

**PROFESSIONAL SKILLS  
FOR COUNSELLORS**

# *Counselling and the Life Course*

Léonie Sugarman



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*Counselling and the  
Life Course*

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*Counselling and the Life Course*  
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For  
Dr Geoffrey Brown  
– teacher, mentor and friend –  
in celebration of his eightieth birthday,  
and  
Erica, Clare, Amy and Sam  
– the ‘Sugarman Peace’ gang –  
who, as fledgling adults, represent the future.

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# Introduction

Assumptions about the existence of life stages and developmental sequences permeate our view of the world. Thus, the audience had a good sense of what was meant when Craig McDevitt (2000) spoke, in his opening remarks to the Sixth Annual Counselling Research Conference of the British Association for Counselling (as it then was), of the ability to do research being a significant ‘mark of maturity’, indicating how the profession was ‘coming of age’. At the same conference Mel Ainscow (2000), talked of the professional doctorate in counselling as indicative of a ‘maturing’ profession; and Jane Speedy (2000) described different ‘generations’ of counsellor educators. Our understanding of such terms is frequently implicit and unexamined, and it is an aim of the present text to expose them to scrutiny and critique, and to consider their relevance for the professional counsellor.

*Counselling and the Life Course* introduces counsellors and trainee counsellors to the concept of the life course as a multidimensional and multidisciplinary framework for thinking about clients’ lives within and, most particularly, beyond the counselling setting. For over two decades my interest in the idea of life span development and the concept of the life course has been sustained by the belief – reinforced through experience – that everyone has a story to tell. But we do more than tell our story, we live it. In large part, this book is about the importance of this story, and about different ways of conceptualising and telling it. It will be argued that both clients and counsellors can be seen as composing, in the form of a narrative punctuated by transitions and turning points, a life that is both unique and universal, using tools that are largely culturally determined. The book engages with the tension between, on the one hand, recognising age and life stage as rich, significant, but often overlooked, dimensions of difference and, on the other hand, resisting the invocation of frequently implicit age stereotypes and ageist discrimination.

My interest in this field has also been sustained by the belief that counselling can be a potent means of accessing and working with life

course issues so that, in the words of Studs Terkel (1975), what we live is 'a sort of life' rather than 'a sort of dying'. The impact of both counsellor and client age on the counselling relationship is considered, with different life stages being seen as characterised by distinctive vulnerabilities that are likely to find voice within the counselling relationship. At the same time, the concept of the life course is also used as an integrative framework for considering the commonalities between different life stages, thereby providing a focus for counsellors' consideration of how to draw on their extant skills and expertise when working with clients of a different age and life stage to that with which they are already familiar.

The present text has provided a welcome opportunity to write about the life course specifically for an audience of counsellors and trainee counsellors. My hope is that the concepts and models covered in this book will be both inherently interesting, and also provide useful additions to the theories and frameworks that currently guide your practice. An 'Activity Trail' of structured exercises is interspersed throughout the text in order to encourage reflection on the concepts discussed, and their significance for clients, for yourself, and/or for your counselling practice. My hope is that the book will be of relevance to counsellors irrespective of their particular theoretical stance. However, as most of my teaching is with students working within the person-centred approach, it may be that a bias towards this perspective can be discerned.

In this book I build on some of my previous publications in the field – notably a chapter in the *Handbook of Counselling Psychology* (Woolfe et al., 2003) and another, written jointly with Ray Woolfe, in the *Handbook of Counselling* (Palmer and McMahon, 1997). My book, *Life-span Development: Frameworks, Accounts and Strategies* (Sugarman, 2001) complements the present text by, for example, discussing the work of several theorists in greater detail, and also considering other topics, such as research methodology, that are not dealt with here at all.

Léonie Sugarman  
May 2003

# 1

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## *Composing a life*

*If you could see your life's shape, you would find its features to be, like those on your face, universally human yet completely unique.*

*(Tristine Rainer, 1998)*

Clients of all ages are constantly engaged in actively creating and recreating their lives. They constantly adjust to changing circumstances and life events in ways that depend, at least in part, on their biographical experience. In other words, life stage, or place in the life course, matters to clients. It positions them in a social and family context – perhaps as a part of the ‘younger’ or the ‘older’ generation; or possibly within the ‘sandwich’ generation, caught between the demands of teenage children and ageing parents. Models of the life course can help counsellors orient themselves in relation to their clients’ lives, recognising how life problems take on a new hue in the psychosocial contexts of successive life stages (Carlsen, 1988). The present book strives to present the life course as a framework – an aerial view, if you like – for conceptualising a range of ideas and tools that are relevant to counselling at any life stage. These include things like the experience of transitions, the balance between growth and loss, and the tension between continuity and change. Even the most assiduous of clients spend more time outside the counselling relationship than within it, and the concept of the life course provides a framework for locating counselling practice within the client’s wider and evolving life space. When counselling from a life course perspective, clients are seen as ‘existing at the centre of a matrix where life events combine and conspire with the ageing process to present each

person, at any one time, with a unique set of challenges' (Woolfe, 2001: 347).

### **The life course**

Counsellors need some way of encapsulating such human experience – a flexible framework that is both sufficiently substantive to anchor and support the disparate pieces that make up a person's life, and sufficiently malleable to accommodate the uniqueness of individually patterned lives (Gilmore, 1973). The *life course* (Runyan, 1978; Davey, 2001) – the rhythmic, fluctuating pattern of human life, marked out by sequences of key events and interactions between self and environment – provides such a framework. A life course perspective acknowledges that the trajectory from birth to death is highly personal and unique to each individual, and yet also contains experiences and events common to most members of a social group (Davey, 2001). It draws on material from individual, interpersonal, ecological and macrohistorical vantage points in order to understand human experience and behaviours (Silva and Leiderman, 1986). Within the life course, a person's *life span development* – the broad changes and continuities that constitute a person's identity and growth (Seifert et al., 2000) – can be explored.

Images will often communicate better than words the ramifications of a life course perspective, and these are the focus of Activity 1. This is the first stopping point in what can be described as an 'Activity Trail' threading its way through the text. The analogy is with the 'Fitness Trails' found in urban parks, in which city dwellers jog between 'posts' where they are directed to complete various specified exercises. Taken together, these activities are designed to address many of the key features of the life course perspective and, albeit to different degrees, engage all of Kolb's (1984) learning modes: active, reflective, abstract and concrete. My hope is that you will take time out from reading the text of this book to consider these activities as they occur, working either individually or with a group of peers. A comment on each activity is included in the Appendix. I realise it is unlikely that many readers will work systematically through all of the Activity Trail exercises – lack of time and/or motivation seems probable to preclude this. However, I do put in a plea for giving the activities some thought and, even if you have not completed them in their entirety, referring to the commentaries in the Appendix, which include relevant points and discussion not covered in the main text.

### Activity 1: Metaphors of the life course

*At its most profound, the meaning of human life is carried in metaphor. For few of us are the metaphors we live by explicit; we do not usually have any conscious awareness of living out anything beyond what seems to be our literal experience. Yet ultimately, it is the metaphorical sense we make of our living that gives the journey its direction, its sense of progression or development, its turning points, changes and passages, the meaning of its beginning and its end.*

*(Salmon, 1985)*

Metaphors of the life course can express our meaning more creatively and subtly than formal definitions. Appealing to imagination as well as reason, metaphors can illustrate, illuminate and embellish our understanding. The concepts of the life course and of life span development are large and unwieldy, but metaphor can clarify this muddle. Consider the metaphors below, and, if you wish, generate your own. What does each say about the nature and meaning of the human life course? Expand them and extend their implications to find images most in keeping with your own world-view.

- Think first of visual images of the life course – a ladder, an arc, a circle, a tapestry, a tangle of wool. ... What does each suggest about the nature of the life course? In what ways do they differ? Which resonate most, and which least, with your experience?
- Now extend the metaphor beyond a simple shape. Think about images from the natural world – a plant, a river, or a rainbow, perhaps. Think, too, about patterns of time in nature – a day or a year. What characteristics does each of these metaphors confer on the life course? To what extent are they adequate? What are their limitations?
- As a contrast, now imagine life as a game of cards. We are dealt a hand of cards at birth, and subsequently may receive, or take, others. Perhaps we will discard or lose some of our cards, and, depending on the rules of the ‘game’, we will have a greater or lesser say in how our hand is played. What does this metaphor imply about the nature of the life course?
- Another metaphor might be the life course as a musical composition – will it be a simple, traditional tune; a rap; a symphony; a jazz improvisation ...? In what ways do each of these say something different about the life course?
- Finally, invoke the image of the story as a metaphor for life. What events will be included? What will be ignored? Will the story be dramatic and eventful? Will it mirror a traditional tale – a fairy story, perhaps? If so, which one? What does thinking about life as a story suggest about the nature of human existence?