Chapter 4

Individualization and the Life Course: Toward a Theoretical Model and Empirical Evidence

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Introduction

Individualization has emerged as a central theoretical construct to characterize recent transformations within society and the life course. Although it drives an increasing amount of research, there are considerably divergent definitions, operationalizations, and interpretations of this popular construct. It has been used as both an explanatory factor driving social change and as an outcome at the individual level. Applications range from studies of large macrolevel societal changes (see Pollack and Pickel 1999) and social class inequality (see Kohler 2005), to the psychological level of self-actualization and identity formation (Côté and Levine 2002). In spite of the fact that individualization is increasingly included systematically in the field of life-course studies, there has been little progress toward a shared understanding of the concept. This ambiguity may lie in the “intentionally ambivalent” definition provided by contemporary individualization theories (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), the polymorphous nature of individualization itself, or in the inherent ambiguity this theory offers vis-à-vis the relationship of the social structure to institutions and the individual (Zinn 2002).

The aim of this chapter is twofold. A primary goal is to draw upon both classic and contemporary social theory to provide a coherent definition and theoretical model that specifies the individualization process in relation to
the life course. A secondary goal is to examine empirical evidence that supports or refutes the multiple claims of the individualization thesis. Following a brief introduction to life-course research, various facets of individualization theory are explored. The root of individualization is specified as the cyclical process of detraditionalization or dissolution of collective structures. This leads to the development of the following three archetypal life-course outcomes and categorizations of individualization: destandardized (strategic) individualization, default (conformist) individualization, and fragile (anomic) individualization. A selection of empirical research that has explored and tested these models of individualization is presented in relation to each category. The chapter concludes with a critical discussion and reflection.

Life-Course Research

Life-course research examines the interrelation between individuals and their institutional context over the life-span. It focuses on how social processes, such as the family, education, employment, and health domains of individuals’ lives, are structured over the individual’s life-span (Elder 1974). A life course is the culmination of multiple life events. Life events refer to significant incidents such as migration, entering or exiting the labor force, entering or leaving a relationship, or becoming a parent. Together, these life events make up life-course domains or careers (e.g., employment or relationship careers) that are interdependent or interact with one other. The combination of events that occur over individual life-course careers in turn produces unique individual life-course trajectories (see Chapter 2 of this volume).

The life-course perspective has been referred to as an “organizing principle” or framework (Heinz and Krüger 2001). This approach often serves as a heuristic model (i.e., rules and techniques that aid understanding under complex circumstances with incomplete information) to position or understand how the dynamic biographies of individuals differ or evolve over time across various societies. The study of the life course often centers on several aspects. Some focus on the subjective meaning given to life events via the qualitative study of biographies, such as the meaning attributed to being unemployed or divorced. Others study the quantitative frequency of life events, such as how often individuals enter unemployment or marriage and the absolute levels within a society (i.e., the number of unemployed). A common area of research is the study of the timing and duration of each life stage, which relates to studies of phases such as the postponement of parenthood. Others focus on the sequencing or order of