

This research brief summarizes the main results of a literature review that was conducted mainly from fall 2016 to winter 2017 on narrative methodologies and more specifically the life course and life calendar approach. The qualitative component of the UNIE-LGBTQ project uses this theoretical and methodological approach. This review was thus used, in particular, to develop data collection tools and will be used when analyzing the results of the UNIE-LGBTQ project.

## LIFE-COURSE APPROACH IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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The life course paradigm is generally defined by a set of multidisciplinary approaches that consider human life and its development as a whole (Bessin, 2009). **There are several visions of the life course approach.** Among other things, Bessin (2009) is interested in the articulation of an individual dynamic of aging, anchored in a given socio-historical context, or rather in the articulation between the temporalities of the individual and the historical time within which they are inscribed. Thus, one of the objectives of this approach is to identify the cultural and material norms and constraints that guide aging. Indeed, the life course is the product of a set of norms, institutions and formal and cultural rules that surround aging, in particular due to chronological age used as a criterion for classifying and ordering society "naturally" (Bessin, 2009).

Another view of the life course argues that it allows for a better understanding of the complexity of the links between time, social trajectories, individual development, interpersonal relationships and the socio-historical contexts in which it is embedded (Gherghel and Saint-Jacques, 2013; Hutchison, 2014). Life course theory suggests a way of conceptualizing time as a culturally, socially and individually constructed product with objective and subjective meanings (Levy, Ghisletta, LeGoff, Spini and Widmer, 2005).

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This perspective thus offers **two levels of analysis** in order to understand human development as a whole, namely the societal angle, i.e. the way in which society organizes human life in terms of an ordered sequence of positions, and the individual angle,

i.e. the set of trajectories specific to each individual occurring at the family, conjugal, educational, professional and residential levels (Cavalli, 2007; Gaudet, 2013). Thus, research based on life course theory allows several levels of analysis depending on the different proximal (family, friends, school, geographical locations) and distal (states, institutions, politics, culture) contexts. This approach is based on **five basic principles** :

1. **Biological, psychological and social development continues throughout life** and is therefore not limited to childhood or adolescence (Gaudet, 2013). Past experiences lived by an individual thus shape his or her present and future.
2. **Lives are inscribed in a place, a context and a historical period.** Thus, people born at different times experience historical periods with specific opportunities and constraints, thereby influencing their life course in distinct ways. Moreover, even if people live in the same period and experience certain socio-historical changes at the same time, individual variations in terms of gender, social class, culture, ethnocultural origins, geographical environment or sexual orientation may influence how these changes are perceived (Gherghel and Saint-Jacques, 2013).
3. **Lives develop following a certain temporality.** Indeed, the sequence in which life experiences occur influences people's later development (Carpentier and White, 2013; Côté, 2013; Elder, 1995). Thus, negative or positive experiences lived at an early age facilitate the accumulation of protective factors and risk factors which will have repercussions on the life trajectory at adulthood (Gherghel and Saint-Jacques, 2013; Hutchison, 2014; Kirkpatrick Johnson, Crosnoe and Elder, 2011).
4. **Lives are interrelated.** Indeed, since lives evolve in a network, one person's actions have repercussions on others in his environment and vice versa (Côté, 2013; Elder, 1995; Gherghel and Saint-Jacques, 2013). Social support is an important component of the interdependence of lives, primarily within families and minority social groups. Indeed, the solidarity networks offered by families and members of minority groups increase the social capital that helps to cope with adversity (Hutchison, 2014).
5. **Individuals are not seen as passive beings** subject to the different contingencies of their environment, but as social actors with the reflective capacities to act on opportunities and social constraints (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson and Crosnoe, 2004; Hutchison, 2014).

Some events in life are planned, whereas others are more unexpected and even less desired. Certain types of events completely transform people's lives and the narratives they make of them (Bessin, 2009). These ruptures go beyond personal dynamics, since while events mark and structure people's paths, they are also the outcome of social processes and constitute moments of recomposition, of redefinition, both of oneself and of the social relationships into which they are inserted (Bessin, 2009). These transitions or events become **turning points** if they cause a major change, a discontinuity in trajectories or a change in orientation. Turning points have lasting effects and can be experienced by a person, a social group or a collectivity. Among the events that may become turning points are: 1) those that promote or hinder the development of opportunities; 2) those that lead to long-term changes in the person's social environment and finally; 3) those that lead to a redefinition of personal identity, beliefs or expectations about life (Hutchison, 2014). Turning points also have the effect of modifying several trajectories in the same individual at the same time (e.g. identity trajectory, professional trajectory, family trajectory, etc.) (Gaudet, 2013).

Using this approach, different data collection tools can be used, including longitudinal population-based statistical surveys, biographical questionnaires, practice narratives and life calendars. The life calendar is a data collection tool based on the notion that individuals' life stories are composed of trajectories and transitions. Participants are therefore encouraged to consider different moments and events from their personal

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past under broader themes (Belli, 1998). This method includes a calendar-based visual assessment of events in an individual's life using suggestions of important events in different areas of his or her life (such as couple relationships, school, work, etc.) to improve retrospective recall (Fisher, 2013). Two dimensions are typically found in a life calendar: domains of investigation (events or variables of interest) and units of time corresponding to a specific period of interest (Fisher, 2013). The UNIE-LGBTQ project actually uses the life calendar as a data collection tool, since it simultaneously allows us to have a better understanding of the context in which events take place and to study the experiences of social exclusion and inclusion related to sexual identity and gender identity, while still allowing participants to express themselves in their own language and actively participate in data collection so that their voices can be heard. The survey areas of the life calendar used by the UNIE-LGBTQ project are family, place of residence, work, social networks, sexual orientation and gender identity.

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For more information on the Understanding Inclusion and Exclusion of LGBTQ People (UNIE-LGBTQ) Project of the Chaire de recherche sur l'homophobie at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM):  
[savie-lgbtq.uqam.ca](http://savie-lgbtq.uqam.ca)

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