

## 1000 Word Essay on Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic is shaking fundamental assumptions about the human life course in societies around the world. In this essay, we draw on our collective expertise to illustrate how a life course perspective can make critical contributions to understanding the pandemic's effects on individuals, families, and populations.

Covid-19 represents a massive global crisis that behavioral and social scientists must study from a life course perspective. The pandemic creates a pressing need and unique laboratory to analyze how institutional structures, sociodemographic composition, types of stratification, and other dimensions of societal differentiation and regulation generate different responses to a common threatening external shock – and, in turn, how those responses alter the organization and experience of the life course in a given society. As the pandemic unfolds, we must continue to monitor which societal changes will be temporary and which will be longer-lasting and even lead to permanent systemic change. A life course perspective provides a powerful lens for understanding these complex interdependencies over time.

In emphasizing time, a life course perspective invites diachronic (time-based) rather than synchronic (point-in-time) comparisons. The effects of the pandemic will likely depend on timing – that is, on ages or life stages that are more or less vulnerable or sensitive to certain types of effects. The most severe health risks of the pandemic are strongly related to old age, whereas the pandemic experience shows more as a disruption to daily activities and social roles and as heightened social and economic insecurity for the young.

A life course frame also invites us to look beyond chronological age and to account for biographical and historical time. Looking backward, the pandemic brings to the fore how individuals have different susceptibility to the virus itself and to the social and economic consequences of the pandemic, depending on their previous experiences – experiences that can also determine the short-term and long-term consequences of the pandemic. We are reminded to read the life course through personal history as well as through its intersection with social history. The ages of people today are a window into their historical location, which affects the response to and effects of the pandemic – as in the example of people now navigating the pandemic in their thirties, who were just a decade ago navigating the Great Recession during their transition to adulthood.

Looking forward, a life course perspective also asks us to identify which pandemic experiences will turn into permanent scars or reorientations for individuals and their families, and which will be open to resilience and be compensated for or even forgotten with time. Even more, it encourages researchers to account for heterogeneity by specifying for whom there will be scarring or resilience, and to account for environment and policy considerations by specifying the conditions under which there will be scarring or resilience.

Whether we are looking backward or forward in understanding the pandemic's effects, it is important to not only probe these dynamics at an individual level of analyses, but also to examine them for groups, especially birth cohorts or social generations. In historical moments like this, people of different ages are branded differently, not just because they are in distinct developmental periods but because their lives carry the imprint of prior historical experiences.

The pandemic is reshaping transitions and trajectories in every domain of life, and instigating turning points that redirect life. Many of these are negative, or at least challenging. The transition

to adulthood, for example, has become longer, more variable, and risk-laden in many countries in recent decades. The pandemic is likely to heighten these trends through its effects on educational transitions, youth labor markets, chances for regional mobility, family formation, and general trust in the future. Likewise, at the other end of working life, the transition to retirement may become more difficult due to insecure pensions or insufficient savings or assets, just as leisure and volunteering activities or the grandparent role may become more difficult due to limited mobility or concerns about exposure to Covid-19. Indeed, throughout the life course, the age-based rhythm of many transitions may loosen in the face of uncertainty and de-standardize life trajectories.

Some changes associated with the pandemic are positive and have direct relevance for life course analysis, interventions, and policies. The pandemic is raising awareness that experiences across life domains such as health, family, work, and education are highly interrelated, and that these spheres are overlaid with institutions that have different time-based expectations and rhythms. It is bringing newfound recognition that people and places both near to and far from us are linked in fundamental ways that must be made more visible. Ironically, just as the pandemic has isolated people from one another, it also seems to be fostering a sense of collective solidarity, community action and cooperation, and the inherent need for mutual support.

It is exposing inequalities in life course processes and outcomes, differentially affecting groups based on age, gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and other social categories. It is increasing consciousness that stability in human life is fragile and dependent on social institutions – and on governments and policies – that are nimble, work well together, and address vulnerabilities and systemic inequalities in the life course. In many societies, these conditions are not met. It is challenging assumptions about the organization of the life course and opening opportunities for innovation and flexibility.

Broadly, the pandemic is triggering deep tensions in human experience that frame how the life course is understood by the individual members of any society – tensions related to individualism and collectivism, autonomy and interdependence, freedom and control, rights and responsibilities, among others. Perhaps the most profound axiom of modernity that is being undermined by the pandemic is that of predictability. The uncertainty and disruption it has created mimics a much earlier age, when time and life itself could not be counted on and when aspirations were more limited and planning less possible.

One thing is sure: There is a time before Covid-19 and a time after it. This watershed moment is marking the psyches and lives of individuals, families, and cohorts in ways both known and unknown. A life course perspective is necessary to bring these effects, and the mechanisms that create them, into focus for investigation and intervention.