

Aging in aging societies: the transformation of life courses and how we study them

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Abstract

Objectives: Population aging is reshaping life courses. This article examines how extended longevity and the collective experience of aging societies alter the timing, meaning, and structure of life course transitions. It explores how individuals adapt their behaviors, expectations, and intergenerational roles to these shifts, and how aging at the micro-level is embedded within macro-level demographic and institutional transformations.

Methods: Drawing on conceptual and empirical insights from the Age-It Research Program, alongside state-of-the-art gerontological and socio-demographic literature, the article adopts a life course perspective informed by the principles of timing and linked lives.

Results: Population aging transforms the life course in at least three fundamental ways. First, increasing longevity and improved health have opened a new stage of life after retirement. Second, delayed transitions in education, work, and family formation are emerging as adaptations to longer lives, though they generate tensions with unchanged biological limits to fertility and evolving intergenerational expectations. Third, family structures are becoming increasingly “beanpole”—longer but thinner—reshaping intergenerational solidarities and increasing the relevance of extended- and non-kin ties.

Discussion: The increase in longevity is not merely stretching life but fundamentally redefining it. Growing old in an aging society becomes both a new individual experience and a collective transformation that challenges the adequacy of traditional life course categories. The Age-It findings call for conceptual renewal to better capture new stages, shifting chronologies, and reconfigured solidarities. Population aging also reshapes the research agenda of gerontologists.

Keywords: Demographic change, Life course transitions, Intergenerational relations, Family structures

The demographic transformation currently unfolding in many middle and high-income countries presents both a formidable challenge and a unique opportunity for scientific inquiry. Population aging represents a multidimensional and multilevel phenomenon that is having a massive impact on individuals' life courses, welfare, economic institutions and, more generally, the social fabric of these societies. Over the past three years, the Age-It Research Program has assembled a very extensive and transdisciplinary effort to study the social, economic, and health implications of population aging in Italy—one of the most rapidly aging societies globally (Vignoli et al., 2025b). Its findings call for a rethinking of the conceptual tools that social scientists use to study aging societies, and societies in general.

Our discussion of the transformations that population aging implies, both at the level of individuals' lives and at the societal level, moves from the perspective of life course research (LCR), a theoretical framework that has gained increasing relevance in the multidisciplinary study of individuals' lives and sociodemographic changes. LCR sees human experience of life as a multilevel phenomenon—a series of age-graded trajectories providing meaning, form, and future expectations to individuals' sociodemographic transitions, embedded in common yet

geographically and historically heterogeneous institutional contexts. The aggregation of countless individual life trajectories ultimately reshapes and transforms institutional contexts themselves (Elder, 1985, 1994). It follows that mega-shifts such as population aging inevitably alter not only how individuals live and ascribe meaning to their lives, but also the historical and social contexts in which they unfold.

What emerges from the past 3 years of research conducted within the Age-It Research Program is the need for a paradigmatic shift. Aging is no longer a separate field within social research—it has become a lens through which life courses, welfare regimes, kinship systems, labor markets, and intergenerational relations must be reinterpreted. Extended longevity and declining fertility are not isolated demographic facts; they are transformative forces reshaping individual biographies, family structures, and institutional settings. As such, they demand a significant transformation of our societies and institutions, and an evolution of the conceptual tools utilized by social scientists to study and understand contemporary societies and individuals' lives (Lee & Goldstein, 2003).

The present article reflects on these challenges by drawing on key insights from Age-It and positioning them within

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broader life course and gerontological debates. Population aging is seen as a historical shift whose transformative impact outweighs intrinsic life course variance between individuals and countries. The article argues that the categories used to analyze individuals' lives must be revisited. It points to the need for adjustments in LCR that better reflect the complexity and inequality of aging in contemporary societies.

Historical and theoretical standpoint

LCR emerged as both a methodological practice and a theoretical lens for studying social change. Its central insight is that the passage of time is multidimensional—biographical, chronological, and historical—and that these dimensions are indispensable for understanding how stability and transformation intertwine in society (Elder, 1974; Giele & Elder, 1998).

Over time, LCR expanded its theoretical scope (Mayer, 2001, 2009; Riley, 1998; Ryder, 1965). This has spurred a LCR agenda focused on the interplay between policy interventions and life trajectories, using both secondary sources (e.g., administrative records) and longitudinal data to investigate mismatches between institutional timing and individual transitions (Saraceno, 2008). LCR also drew on psychology, especially through concepts such as turning points, retrospective meaning-making, and life review methods. Importantly, the principle of linked lives has evolved toward network-based and convoy approaches (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), which highlight the durable role of relationships in shaping resilience and adaptation in later life.

Recent advancements (Bernardi et al., 2019) stress mid-range theorizing, recursivity, and discontinuity, moving beyond deterministic frameworks. This has made LCR particularly relevant for aging research across disciplines once considered distant from the social sciences. The life course approach has expanded, intersecting and fertilizing scientific domains well beyond sociology and demography; the LCR perspective and principles have been adopted to explain how historical shocks (e.g., famine, pandemics, economic depression), social domains (family, work, networks), and critical timing of events shape biological responses, health disparities, and patterns of longevity (Graham, 2002; Kuh & Ben-Shlomo, 2004; Wadsworth & Kuh, 2016; Wagner et al., 2024).

Next, Kohli's perspective (1986a, 2007) offers crucial consolidation. He reframed the life course not simply as a sequence of individual choices or institutional positions, but as a *social institution* in its own right—an overarching regime that organizes lives through both formal rules (e.g., legal rights, education, social security) and informal norms (e.g., developmental expectations, cultural scripts). Far from being static, this institutionalization of the life course is dynamic and partly endogenous: individuals, through their choices, adapt to new demographic realities such as increased longevity and declining fertility, and in turn reinforce these transformations even before institutional adaptation catches up.

Kohli's insight is particularly powerful for contemporary aging research. It reminds us that demographic aging is not merely a structural challenge imposed on individuals and welfare systems; it is also the outcome of individualized responses to longer lives and changing fertility patterns, which generate new normative expectations, institutional pressures, and forms of inequality across age and generations.

Do we need to rethink the life course framework in aging societies?

The profound sociodemographic transformations that underpin population aging, most notably increasing longevity, (partial) compression of morbidity, and decreasing fertility, call into question the foundational categories and operational definitions of LCR. The classic schema—adulthood, mature age/parenting/working life, retirement/end of life—now appears increasingly insufficient to capture the diversity, complexity, and length of contemporary life trajectories. What we are witnessing is a silent yet profound reshaping of life course stages, the meaning and timing of transitions, and of the very architecture of linked lives and intergenerational convoys.

A new stage in the life course: between institutionalization from the bottom and compression

Past research has consistently documented how macro demographic, cultural, and economic shifts have led to behavioral changes at the micro-level, which, in turn, have substantially modified individuals' life courses and societies' sociodemographic patterns. For instance, the decrease in infant mortality, together with the diffusion of contraceptive methods, has significantly affected couples' reproductive behavior: moving from investing in the quantity to the quality of children (e.g., Becker & Lewis, 1973). Previous research has suggested that, similarly, in most middle- and high-income societies, increasing longevity and improved health conditions in post-retirement life are leading to individuals' behavioral responses that, in aggregate form and via a process of diffusion from the upper and middle classes to lower social strata, will lead to a significant and systematic change in life course patterns. This is in line with the findings from the Age-It Program (Alderotti et al., 2025a). Unlike some previous studies, however, we think this new section of individuals' life is not just a mere cultural phenomenon, a "cultural field" shaped and defined by specific consumption patterns (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005), rather evidence from the Italian case indicates that this should be seen as an emerging "new stage of life." The research conducted within Age-It also suggests that the institutionalization of this new stage of life is the object of opposing forces, and a "silent" struggle between different actors, birth cohorts, age groups, and vested interests.

Despite substantial individual heterogeneities, rising longevity, improving health conditions, and the less-than-proportional adjustments in the average retirement age have led, first, to a postponement of functional ageing along the chronological age and, second, to a significant extension of the post-retirement years spent in good health and free from major diseases and mobility limitations (Seaman et al., 2020; Stalard, 2016). With substantial gains in longevity and years of healthy life, a new life course stage is emerging between the traditional markers of labor market exit and the onset of advanced old age and functional limitations. Referring to this phenomenon, the Financial Times titled a recent article published in its "Retirement" section: "How to make the 'third quarter' of your life the best quarter. Cruises, Holidays, Gifting: the early years of retirement are to be enjoyed" (O'Neill, 2025). Evidence about the emergence of such a new stage of the life course, however, appears across different levels and along different dimensions.

In popular culture, scientific research, and public discourse, there is growing awareness and diffusion of the idea that aging is a relative concept that transcends chronological age (Alderotti et al., 2025a). “Feeling younger than your chronological age” is an increasingly widespread experience in many aging societies, with a markedly decreasing popularity of the idea of a strict and unmodifiable association between chronological age, health status, functional limitations, and lifestyles. There are other interesting signs of behavioral changes in the early years after retirement. Miniaci and colleagues (2003) documented that the observed fall in consumption of non-durable goods around retirement disappears once we consider increased leisure consumption, signaling a growing relevance of leisure time and consumption in the early phases of later life (Miniaci et al., 2003). Looking at the same tract of the individuals’ life course, Cedolini and Rebba (2016) show that Europeans are more likely to adopt healthy lifestyles in the early years after retirement, with a significant increase in practicing physical activity. Notably, such changes in behavioral and consumption patterns among the most recent cohorts entering post-retirement life have attracted increasing attention in marketing research (Berg & Liljedal, 2022; Schiffman & Sherman, 1991). An increasing quota of older people (re)entering education after retirement is also a sign of an emerging new way of living a longer and healthier post-retirement life (Formosa, 2023; Principi & Lamura, 2009). Another trace of this phenomenon is the transformation of family dynamics in later life. The increasing institutionalization of separation, non-marital cohabitation, childbearing outside marriage, and re-partnering has fueled a marked rise in family diversity and complexity, patterns that are now clearly visible even among older adults (De Shane & Brown-Wilson, 1982). As life expectancy rises and partnerships extend into older age, “silver separations” or “grey divorces” have become increasingly frequent in high-income countries (Lin et al., 2018; Alderotti et al., 2022).

The evidence emerging from Italian society and the research conducted in the framework of the Age-It Program resonates with these findings, highlighting that later life is no longer a stage solely defined by withdrawal and stability, rather it is becoming a period of renewed choices, reconfigurations, and opportunities, both in individual lifestyles and in family relationships (Sparano et al., 2025), including later-life divorces (Vignoli et al., 2025b). Other important elements of the “institutionalization from the bottom” of this new stage of life emerge from Age-It research: for instance, as documented by Alberio et al. (2025), the number of Italian pensioners who migrate to other (mainly Mediterranean and Southern European) countries is rapidly increasing. Far from being merely driven by reasons associated with favorable tax regimes, these moves correspond to a rewriting of the individual’s life course that an increasing number of ageing Italians begin when retiring. The phenomenon is more widespread among highly educated, affluent individuals from Northern Italian regions, but the practice is rapidly spreading across other demographic groups of the pensioner population (Alberio & Lomonaco, 2025; Alberio et al., 2025). On the dimension of participation in educational activities in later life, a recent government report has documented that an increasing number of Italian regions, within the framework of active aging policies, are implementing several measures and providing financial support for educational interventions targeting the older population (Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia & INRCA, 2022). It is

worth noting that, as documented by Age-It research, this new stage in the life of aging Italians is also characterized by a significant and growing investment in time to care for others, particularly grandchildren, older parents, and frail partners (Albertini & Zanasi, 2025).

These transformative changes in later-life life courses confirm that the “canalization” of the life course is not a fixed or immutable feature of our lives and societies (Heckhausen & Buchmann, 2019). Mega-demographic changes, such as those behind population aging, trigger transformations and adaptations in individuals’ behavior that, in turn, change prescribed institutions and norms on timing, meaning, and content of different life course stages. The Italian case, however, suggests that such “institutionalization from the bottom” is somehow counteracted by other forces. The institutionalization of this new stage of life, a period characterized by retirement from the labor market and good health, and which precedes a fourth age characterized by limitations in daily life activities, is indeed contrasted by the increasing social and economic pressures aiming at increasing the minimum age threshold for retirement and, thus, significantly reducing the length of the third age. In recent decades, the Italian pension system has undergone numerous reforms, which have led to (i) an increasing minimum-age threshold to access public pension, (ii) a growing relevance of the second and third pillar (i.e., partial privatization), and (iii) lower expected amounts of future public pensions; most importantly, the minimum age threshold has been connected with changes in life expectancy (Franco, 2002; Hinrichs, 2021).

These counteracting pressures, aimed at containing the length and/or emergence of a new post-retirement stage of life, are only partially successful. The fact that they will mainly affect younger cohorts entering the labor market leads to significant disequilibria in the age-related distribution of public welfare in Italy. As documented by Galasso and colleagues (2025), the redistributive equity of the Italian welfare and labor market is heavily biased in favor of the older age groups. Furthermore, also due to a political equilibrium that favors the older population (Galasso et al., 2025), Italy experiences systematic political and social resistance to the automatic application of the mechanisms connecting life expectancy and minimum age requirements for public pensions (see, for instance, <https://www.ft.com/content/af2d2bb6-5095-4ff8-ae25-6ce826c0414c>). Such a political and social confrontation over the minimum age of retirement represents a clear indication of the tensions around the full institutionalization of a new stage of life preceding the “fourth age”: a struggle between bottom-up institutionalization pressures, and pressures, including from institutions of the European Union (Guardiancich & Natali, 2022), to contain or even reduce its length and significance in individuals’ life courses.

In light of these findings—without denying the obvious heterogeneities and social cleavages associated with gender, class, and ethnicity—we suggest here that, at the population level, current cohorts of Italian aging individuals are tracing new life course pathways through behavioral adaptation to: (i) individual-level changes, namely longer and healthier lives; (ii) relative institutional inertia, such as retirement ages that are not fully adjusted to increased longevity (Kohli, 2007); and (iii) broader social transformations, including the rising share of older adults in the population. While the traditional tripartition of working life—education, work, retirement—remains socially

and policy-relevant (Kohli, 1986b), growing evidence indicates that bottom-up pressures, backed by trade unions and specific political parties, exist that push for the full, institutional recognition of an emerging internal distinction within the “retirement stage” of the life course: an early phase characterized by good health, activity, and engagement, followed by a later-late phase, a fourth life in the definition of Gilleard and Higgs (2010), in which functional limitations shape the experiences of older adults and their families.

Increasing longevity and number of years spent while both in good health and in retirement, together with the process of vertical weakening of regulation of life-course timetables, already pointed out by Napolitano and Freund (2019), are creating the opportunity for actually aging birth cohorts to write a new script for the later part of individuals’ life courses. There are few or no social norms setting what is to be expected by these individuals, on how one should “become old in an aging society,” while still being active and healthy. In a way, social norms and institutional frameworks, in the shape of social policies and welfare measures, are lagging behind ongoing demographic change. What is more, we expect that both in Italy and in other aging societies, the prevalence of aging individuals will add to the significance of the script they are writing for future aging individuals. As Napolitano and Freund (2019) put it: “adding life” to these “added years” is “both a challenge and opportunity for older adults.” Writing a new script and creating new canalizations for this “fourth act in a three-act play” of individuals’ life courses does represent both an opportunity and challenge also for many different institutions, such as welfare state, labor market and business organizations, families and communities, as well as for social scientists aiming at having a better understanding of (aging) societies. The political struggle documented in Italy between bottom-up pressures and forces aiming at limiting the expansion of this new stage of the life course signals, however, that before adapting to the emergence of a new third age, institutions and societies will have to determine whether and how to accept it. If the forces and needs of containing and reducing the length of the third age prevail, then this will be (merely) a transient historical generational phenomenon; if bottom-up pressures are successful, then institutions, policy makers, and scholars of the life course should adapt their tools, perspectives, and analyses to this reconfiguration of individuals’ life courses.

Are “delays” really delays?

Chronological age has a particularly relevant role in LCR and in the institutionalization of individuals’ life courses. It is the social meaning of age, and the norms and policies associated with it, that make age relevant for social scientists. Social norms “prescribe” the timing, sequence, and duration of specific social roles, life events, and transitions: studying, moving into the paid labor market, exiting parental home, mating, marrying, and becoming a parent. Social norms do exercise pressure on individuals in terms of which sequence, when, and for how long such roles should be held and transitions should be made (Elder, 1994; Neugarten et al., 1965). The costs associated with violating such norms may vary from negligible to significant, in terms of economic outcomes, social stigma, and accumulation of disadvantages along an individual’s life course.

Institutions, particularly those related with the welfare state, have built on these social norms thus further regulating the individuals’ life courses: children are not allowed to enter the labor market, there are (partially) fixed age-related thresholds for entering and exiting the educational system, one cannot legally marry before a certain age, and age-related thresholds are also set for other relevant aspects such as voting, exiting the labor market, receiving specific welfare benefits and transfers (Kohli, 2007).

On the other hand, it is worth noting that previous research consistently shows that the vertical regulation of life-course timetables has been weakening across high-income societies (Napolitano & Freund, 2019). The seminal study of Settersten and Hagestad (1996a, 1996b) has documented the extent to which, despite the widespread perception and social meaning of age-related deadlines, delays in the transitions are considered acceptable and carry relatively irrelevant social consequences. In Kohli’s words, “age norms are still in place, but they have become less commonly shared and above all, less constraining” (Kohli, 2007). Once we consider findings from this stream of research, together with the results emerging from the Age-It Research Program, we begin to question the fact that, in much sociodemographic research, later transitions into adulthood—completing education, forming partnerships, and entering parenthood—are often labeled as “delays” (Alderotti et al., 2025b; Guetto et al., 2025; Puglisi et al., 2025; Vignoli & Guetto, 2025). What we argue, instead, is that from a top-down perspective anchored in longer life spans, these “delays” may represent *adaptive recalibrations*. Biological imperatives have remained relatively constant, but social scripts have stretched. Thus, what is often perceived as a delay may reflect *not just a flexibilization or weakening* of the individual’s life course timing, as suggested in previous studies, but rather a *new normative pattern* aligned with extended youth and prolonged middle age. Norms governing the precise timing of life course transitions, such as completing education, entering the labor market, forming a partnership, or becoming a parent, have been shifting since the decline in child mortality. We argue that these norms are changing again in sync with increasing longevity and improving health conditions in later life.

Studies documenting the postponement of family-, education-, or work-related transitions often treat these changes as resulting from shifts in social norms, institutional rules, or a dynamic interplay between the two, with circular causal relationships linking cultural expectations and regulatory frameworks. We suggest that these changes should also be interpreted as a micro (to macro) behavioral response to increasing longevity. To put it in Kohli’s terms, life-time orientation has changed—i.e., “aging implies an action space with a shrinking life-time horizon, which requires adaptations and recalibrations” (Kohli, 2019), but increasing longevity means that the horizon has been moving forward. This, a posteriori, may seem quite an obvious change brought about by the simple fact that expected life duration has significantly increased. Yet increasing longevity changes this dynamic: not only can individuals now plan for a newly emerging stage of life—an active retirement—but adjustments and recalibrations throughout the life course can also occur at both earlier and later ages, because the time horizon of individual lives has expanded far beyond what it was for previous generations at the same age. For those in younger and mature life, the “shadow of the future” has

become a longer shadow, while for those in later life, “the shadow of the past,” and the time span upon which path dependencies, accumulation of advantages and disadvantages have piled up their effects is getting longer as well.

Within the broader adaptation to longer and healthier lives, there is at least one transition that still reflects “delay” rather than “adaptation”: the transition to parenthood. While many life course transitions can be postponed, childbearing remains biologically anchored to a specific age window in the life course. This fundamental constraint creates tension between the increasing postponement of family formation—enabled by longer life expectancy and extended healthy lifespans—and the fixed nature of human reproduction. The renewed fertility declines now observed across affluent societies, of which Italy represents a paradigmatic case (Alderotti et al., 2025a, 2025b; Kohler et al., 2002; Vignoli & Guetto, 2025; Vignoli et al., 2020), can be seen as an outcome of this mismatch and an accelerator of population aging.

It should also be noted that some forms of partial adaptation to this tension have been observed in the last decades. As documented by Age-It, first, we are witnessing a shortening of the spacing between the first and following child births, suggesting a compression of fertility within an altered life course timetable (Aassve et al., 2024; Alderotti et al., 2025b); second, Italy is experiencing a significant increase in childbirths among women in their 40s, with a growing reliance on medically assisted reproduction (Burgio et al., 2025; Cozzani et al., 2025).

The lens of demographic aging invites us to reconsider the postponement of several family, education, and work-related transitions as delays or proofs of a flexibilization of social norms underpinning life courses and their institutionalization. Rather, we should see these “delays” as new social norms, i.e., deviating from normative scripts of the past and simply reflecting new, emerging ones.

Linked lives and family convoy reconsidered

The principle that “lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships” (Elder, 1998, p. 4) remains an essential cornerstone of LCR. At the same time, population aging has dramatically changed both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the connections between linked lives and, in particular, the relations between different family generations. To put it in other words, the conceptual framework of linked lives remains robust, but its content and salience are evolving.

Decreasing fertility has translated, and will continue to translate into smaller birth cohorts and, consequently, smaller sibship sizes and peer-age friendship networks. Within the family system, this is reflected in the growing prevalence of beanpole rather than pyramidal family structures (Bengtson, 2001), in which the vertical dimension of kinship networks is more significant than the horizontal one. Another important consequence is the increase in childless and kinless individuals, also among currently and future aging cohorts (Pittavino et al., 2024; Rowland, 2007; Sobotka, 2017; Valerio et al., 2021; Verdery et al., 2019). Such changes in the structural characteristics of families and kinship networks do represent a challenge for both policymakers and gerontology scholars.

Most welfare policies addressing the needs of the older population, as well as the functioning of health and social care

institutions, assume the presence and availability of a multi-generational nuclear family. Italy represents an extreme case of this setting, given the “familism by default” principle underlying its welfare system and institutions. As shown by research conducted within the Age-It Research Program, on the one hand, the Italian society is responding well to the “beanpolization” and aging of families: in the last decades the proportion of family caregivers has increased by 10 percentage points, and more than one third of the general population provides care to family members and friends (Tomassini & Meli, 2024). On the other hand, the simultaneous increase in the intensity and types of care provided, and in the average age of the caregivers, signals that informal support networks are under increasing pressure, and show early signs of stress and cracks when it comes to access to informal care by childless people (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014; Castagnaro et al., 2025; Tocchioni et al., 2022; Tomassini & Meli, 2024). Currently, in Italian society, partners, parents, children, and grandchildren remain the most significant source of relations and support in later life, but the role of other kin members, and siblings in particular, is increasing (Tosi et al., 2025). In this context, the familism of Italian welfare and institutions translates into their significant and growing unfitness vis-à-vis the increasing numbers of childless and kinless older people (Alderotti et al., 2025a; Pittavino et al., 2024).

Structural changes in the kinship and family networks have generated and have been paralleled by marked changes in some important qualitative dimensions of relations between family generations. First, with families becoming more vertical and less horizontal, non-linear and extended kinship ties gain importance. Particularly during later life, relationships with siblings, uncles, nieces, or even long-term friends may carry more emotional and instrumental weight than traditional linear ties. For instance, because of the diminishing number of siblings, we should expect an increasing relevance of other kin—such as cousins—in terms of associational solidarity (Danielsbacka & Tanskanen, 2019). Next, the decreasing number of siblings and children is putting at the forefront the relevance of non-kin, friendship relations; this applies also and in particular to aging individuals without children or kin (Mair, 2019). A particularly significant aspect of the increasing qualitative relevance of extended kin and non-kin relations is the provision of social support in later life. To have a glimpse of what the “beanpolization” of families may entail for future aging cohorts, looking at findings from present-day studies of childless and kinless older people may be particularly useful (Albertini & Kohli, 2009; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007).

A second important qualitative change is connected with increased longevity: longer lives mean that linked lives are maintained over longer periods of time: children may still have retired parents, and grandparents may remain actively involved well into their grandchildren’s adulthood (Skopek et al., 2024). To put it in other words, the convoy model of social relations (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) is undergoing a significant qualitative transformation. Convoys are no longer composed mainly of same-age peers; instead, they increasingly span three or more generations. As people live longer and age more slowly, inter-generational influence extends further in both directions, despite the fact that rising childlessness may simultaneously reduce the number of individuals experiencing the transition to grandparenthood. Grandparents, who are often in better

health conditions than in the past despite often making this transition later in their life, play an increasingly relevant role in the caring and early socialization of their (fewer) grandchildren, and they may also directly affect their socioeconomic status (Chan & Boliver, 2013; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2001; Mare, 2014; Zanasi et al., 2023). Grandchildren are often adults themselves when they witness their grandparents' aging; adult children may be caring for their parents for decades as they themselves are already going through the early post-retirement spells of their lives. The likelihood of being sandwiched between financial and care support demands from younger and older generations is likely to increase within the context of longer family convoys and longer-lasting linked lives (Albertini et al., 2022). In sum, we suggest that the changing length and structure of family convoys have and will have a qualitative impact on intergenerational relations, and thus will alter expectations of care, emotional support, and even inheritance patterns. These extended linkages, therefore, demand new theoretical and methodological attention.

Longer lives and the shrinking number of younger peers force a reassessment of both the empirical boundaries and theoretical core of LCR. This emerging reality calls for conceptual tools that are capable of capturing extended transitions, reshaped kinship dynamics, and new interdependencies across time and generations. We also urgently need to adapt our analytical tools and surveys to capture the increasing relative importance of extended kin-networks and non-kin relations. Aging societies are not just older—they are differently organized in how they produce, distribute, and experience the life course.

Population aging and the gerontologists' research agenda

Population aging is transforming mid- and high-income countries; it does represent both a formidable challenge and an opportunity for those societies undergoing this macro-demographic trend. Population aging is both the result of and a key factor shaping individuals' life courses. Becoming old is not a new experience for humans; what is novel is aging within an aging society. At the same time, becoming old in an aging society is not merely a question of individual experience—it is an unfolding social transformation that reshapes the meaning, structure, and trajectory of life courses.

Our conceptual and analytical tools, and more in general the way in which we conceptualize societies and their functioning, both from a scientific and policy perspective, need to be adapted to this new reality. LCR must now move beyond its traditional categories, tools, and chronologies. The shifting temporal architecture of individual lives, marked by longer post-retirement phases, delayed transitions, and new patterns of multigenerational interdependencies, demands a significant conceptual revision. New stages of individuals' lives are emerging; timing and duration of key transitions and roles in the life course are changing, setting new norms; kinship and social relations are reconfigured both from the structural and qualitative point of view.

The Age-It Research Program represents one of the most significant efforts in advancing our knowledge of the causes, consequences, and adaptations associated with the process of population aging in the context of one of the world's super-aging societies: Italy. Drawing on the empirical evidence and theoretical reflections emerging from Age-It (Vignoli et al., 2025a),

this article posits that extended longevity, declining fertility, and the aging of entire populations intersect to reconfigure both personal biographies and institutional arrangements. Aging is no longer a separate stage or issue; it is a pervasive condition of late modern societies that challenges how we think about age, agency, interdependence, and inequality. Later life and the entire biography of an individual, the functioning of societies, and the specific configuration of the institutions shaping our lives cannot be understood if we do not frame and study them within the larger, changing demographic context of population aging. To this end, findings from the Age-It Program suggest three important updates to the LCR framework and pose new questions to future research in the social sciences.

First, due to increasing longevity, improving health conditions, and slow adaptation of age boundaries for eligibility to retirement, a new stage of life is emerging: an early period after retirement, characterized by the absence of limitations, increasing time devoted to leisure and healthy lifestyles, the relevance of the grandparenting role, and social engagement. Evidence from both social and clinical studies suggests that this stage is shaped not only by changing social norms but also by improved physical and cognitive health, with the onset of chronic conditions occurring later than in previous cohorts. Contemporary aging cohorts are thus writing new scripts for this new stage of life, (re)inventing rules and norms shaping this part of individuals' lives, the "fourth act in a three-act play" (Napolitano & Freund, 2019). Recognizing the emergence and significance of this new stage of life poses a number of pressing questions to future research in the social sciences: To what extent are the countless micro-level behavioral responses behind this new stage of life heterogeneous or homogeneous? Are these new emerging scripts creating new social norms, new "canalizations" for future birth cohorts to follow? Will an institutionalization of this new tract of the life course emerge, and if so, how are societies "regulating" it? Will changes in retirement eligibility rules—especially the increase in age limits—compress or even suppress the emergence of this new stage of life, making it simply a "generational phenomenon"?

Second, we suggest that delayed transitions in individuals' education-, work-, and family-related careers should be reframed, reconceptualized, and studied not as "delays" or as a flexibilization of rules about the timing of life course, but rather as an adaptation to the longer length of life, and new emerging social norms. The action space implied by aging has expanded, and, correspondingly, the timing of several transitions has shifted. Such changes, however, are not without tensions and contradictions: the later age of transitions, such as the completion of education, exit from parental home, entry into the paid labor market, partnering, and becoming a parent, are in stark contrast with the almost unchanged age window of fertile life. Thus, the postponement of childbirth often translates into lower fertility rates than desired (Vignoli & Guetto, 2025), and involuntary childlessness (Albertini & Brini, 2021). Scholars have already begun exploring the origins and spill-over effects of such tensions, looking both at macro and micro-level phenomena. Several open questions emerge: How is the definition of "appropriate age" for specific transitions changing among the nowadays younger birth cohort? To what extent (some of) these adaptations, such as the general postponement of exit from parental home, are considered negatively and "deviant" by older birth cohorts? To what extent are different views on the timing and duration of specific transitions and

Table 1. Key areas of inquiry for gerontological and LCR in the context of population aging.

| Area of inquiry | Core idea/emerging trend | Key research questions | Implications for gerontology and LCR |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. The emergence of a new post-retirement life stage | A new, active phase around retirement is taking shape, marked by good health, leisure, relationships, and social engagement before the onset of limitations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How heterogeneous are behavioral responses shaping this new stage? • Are new norms and “scripts” of aging emerging? • How will institutional and policy frameworks adapt (or constrain) this new stage? | Calls for reconceptualizing later life as a multidimensional, evolving period; requires integration of health, family, social, and policy perspectives. |
| 2. Shifting temporalities and delayed transitions | Extended longevity has expanded the life course, altering the timing of education, work, partnership, and parenthood transitions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should “delays” be reframed as adaptive responses to longer lives? • How do intergenerational norms about “appropriate ages” evolve? • What are the long-term consequences of postponed transitions for family life and well-being? | Necessitates rethinking age norms and life course sequencing; highlights new intergenerational tensions and inequalities. |
| 3. Beanpolization and kinlessness | Families are becoming longer but thinner; more people age with few or no kin. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do family and friendship networks adapt to new demographic structures? • How do patterns of solidarity change with fewer kin? • How can social and clinical research better capture kinless aging? | Demands new data and theories on intergenerational and non-kin relations; urges integration of social and biomedical perspectives. |
| 4. Aging in an aging society: collective implications | Population aging reshapes institutions, norms, and collective life, not only individual trajectories. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does aging within an aging society redefine interdependence and inequality? • What institutional arrangements support well-being across extended lives? | Encourages a systemic view of aging as a societal condition; bridges individual and structural analyses within gerontology. |

Note. This table summarizes the main conceptual areas and open questions identified in the paper, illustrating how population aging calls for renewed theoretical and empirical approaches within Life Course Research (LCR) and gerontology.

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