

The LifE Study yields insights into courses of life over three decades, from early adolescence to the age of 45

Life courses over three decades

How do experiences from adolescence shape the later course of life? Do children 'inherit' the attitudes and personalities of their parents, or even their grandparents? Is there a relationship between the development of working life and the development in other life domains? Such questions about long-term influences over the lifespan, intergenerational transmission, and cross-domain effects impose particular requirements on research data and design. The LifE Study is one of a small number of studies worldwide that provides such information. It yields insights into courses of life over three decades, from early adolescence up to the age of 45. The study's core data consists of a cohort of individuals born between 1965 and 1967. They were first surveyed from 1979 to 1983, and again in 2002 and 2012.

The Constance Youth Study

The LifE Study started as a school-embedded youth study, including 12-year-old adolescents who were interviewed annually until the age of 16. All in all, the data of over 3,000 adolescents was collected and, additionally, in the years of 1980 and 1982, parents and teachers were surveyed.

The main research question was settled within the socialisation research of the 1960s and 70s: In which ways do experiences in school shape the personalities of adolescents? The research combined socialisation theory with developmental psychology to focus on the 'development in context'. Accordingly, the research interest focused on how the adolescents coped with school-related and general developmental tasks during adolescence, and the study analysed the development of personality.

The youth study focused on growing up in urban and rural environments: a metropolitan area of the former West Germany, the city of Frankfurt, and adjacent rural areas, Odenwald and Bergstrasse. The study was conducted in a quasi-experimental design, analysing the differential development of the adolescents in the aforementioned contexts longitudinally. Findings were published in a series of monographies by Helmut Fend (1990, 1991, 1994, 1997, 1998).

20 and 30 years later: two follow-up studies in 2002 and 2012

The Constance Youth Study was resumed in a first follow-up study in 2002, when the respondents were 35 years old. Out of all the participants of the youth study that could be found 83% participated again, resulting in a sample of 1,657 (Fend *et al.* 2009). In a second follow-up study in 2012, the latest collection of data took place. This time, approximately 85% of the participants contacted took part again (1,359). Moreover, the respondents' children, around the ages of 12-17, were also included in the study (570, participation rate: 83%).

And what do the analyses show?

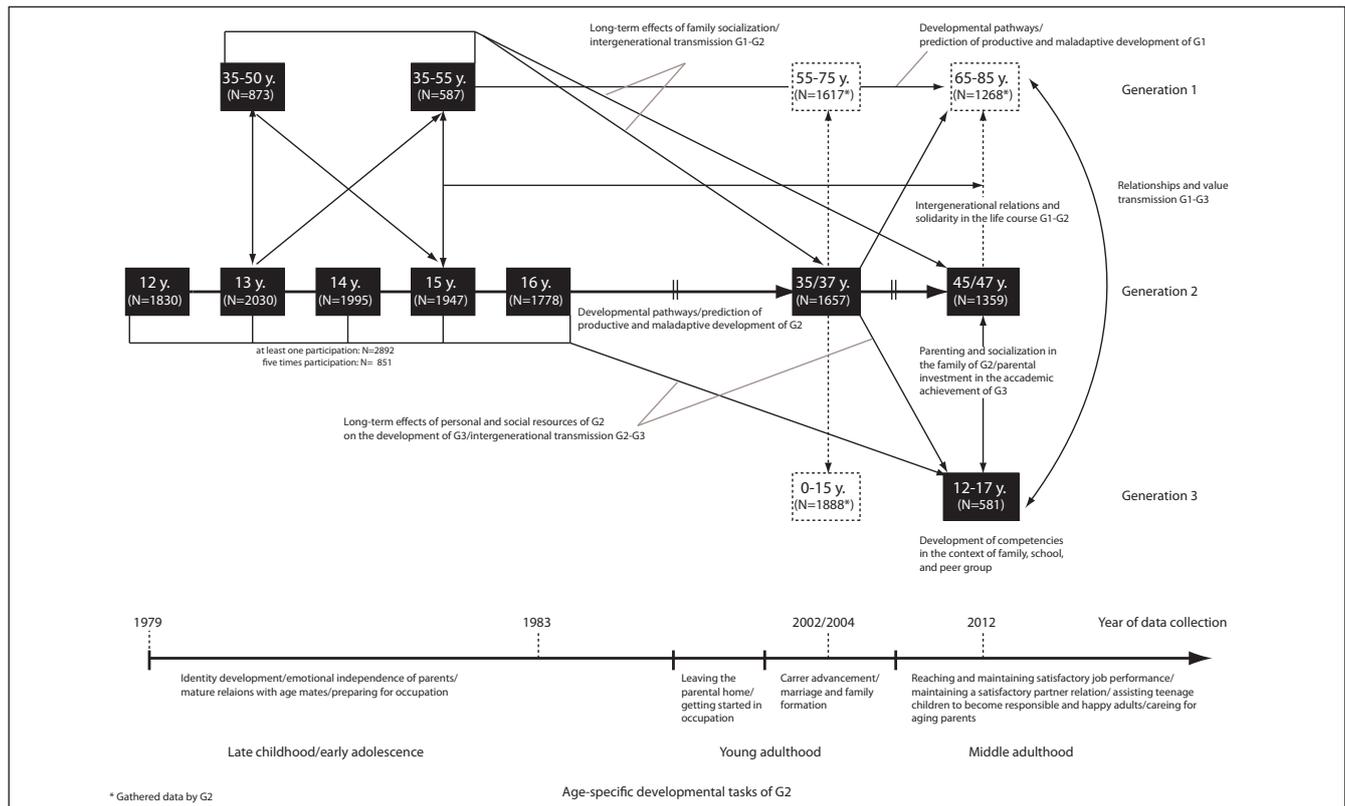
The LifE Study shows that parents transmit attitudes, values and political orientations to their children. Despite the progressing pluralism of values, the LifE Study revealed that there still remains an intergenerational continuity of attitudes and values. For example, we found a transmission of parenting beliefs as well as parenting practices. The participants of the LifE Study adopted the parenting styles of their parents when they had children themselves, but this intergenerational continuity of parenting styles depends on the warmth and acceptance in the parent-child relationship. The parent-child relationship is also relevant for the transmission of political orientations over three generations.

These transmission effects might explain enduring social inequality. The LifE Study revealed that cultural capital – namely educational habits such as reading – is handed down from parents to their children. Despite educational expansion, whether children have access to such familial habits is still important for educational attainment.

On a broader level, the intergenerational design of the LifE Study also enables us to compare and trace transitions of pedagogical cultures in society. Helmut Fend and Fred Berger depicted a clear shift towards a more humane school culture within these 30 years – a shift they also found in parenting practices within the family.

Development over the course of life

The long-term data of the LifE Study allowed us to examine the change and stability of personality variables over the course of life. Our results revealed that self-esteem, one of the most important dimensions for productive life and subjective wellbeing, is rather stable over 30 years. However, we also found that the development of self-esteem over 30 years is influenced by external factors, particularly by income and socioeconomic status. Therefore, the low self-esteem of adolescents might be compensated for during the course of life.



In addition, the development of achievement orientations in school is rather stable. Adolescents with higher achievement orientation in school also showed higher achievement orientation in middle adulthood at work. Further, a positive and stable school climate in adolescence can enhance achievement orientation in adulthood. Therefore, school climate is of high importance for the development of achievement orientations, particularly for low-achieving students.

Some interesting results can be identified when analysing timing patterns of romantic partnerships and the quality of the relationship in marriage. The study found that marriage and long-term partnerships remain predominant, while personality characteristics such as

sociability are influential in early partnership experiences, and structural aspects such as educational level are more important for later, more institutionalised partnership experiences. Additionally, positive peer relationships and first romantic experiences in adolescence predict the quality of the relationship in marriage. Most importantly, while bad experiences from parent-child relationships, and from parental divorce, influence the quality of the relationship in marriage at age 35, this influence disappears in the long run at the age of 45.

What can we learn from this study?

Adolescence matters – even for middle adulthood. Experiences in schools, families, and with peers during adolescence, regardless of whether they were good or bad, are important for the development of young people. On the one hand, positive experiences can be identified as resources that help to deal adequately with various challenging situations. On the other hand, stress from particular life events are risky but might be compensated for in young and middle adulthood. In further analyses, we will investigate if there are similar life trajectories for men and women, if additional factors influence the development during 30 years and how intergenerational transmission is working.

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