of employment and pensions (pp. 197-9). The chapter also discusses the ways in which the experience of ageing is always inflected by other social inequalities such as class, ethnicity and gender. The key consequence of life-course approaches is that ageing is understood as a social rather than a biological category, hence much that appears inevitable or natural in the ageing process is in fact socially produced and therefore open to change.