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Martin Cooke  
Jennifer McWhirter

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# Public Policy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Taking a Life-Course Perspective

MARTIN COOKE

*Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, and  
Department of Health Studies and Gerontology  
University of Waterloo, Ontario*

JENNIFER MCWHIRTER

*Department of Health Studies and Gerontology  
University of Waterloo, Ontario*

L'état de santé et les conditions sociales des Premières nations, des Inuits et des Métis au Canada reste une question de politiques sociales préoccupante. Certains chercheurs ont proposé l'approche des parcours de vie comme cadre d'analyse pour la conception de politiques qui favoriseraient l'inclusion sociale des peuples autochtones. Dans cet article, tout en expliquant que nous sommes d'accord avec cette démarche, nous soutenons que le cadre d'analyse doit aussi prendre en compte la situation particulière des peuples autochtones en matière de politiques sociales. Nous illustrons notre propos en donnant quelques exemples que nous avons élaborés à partir des données de l'Enquête auprès des peuples autochtones de 2001.

**Mots clés :** parcours de vie, peuples autochtones, Canada, politiques sociales

The health and social conditions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada remain important policy concerns. The life course has been proposed by some as a framework for analysis that could assist in the development of policies that would improve the economic and social inclusion of Aboriginal peoples. In this paper we support the goal of applying a life-course perspective to policies related to Aboriginal peoples but suggest that the framework needs to consider the unique relationship between Aboriginal peoples and public policies. We provide some illustrations using data from the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey.

**Keywords:** Life course, Aboriginal peoples, Canada, social policy

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## INTRODUCTION

The social and economic inclusion of Indigenous peoples is a major and ongoing policy concern in Canada. As is well known, the descendents of the original populations of North America continue to experience health, economic, and social conditions

that are, on average, much worse than those of their fellow citizens. These conditions have been resistant to change despite a considerable amount of research attention and some major changes in the legal relationships between First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and the Canadian state. Moreover, there are now reasons to believe that some of the

gaps between Aboriginal populations and other Canadians may have widened, not narrowed, in recent years (Cooke and Guimond 2009; Guimond and Cooke 2008), something that should be a serious concern to Canadian and Aboriginal governments.

One perspective that may help us understand these continuing disparities, and point to policy options to address them, is the life course. Since the early 1990s, the life course has become an increasingly important framework for research in a variety of disciplines and research areas, including sociology, social psychology, aging and gerontology, criminology, health and epidemiology, and others. Its popularity among analysts can be attributed partly to the increasing availability of longitudinal data and analysis techniques and to demographic and social changes, such as population aging, that have focused attention on how events in earlier life can affect well-being in later life.

One of the important themes of life-course research has been uncovering the interrelationships between individual lives and various types of social policy. Life-course frameworks have been used to provide critical perspectives on particular social policies (Marshall 2009; Marshall and McMullin 2010). More than their North American counterparts, European researchers have focused attention on how social policy institutionalizes particular life-course patterns. After all, social and economic policies form a critical part of the context in which we live, and it has been pointed out that the standard “tripartite” working life course has largely been the creation of education, social insurance, and pensions policies (Kohli 1986).

More recently, the life course has become a lens through which to view the development of policy, in addition to improving our understanding of how policies affect lives. In Canada this has mainly taken place through the work of the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) in the early 2000s (Marshall 2009; Marshall and McMullin 2010). It was proposed that the PRI’s life-course framework, along with some advanced analytic

methods, would help policy analysts understand the flows of resources between individuals, markets, families, and other institutions, across the life course (Policy Research Initiative 2004). This would facilitate the development of policies to address various social, economic, and demographic concerns, including encouraging longer working life and higher labour force participation at older ages (Policy Research Initiative 2005). As well, it was proposed that this approach to policy could help to promote social inclusion and labour force participation, especially among three identifiable groups in Canadian society: lone mothers, recent immigrants and, notably, Aboriginal peoples (Hicks 2006).

In this paper we support the proposal that a life-course approach may help us understand the ongoing inequality faced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and that it can improve our purchase on how Aboriginal conditions may be affected by social policy. However, we argue that there are important and unique considerations in applying a life-course approach to Aboriginal inequality in Canada, in addition to the evidence that Aboriginal lives differ from those of other Canadians in terms of the timing and experience of various events and transitions.

One is that policy approaches must consider the possibility that differences between the life paths of Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians may not be adequately supported by “mainstream” policies and institutions. Some of the disadvantage faced by Aboriginal peoples may be attributable to this lack of correspondence between the life patterns implicit in mainstream policies and those generated by either cultural difference or the social and economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples.

As well, a framework must recognize that Aboriginal peoples have been subject to different policies from the rest of the Canadian population, with potential implications for life-course patterns. We illustrate some of this through analysis of the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) and the life-course

predictors of good health or adequate income in later life. Although a cross-sectional survey, the APS includes a number of items that can be interpreted as providing information about conditions earlier in life, and which may affect well-being at older ages. We conclude with suggestions for future applications of this perspective to Aboriginal issues.

#### BACKGROUND: CHANGING OUTCOMES, CHANGING DEMOGRAPHY, AND CHANGING CONTEXTS

The well-being of Aboriginal peoples is rightly a major policy topic in Canada. Recent research into whether the social, economic, and health conditions of Aboriginal populations have been improving have found what is a mixed picture at best. This continuing inequality must also be considered within a context of changing demography, and a changing legal and policy context. As we try to argue below, there are several reasons that these circumstances suggest that a life-course perspective may be useful both for understanding continuing inequality in the context of change, and for developing appropriate policy approaches.

The persistent inequality of outcomes between Aboriginal peoples and Canadians has been the topic of a considerable amount of research, in a number of disciplines, over many years. Indeed, the low social and economic status of Aboriginal peoples was one of the major findings of John Porter's seminal work on Canadian social stratification, *The Vertical Mosaic* (Porter 1965). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) commissioned an enormous amount of research in the early 1990s, and reported on the poor social and health conditions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis in all parts of the country: in cities, rural areas, and Aboriginal communities. Challenges reported by the RCAP and others included inadequate housing, high rates of crime and victimization, low education (e.g., White et al. 2009), poor health (e.g., Waldram,

Herring, and Young 2006), and other ongoing social and economic problems, many of which continue to exist (Assembly of First Nations 2006).

Previous research has attempted to measure whether certain aspects of the well-being of Aboriginal populations have improved in recent decades (see White, Beavon, and Spence 2008). As one would hope and expect, these analyses have generally found improvements in the health, income, and educational attainment of Aboriginal populations since the 1980s. For example, the proportion of Status First Nations<sup>1</sup> people with high school or some post-secondary education has increased rapidly, as has life expectancy (Cooke, Beavon, and McHardy 2004; Cooke and Guimond 2009). Examining First Nations communities, O'Sullivan et al. (2006) found a general improvement in housing stock, average education, average income, and employment and labour force participation between 1981 and 2001. Using a similar methodology, Sénécal et al. (2008) found improvement in the well-being of Inuit communities between 1991 and 2001.

But at the same time as there have been improvements on some outcomes, there have been other indications that differences between Aboriginal populations and other Canadians may have been growing in recent years. Average individual income for Status First Nations increased between 1981 and 1996, but the last decade has seen overall First Nations income remain nearly constant, while the average income of other Canadians has risen (Cooke and Guimond 2009). Similarly, Clement (2008) has examined the university attainment of successive cohorts of Status First Nations, and found that there has been very little increase in the proportion with university degrees, resulting in a widening gap with other Canadians. Although overall household income has increased, the average income of households with Status First Nations youth did not increase appreciably between 1980 and 2000 (Guimond and Cooke 2008). Wilkins and colleagues (2008), using an ecological approach to estimate

life expectancy in Inuit-inhabited areas of Quebec, found that life expectancy may have fallen slightly between the 1990s and 2000s.

This lack of relative progress on some measures, and the lack of absolute improvement on others, is worrying. The possibility that inequality between Aboriginal populations and other Canadians may be *widening* raises important questions about the policies that might prevent the social, economic, and sometimes physical exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from continuing. Moreover, these social, economic, and health outcomes must be considered in the context of some other demographic and social changes that provide further reasons for a life-course approach. One is the aging of Aboriginal populations. Although still demographically younger than the Canadian population, Aboriginal peoples have been affected by falling fertility and mortality, and a relatively large Aboriginal baby-boom cohort is slowly moving into older adult ages (Statistics Canada 2003a). This aging suggests questions with regard to the adequacy of pensions and income provision at older ages, health and services for older people, as well as how the conditions in older ages are affected by experiences and choices in younger ages. These are, of course, similar to the issues that gave impetus to life-course policy approaches in Europe. Other important changes include the growth of Aboriginal populations in the cities, meaning that younger cohorts of Aboriginal people are increasingly more likely to grow up in urban contexts than were previous generations (see Newhouse and Peters 2003).

These demographic changes have been occurring at the same time as dramatic changes to the policy and legal context. These changes are too numerous to review here, but important legal decisions such as the *Delgamuuk'w* and *Marshall* decisions have changed the legal basis for Aboriginal title and rights, and the 1982 inclusion of Métis rights in the *Constitution Act* and the 2003 *Powley* decision have changed the relationship between Métis people and the Canadian state. The 1985 *Amendment to the Indian Act* (Bill C-31) changed the definition of who

is eligible for *Indian Act* registration or “status,” and the *Corbiere* decision changed the definition of who could vote in band elections. There have also been a large number of policy changes since the 1980s, including devolution of control over education and health services to First Nations, and recent changes to the rules regarding matrimonial real property.

All of these social, demographic, and policy changes mean that now-younger cohorts of Aboriginal peoples will experience key life transitions, including decisions to get married, to move, to pursue education, and to take a job, in considerably different contexts than did previous generations. For those who are concerned about the conditions that these cohorts will experience in adulthood and older adulthood, a life-course approach offers an appropriately dynamic perspective on policy and inequality.

#### A LIFE-COURSE APPROACH TO POLICY AND INEQUALITY

As described above, the life course is a perspective that has become popular in a number of social and health science disciplines, for a number of reasons. It is not a theory itself, but rather a framework that can incorporate theoretical and empirical insights from sociology and economics, psychology, gerontology, demography, and biology (Marshall and Mueller 2003). Fundamentally, it is a reminder to researchers to consider lives as they are lived: as trajectories through a variety of age-related events and statuses, in interrelated domains of health, work and education, and family events, and in the context of the social and economic conditions of a particular place and time.

There are several excellent sources for the intellectual history of the life course (see Marshall 2009), but one of the foremost proponents of what has been seen as the American version of the life course has been Glen H. Elder, Jr. The shape of life-course trajectories, which can be empirically observed as the timing and experience of various

events, is described by Elder (1994) as affected by the processes captured in the central themes of the paradigm: *historical time*, the *timing of lives*, *linked lives*, and *human agency*.

The first theme is *historical time*, and the recognition that successive cohorts are born into “different historical worlds with their constraints and options” (Elder 1994, 5). Furthermore, historical events and conditions will affect cohorts differently, as their effects are conditioned by the age at which they are experienced. The second is the *timing of lives* and the social meaning of age. Age is itself an aspect of social structure, carrying with it sets of normative expectations and roles. Moreover, the age at which various events are experienced, and the timing of events in relation to each other, can have critical implications for later experiences. Third is the concept of *linked lives* and the understanding that individual trajectories and transitions are linked to those of others in any number of ways, perhaps most importantly within families. More generally, *linked lives* refers to the ways that individuals’ social worlds are linked and how resources are shared and transferred in various ways within households, families, and communities, such that events that happen to one member affect others. Lives are also linked through relationships in the labour market and other institutions. The fourth aspect of the life-course perspective is *human agency*, recognizing that people actively shape their own lives in the context of various constraints and with the aid of various resources. This may seem obvious, but it is one of the contributions of the life-course paradigm that it avoids what can be the overly deterministic approach of some structural perspectives on poverty and social exclusion, and emphasizes the purposive decisions made by individuals and communities.

From the longitudinal perspective of the life course, previous events and decisions form the context of later ones. Life-course researchers have therefore invoked Robert K. Merton’s “Matthew Effect” to describe the phenomenon of positive life-course experiences begetting increasingly positive

transitions, and negative events tending to make future transitions more difficult. The mechanisms by which this occurs can be thought of in terms of stocks and flows of the various forms of capital over the life course, including financial capital, health capital, social capital, and human capital. Negative events tend to draw down these resources, making future transitions more difficult. This idea of *cumulative advantage and disadvantage* has proven useful for explaining various types of outcomes in later life (O’Rand 1996).

An important theme in American life-course studies has been gender, racial, and class differences in the timing and experience of various events, such as marriage, education, and childbearing, and the effects of these trajectory differences for conditions in later life. Racial/ethnic, class, and gender inequality are seen as operating over a lifetime. These dimensions of inequality result in, and are reinforced by, different life-course patterns depending on social location. For example, women’s life courses, on the whole, are characterized by different transitions in the domains of family and work than are men’s (Moen and Han 2001). This is evident in the greater consequences of childbearing for women’s employment and income trajectories. Timing and experience of various events can also contribute to the maintenance of class and racial/ethnic inequality. Elman and O’Rand (2004) find that the timing of educational attainment, and the pattern of disadvantaged groups’ later completion of schooling, contributes to reinforcing the lower earnings of African Americans. Health has been an important domain of interest in this regard, with researchers studying how the health of older people is shaped by their economic and social situations at younger ages. Work in this vein has investigated how the effects of low income and employment insecurity, for example, can result in wide health disparities at older ages (Willson, Shuey, and Elder 2007). The life course has also brought useful perspectives on other events, such as individual trajectories of involvement in crime and the factors that lead to prolonged involvement (Sampson and Laub 2005).

In studying inequality from a life-course perspective, we may expect many events or conditions to have similar effects across gender or race/ethnicity. Lower education or later educational attainment, exposure to violence, or young childbearing likely increase social and economic risk nearly universally, although these effects will be mediated by the availability of other resources or supports. However, some events and transitions may have different implications for later life depending on other dimensions of social location, including race/ethnicity, class, or gender. For example, Willson (2003) finds that among American women the links between marriage and income security are different for African-American and white women, meaning that family transitions have different implications for income, depending on race/ethnicity. Similarly, the life-course processes through adolescence and young adulthood that shape depression in men later in life have been found to differ by race (Mizell 1999). These findings suggest that life-course studies of inequality need to understand both the general characteristics of life courses that lead to disadvantage, and how race/ethnicity, class, or gender may interact to create distinct life-course patterns and dynamics.

Whereas North American life-course researchers have largely focused on individual life-course trajectories, European researchers have focused on the institutionalization of the life course as a set of normative transitions (Leisering 2003). Particularly important work from the latter perspective has focused on the role of welfare state programs in this institutionalization (Kohli 1986; Settersten and Mayer 1997). As Leisering and Leibfried (1999) put it, modern social policy is in fact “life-course policy,” and can be thought of as primarily working by affecting the timing and experience of various life-course transitions.

There are several aspects to the relationship between welfare state programs and the life course. The first is that programs are often explicitly or implicitly age-targeted. Education and retirement

pension programs are obviously aimed at people of particular ages, but other programs are implicitly targeted, insofar as they tend to have client groups that are at a particular stage in the life course. A large proportion of Canadian social assistance recipients are women between the ages of 20 and 40, for example, and although these programs do not explicitly focus on one age group, they are more likely to impact people at certain ages and life-course stages, such as young parenthood. Another aspect of this relationship is how social policies “canalize” lives, or promote institutionalization of the life course (Settersten 2003). For example, pension policies not only serve people in a particular age range but also enforce a rather rigid timing of retirement, by means of financial incentives. Other policies can also be thought of as having these “canalizing” effects. Student loans, for example, may be difficult to obtain for those who already have labour force experience or who have acquired assets, such as a house, thus reinforcing post-secondary education as mainly attainable in young adulthood and before full entrance to the labour market.

Research questions from this institutionalization tradition tend to focus on the role of state programs and policies in shaping the life course. As well, they point our attention to the effects of policies for those whose life courses may not follow “normative” or institutionalized timelines. This is one of the important aspects that must be considered if we are to take a life-course perspective on Aboriginal inequality.

#### POLICY AND THE LIFE COURSES OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

Despite the large amount of research focusing on Aboriginal inequality in North America and elsewhere, and the growth in popularity of the life course as a research framework and as a tool for policy analysis, there has been very little work that has explicitly combined the two to examine the life courses of Aboriginal peoples. This may be partly due to a lack of longitudinal data. Most of

the sources of survey data in Canada do not include enough Aboriginal peoples for detailed analyses, and there are few sources of longitudinal prospective panel data currently available. As yet, there have been no serious attempts to apply a life-course approach to Aboriginal research in Australia, the United States, or New Zealand, the countries most often compared to Canada in terms of Aboriginal well-being, although one Australian study is currently collecting life-course data on an Aboriginal birth cohort (Sayers et al. 2003).

From our perspective, there are three important considerations that should be part of a life-course framework for research or policy development related to Aboriginal peoples. The first is that, despite the absence of life-course studies in the area, there is certainly evidence that the life courses of Aboriginal peoples are different from those of other Canadians, in terms of the timing and experience of various events in health, family, and work and education. Although there is not the space to thoroughly review them here, differences include a much higher risk of various negative experiences, such as a higher risk of poverty, of crime and victimization, of early school-leaving, of various negative health events, and so on. These different risks vary, naturally, with age, but may result in the accumulation of disadvantage across the life course. As the PRI framework suggests, a life-course approach to policy may help address the accumulation of deficits in health, financial, or human capital (Policy Research Initiative 2004).

That much may be uncontroversial, but the second connection between the life courses of Aboriginal peoples and policy may be more difficult to translate into clear policy prescriptions. Many of the life-course differences between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians that contribute to disadvantage may not involve “negative” transitions or events per se, but have negative outcomes in a specific context. In particular, some life-course differences of Aboriginal peoples may not be in line with the regular “institutionalized” life course, and may interact

with policy in such a way that these transitions are poorly supported or have negative implications. Lone parenthood is an example of a transition that is not well-supported by social policy, as evidenced by the high rates of poverty for lone parent families, and a higher rate of lone parenthood is one way in which the life courses of Aboriginal peoples differ from those of other Canadians. Likewise, high rates of mobility between Aboriginal communities and other areas might not be well accommodated by various social policies and institutions. Schools may not adequately support children whose families are highly mobile (Norris et al. 2004), with negative implications for educational attainment among Aboriginal students (Aman and Ungerleider 2008). Family forms, fertility decisions, and other aspects of the life course may be strongly related to cultural norms, while mobility may be related to the unique relationship between Aboriginal people and place. Looking at policy through a life-course lens should include considering how policies may incorporate normative “mainstream” ideas about timing of the life course, and may therefore contribute to systemic disadvantage if these ideas conflict with different cultural conceptions of the life course. This also requires understanding Aboriginal conceptions of age and age-graded expectations, in order to highlight how these may conflict with the assumptions inherent in existing policy.

A third connection between the life-course differences of Aboriginal peoples and social policy is that particular policies and legal institutions may be partly responsible for life-course differences of Aboriginal peoples. If policy should be responsive to the differences in the timing of key life events and life-course trajectories between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, we should also be sensitive to the fact that Aboriginal peoples have been subject to different policies than have other Canadians, and that these policies might result in differences in resources across the life course. One of the clearest examples of this is the policy of residential schooling, which has been identified as having effects not only on those who experienced it but also on

subsequent generations (Barton et al. 2005). There are other important policies to consider, though. The legal legacy of colonial institutions, including the *Indian Act*, has meant that Aboriginal peoples are often exposed to different educational, health, employment, and family policies than are other Canadians. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of Registered Indians or Inuit for whom educational, health, and social services are ultimately provided by the federal government rather than by provincial governments (e.g., Health Canada 2009).

Furthermore, the *Indian Act* establishes rules that govern other aspects of life, such as the division of matrimonial property after marital dissolution—rules that have been recently changed. These rules have been found to disadvantage Aboriginal women, including many living off-reserve (Abbott 2004). Other differences include the former restrictions on Canada/Quebec Pension Plan contributions of income earned on-reserve, potentially affecting the resources of Registered Indians in retirement (Gyimah, White, and Maxim 2004). The *Indian Act* itself and the complex legal distinctions that it and the C-31 amendment have created between communities and families (Clatworthy 2001) can be thought of as a policy that shapes the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Through the life-course concept of “linked lives,” these differences in resources and legal status potentially affect not only individuals, but also families and communities. Although these policies may have been undertaken to rectify past discrimination and to provide communities with more control, they are also part of a legal regime that affects the lives of Aboriginal peoples in ways not experienced by other Canadians.

#### SOME ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE: THE 2001 ABORIGINAL PEOPLES SURVEY

As we have described, one of the barriers to taking a life-course view on Aboriginal policy in Canada is a lack of truly longitudinal data. The various longitudinal surveys conducted by Statistics Canada,

including the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, the National Population Health Survey, and others, generally do not sample enough Aboriginal people for meaningful analyses. Like most of the cross-sectional surveys available from that agency, on-reserve populations are also rarely sampled. Even the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS), conducted exclusively in First Nations communities and maintained under the auspices of the Assembly of First Nations, has not produced linked, longitudinal individual-level data of the type that most life-course analysts would prefer. But although longitudinal studies may be the ideal for a life-course analysis, they are not the only source of information that might be useful. As we have argued elsewhere, many cross-sectional surveys include retrospective questions that can provide useful information about how previous events and experiences affect later conditions in people’s lives (Cooke and Gazso 2009). Moreover, even seemingly static characteristics, such as current education or marital status, can be thought of as the end-points of unobserved trajectories in these domains. For non-renewable events like the transition from singlehood to having ever been married, or the attainment of high school, we are aware that a transition has taken place, although we may not have information on its timing.

In the section below, we use some results from an analysis of the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS)<sup>2</sup> to illustrate some of these important aspects of the life courses of Aboriginal peoples. The APS is a post-censal survey of the population that self-identified as Aboriginal in the 2001 census. The APS was conducted off-reserve and in Aboriginal communities; Statistics Canada (2003b) does not consider the data to be representative for the on-reserve population.

Although these data are limited in their ability to describe the life course, we used individual characteristics, interpreted through a life-course lens, to predict “well-being” of those aged 50 or older and living off-reserve in 2001. We operationalized

“well-being” broadly, as having a higher level of self-rated health, and as living in an economic family with an income above the Low Income Measure (LIM)<sup>3</sup> in 2000. We estimated an ordered logistic regression model of self-rated health (1 = poor through 5 = very good) and a binary logistic regression model of living in a low-income economic family in 2000 (1 = economic family income below the LIM, 0 = economic family income above the LIM).

Our strategy was to include predictors that, although measured cross-sectionally, gave us some information about previous life courses that may affect well-being at older ages. We included control variables for age, region of residence, and rural/urban residence. Independent variables of interest were divided into two groups. The first were aspects of the life course that could be thought of as affecting the well-being at older ages of any Canadian, although some of these characteristics or experiences are more likely to be present in the lives of Aboriginal people. Marital status was included as a categorical variable indicating whether the respondent was currently living common-law, was single and had never been married, or was divorced, separated, or widowed (combined). As described above, the trajectories of Aboriginal people in the domain of marriage and the family are different from those of other Canadians, in terms of higher probability of divorce or separation and lower probability of marriage, as well as different timings of these events. Another aspect of family trajectories is the number of children, and higher fertility may be an important aspect of the life course. Educational attainment is also an important characteristic expected to affect health and income in older adult ages.

As well as these characteristics that are expected to affect the well-being of Canadians in general, the APS allowed us to include some aspects of the life course that are unique to Aboriginal peoples. The ability to speak an Aboriginal language was included as a very rough measure for the inheritance of aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture,

or perhaps as an indicator of having grown up in an Aboriginal community. Clearly, having attended an Indian residential school is an aspect of the life course that is unique to Aboriginal peoples, and was expected to be negatively related to well-being at older ages, controlling for the other variables. Being registered under the *Indian Act* is also a situation unique to Aboriginal peoples and, since the 1985 amendments, no longer identical to being a member of an Indian Band or First Nation. The distribution of these independent variables is described in the Appendix.

Table 1 presents the results of the ordered regression models of self-rated health, separately for men and for women. Men who were currently living in common-law relationships had significantly worse self-rated health than those who were currently married, while women who were in common-law relationships had significantly better self-rated health than married women. Although it had no significant effect on men’s self-rated health, women who were divorced, separated, or widowed were significantly more likely to have lower categories of self-rated health. As mentioned above, given the higher rates of both divorce and widowhood among Aboriginal women, compared to other Canadian women, this may be evidence of an important life-course difference contributing to overall patterns of inequality.

Education, as expected, had some effect on self-rated health, with both men and women who had less than high school education more likely to have lower levels of self-rated health in later life than those with high school. Those with university degrees also had higher levels of self-rated health than those with high school only. These effects were independent of any effects of family income, which also had a positive effect on self-rated health for men and women.

As described above, marital status, education, and income are expected to have effects on health regardless of Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal identity, although divorce or widowhood, low education, or

TABLE 1  
 Ordered Logistic Regression Models Predicting Self-Rated Health Status, Aboriginal Men and Women 50 and Older  
 Living Off-Reserve, 2001

	<i>Off-Reserve Men</i>				<i>Off-Reserve Women</i>			
	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>SE (B)</i>	<i>Pr &gt;X<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>S.E. (B)</i>	<i>Pr &gt;X<sup>2</sup></i>
Intercept 5	-3.394	-	0.429	<.0001	-4.147	-	0.392	<.0001
Intercept 4	-2.028	-	0.427	<.0001	-2.737	-	0.389	<.0001
Intercept 3	-0.739	-	0.426	0.083	-1.423	-	0.388	0.000
Intercept 2	0.571	-	0.426	0.181	0.036	-	0.387	0.926
Age group (55-59 = ref)								
50-54	-0.103	0.902	0.080	0.197	0.283	1.327	0.076	0.000
60-64	-0.101	0.904	0.097	0.295	0.204	1.226	0.091	0.024
65-69	-0.174	0.841	0.107	0.106	0.111	1.118	0.108	0.304
70-74	-0.808	0.446	0.128	<.0001	0.079	1.082	0.125	0.527
75-79	-0.885	0.413	0.182	<.0001	0.425	1.530	0.158	0.007
80-84	-0.516	0.597	0.192	0.007	0.148	1.160	0.206	0.472
85+	-0.030	0.971	0.308	0.923	0.621	1.860	0.285	0.029
Region of residence (Ontario = ref)								
Atlantic	0.225	1.252	0.125	0.071	0.411	1.508	0.130	0.002
Quebec	0.350	1.419	0.115	0.002	0.643	1.902	0.103	<.0001
Prairies	-0.070	0.932	0.078	0.369	0.373	1.452	0.073	<.0001
British Columbia	0.136	1.145	0.091	0.135	0.533	1.704	0.089	<.0001
North	0.119	1.126	0.349	0.734	0.317	1.373	0.332	0.340
Rural	-0.443	0.642	0.169	0.009	-0.806	0.447	0.178	<.0001
Arctic	-0.443	0.642	0.169	0.009	-0.854	0.426	0.174	<.0001
Marital status (married = ref)								
Common law	-0.306	0.736	0.109	0.005	0.322	1.379	0.108	0.003
Divorced/sep/widowed	0.026	1.027	0.081	0.745	-0.311	0.733	0.071	<.0001
Single, never married	-0.092	0.912	0.099	0.356	0.033	1.034	0.106	0.753
More than two children	0.014	1.014	0.036	0.703	0.034	1.035	0.036	0.340
Highest level of schooling (high school = ref)								
Less than high school	-0.483	0.617	0.101	<.0001	-0.691	0.501	0.092	<.0001
Some post-secondary	0.140	1.150	0.132	0.289	0.003	1.003	0.116	0.980
Non-university PSE	-0.040	0.961	0.108	0.712	0.137	1.147	0.101	0.174
University degree	0.573	1.774	0.146	<.0001	0.537	1.712	0.137	<.0001
Log-family income	0.242	1.274	0.031	<.0001	0.247	1.280	0.028	<.0001
Aboriginal language	-0.046	0.955	0.077	0.554	-0.395	0.674	0.072	<.0001
Residential school	-0.269	0.764	0.109	0.014	-0.013	0.987	0.088	0.884
Registered Indian	-0.006	0.994	0.095	0.953	0.114	1.121	0.107	0.286
Band membership	0.078	1.081	0.094	0.406	-0.226	0.798	0.105	0.032
<i>N</i>	3,117				3,548			
-2LL	11143.819				12197.425			

Notes: Variance estimated using Statistics Canada bootstrap weights.

Source: 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey.

low income are more characteristic of Aboriginal life courses than those of other Canadians. However, the experience of residential school is unique to Aboriginal peoples. Controlling for the other variables, men who had attended residential school had significantly worse self-rated health, although there was no significant effect for women. However, women who spoke an Aboriginal language also had significantly worse self-rated health.

In Table 2 we present similar models of the likelihood of living in a low-income economic family in 2000, predicted by a similar set of variables. In this model we include economic family status, as well as marital status. As expected, being an unattached individual or having never been married significantly increased the probability that an Aboriginal man or woman 50 or older lived in a low-income economic family, compared to those who were married or partners in a couple family. As in the previous models, being divorced, separated, or widowed significantly affected the well-being of older Aboriginal women, in this case increasing the probability that they lived in a low-income family. Education also had the expected effect, with those with less than high school more likely to live in low income than those with high school, and those with post-secondary education significantly less likely.

For both men and women, those who could speak an Aboriginal language were significantly more likely to live in a low-income economic family than were those who did not. As we suggested above, some of the explanation may be that those speaking Aboriginal languages are more likely to have moved from Aboriginal or First Nations communities, perhaps recently. This may be supported by the evidence that men who were members of an Indian Band or a First Nation were also significantly more likely to live in low income, although this was not significant for women.

As with the model predicting self-rated health, older men who had attended residential schools were

significantly more likely to live in low-income economic families, while the effect was not significant for women.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The cross-sectional nature of the APS data does not allow us to systematically investigate many of the questions that are important to a life-course perspective, such as whether, and how, disadvantage may accumulate across the life course, how the timing of various transitions and experiences affects later outcomes, and how trajectories in the domains of health, work and education, and family transitions might interact. Nor can these data be used to compare the experiences of cohorts, to help us understand how the lives of Aboriginal peoples have changed with changes in the social and economic context.

However, cross-sectional data like these can point out some aspects of the life course that may be important to understanding the ongoing inequality of Aboriginal peoples. For example, the continued low educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples, for the older cohorts represented in our 2001 APS sample, has implications for health and the risk of poverty in later life. As we would expect, some aspects of marital and family history have independent effects on health and income adequacy at older ages, although these data do not allow us to investigate the complexities of trajectories.

These findings are not surprising, as these life-course patterns are likely seen, although perhaps to a lesser degree, in the lives of other Canadians. The APS data do, however, show that some aspects of the life course that are unique to Aboriginal peoples may have some effect on well-being in later life. Perhaps most importantly, having ever attended a residential school had independent and negative effects on men's education and economic family income after age 50.

TABLE 2

Logistic Regression Models of Low-Income Economic Family Status, Aboriginal Men and Women 50 and Older Living Off-Reserve, 2001

	<i>Off-Reserve Men</i>				<i>Off-Reserve Women</i>			
	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>SE (B)</i>	<i>Pr &gt;X<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>SE (B)</i>	<i>Pr &gt;X<sup>2</sup></i>
Intercept	3.511	–	0.710	<.0001	2.949	–	0.485	<.0001
Age group (55–59 = ref)								
50–54	0.016	0.985	0.125	0.901	0.029	1.029	0.111	0.797
60–64	0.631	1.879	0.141	<.0001	0.558	0.572	0.137	<.0001
65–69	0.746	0.474	0.181	<.0001	0.987	0.373	0.161	<.0001
70–74	0.858	0.424	0.228	0.000	0.864	0.421	0.180	<.0001
75–79	0.857	0.424	0.315	0.007	1.477	0.228	0.230	<.0001
80–84	0.106	1.112	0.250	0.671	0.384	0.681	0.270	0.155
85+	1.494	0.225	0.593	0.012	1.025	0.359	0.387	0.008
Region of residence (Ontario = ref)								
Atlantic	0.543	1.722	0.199	0.006	0.859	2.361	0.185	<.0001
Quebec	0.748	2.112	0.173	<.0001	0.219	0.803	0.157	0.163
Prairies	0.405	1.499	0.127	0.001	0.229	1.257	0.110	0.037
British Columbia	0.285	1.330	0.144	0.048	0.183	1.201	0.129	0.156
Rural	0.065	1.067	0.100	0.518	0.075	0.928	0.100	0.453
Economic family status (partner in couple family = ref)								
Unattached individual	1.402	4.064	0.662	0.034	1.534	4.636	0.444	0.001
Lone parent economic family	0.258	1.294	0.703	0.714	0.160	1.173	0.457	0.726
Child in economic family	1.031	0.357	0.776	0.184	1.269	0.281	0.786	0.107
Non-family person in household	0.356	0.700	0.668	0.594	0.015	1.015	0.443	0.973
Marital status (married = ref)								
Common law	0.064	1.066	0.673	0.924	0.480	1.617	0.454	0.290
Divorced/separated/widowed	0.484	1.622	0.661	0.464	1.315	3.725	0.438	0.003
Single, never married	1.226	3.408	0.666	0.066	1.249	3.485	0.447	0.005
More than 2 children	0.152	1.164	0.059	0.010	0.025	1.026	0.065	0.695
Highest level of schooling (high school certificate = ref)								
Less than high school	0.952	2.590	0.182	<.0001	0.459	1.582	0.135	0.001
Some PSE, no certificate	0.065	1.067	0.234	0.780	0.221	0.802	0.172	0.200
Non-university PSE	0.577	1.781	0.194	0.003	0.311	0.732	0.154	0.043
University degree	0.557	1.745	0.250	0.026	0.848	0.428	0.227	0.000
Speaks Aboriginal language	0.296	1.344	0.115	0.010	0.498	1.646	0.101	<.0001
Attended residential school	0.879	2.409	0.157	<.0001	0.179	1.196	0.124	0.150
Registered Indian	0.051	0.951	0.146	0.728	0.249	1.282	0.151	0.100
Band membership	0.300	1.349	0.147	0.041	0.017	1.017	0.155	0.915
<i>N</i>	3,117				3,548			
–2LL	3012.260				3691.582			

Notes: Variance estimated using Statistics Canada bootstrap weights.

Source: 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey.

These findings can be connected to our main arguments which are, first, that the life course can be a useful perspective for understanding Aboriginal inequality and its relation to policy and, second, that there are unique considerations for such an application. Taking a life-course perspective on Aboriginal inequality requires attention to both individual trajectories and the roles of policy in shaping lives. On the one hand, the trajectories taken by Aboriginal people, through marriage and family, health, and work and education, may be different from those taken by other Canadians, and some of these differences may contribute to the differences in health and income of Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians. Lower educational attainment, for example, likely contributes a great deal to poorer outcomes. Following the North American emphasis on individual trajectories, this leads our attention to the various effects of these life-course differences, including the possibility of cumulative disadvantage, the importance of timing of events, and the interactions between events in the different life-course domains.

However, the European focus on institutionalization turns our attention to the role of policy in shaping lives and reinforcing particular life-course patterns, and how some transitions may be negative in their effects primarily because they are not sufficiently supported by existing policies, not because they are negative in themselves. The lives of Aboriginal people are more likely to include frequent mobility and migration or lone parenthood and, although there are not yet longitudinal data to test this, these experiences may be hypothesized to contribute to disadvantage of Aboriginal peoples in later life. Lastly, there are some aspects of Aboriginal life courses that are unique, such as the experience of residential schooling, and which are the direct result of policy. These policies may contribute to the systematic differences between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

Of the implications of a life-course perspective for policy toward Aboriginal inequality, the first is

that better data are needed if we are to truly understand, as the PRI framework proposes, how policy can provide supports for transitions across the life course. This would entail the inclusion of sufficient samples of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis in the existing longitudinal studies conducted by Statistics Canada and any other long-term panel studies that may be conducted in the future. Incorporating Aboriginal conceptions of age and the life course into this policy research area will also be important. Cultural ideas regarding the statuses and roles occupied across the life course and the resources that are available to help negotiate or facilitate various transitions may be different for Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Any application of a life-course framework should therefore be informed by the knowledge of Aboriginal peoples themselves about the meaning of various life-course transitions and the resources, from family and communities, markets, and institutions, that are important for those transitions.

Beyond the need for better data, a life-course approach may help point policy-makers to the importance of earlier events for later outcomes. This may include an emphasis on the conditions in childhood, and policy interventions at young ages such as Aboriginal Head Start (Public Health Agency of Canada 2008), but also programs that would help people to access the resources needed to manage the education, family, and labour force transitions that they see as important for their own lives. Although some of these programs may be targeted to Aboriginal peoples, a life-course perspective may draw attention to the different ways that the separate policy regime experienced by Aboriginal peoples may have unintended consequences for equality and social inclusion.

One potential outcome of a life-course approach would be to broadly attempt to make Aboriginal life-course patterns more similar to non-Aboriginal ones, in terms of the timing and order of various events. Rather, we hope that a better understanding of the sources of life-course differences may avoid this in

favour of encouraging flexibility in institutions, so that Aboriginal life-course patterns need not result in accumulation of disadvantage. This would be an approach that is more consistent with the PRI framework and recognition of the diversity in life paths.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Status First Nations or "Registered Indians" are people registered under the *Indian Act of Canada*.

<sup>2</sup> These data were provided by Statistics Canada through the Research Data Centres program. The opinions expressed do not represent the views of Statistics Canada.

<sup>3</sup> The Low Income Measure (LIM) indicates an income of less than half the overall median. It is adjusted for economic family size.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE A1  
Sample Description, 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, Off-Reserve Adults Aged 50 and Older

<i>Variable</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		Highest level of schooling	
Male	47.5	Less than high school	49.3
Female	52.5	High school	12.1
Age group		Some post-secondary	34.5
50–59	51.1	Some university	9.5
60–69	13.3	University degree	5.6
70–79	11.4	Low-income economic family	25.9
80+	3.8	Marital status	
Region		Married and not separated	37.7
Atlantic	6.5	Divorced/separated/widowed	18.8
Quebec	9.1	Unattached individual	15.8
Ontario	25.6	Economic family (EF) status	
British Columbia	18.9	Partner in EF	72.1
Prairies	45.5	Lone parent EF	5.4
North	0.8	Non-family/other person in EF	22.5
Rural	36.4	Two or more children	38.9
Urban	63.6		
Registered Indian	51.6		
Residential school	8.6		
Aboriginal language	37.0		
Band membership	49.9	Total N (unweighted)	6,665

Source: 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey.