Considering Life Course Concepts

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IN limning the etymology of the concept of the life course, Alwin makes a number of prime points and paves the way toward further conceptual development. For me, one of the more prominent takeaway messages is that there is no standard model—to borrow a phrase from particle physics. He makes clear that life course analysis is not an exact science, and, sticking with the same analogy for a bit longer, there is a hierarchical problem in explaining the fluidity in the constellation of factors influencing life courses. Some things matter more for some than for others or else deflect trajectories in some instances in such a way that it is a challenge to explain the resulting disparities. Alwin offers a Baedeker’s guide that will help focus the métier of social gerontologists as they attempt to make sense of the life course. No doubt the debate about whether there is a “theory of the life course” will persist but what we have with Alwin’s exegesis is a closer handle on evaluating what is variously said to be a perspective, paradigm, or theory.

Fundamentals of a Life Course Perspective

Examining the life course is about analyzing change. From birth until death lives are in flux. A life course perspective is about examining changes, whether they be biological, developmental (including social and psychological factors), historical, or geographic and attempting to identify which factors affect the arc of change, and what transformations change bring. Some of what goes on occurs because of intrinsic dynamics called ontogenetic forces that are inherent, built into our biology, and moving us along life’s path. Some change can be attributed to when, where, and how we live, who we are, and where we fit into the social structures in which we are ensconced. Many scholars assert the ways we grow up and grow old are socially constructed, normative, or prescriptive. Yet, because humans are sentient beings, we do not just take change as given, we impose meaning on it and bend it to our purposes—of course we take direction from it as well. In a manner of speaking, there is the basic question: What is it that gives shape to our lives? There is no shortage of answers to questions about change, and not surprisingly, diverse disciplines look at change through characteristic lenses. In mathematics, as a clever calculus book might say, calculus is about solving problems about things that change and those who study change are interested in how fast and how much. They scrutinize rate of change and net changes under prescribed conditions. Biologists look at change by examining the unfolding, sustenance, and eventual diminishment of biological processes and sometimes those external factors that affect the process. Psychologists are of two minds: one focusing on development and aging fueled by unfolding intrinsic or ontogenetic forces and the other championing a viewpoint grounded in social circumstances as a force propelling change. The initial round of life course explanations began around World War I and despite some important work in France on contextual factors the latter did not really begin to be included until the 1960s as some social scientists launched a critique of life span perspectives and their claim that patterns and stages of human development are not nearly as universal as previously claimed (Cain, 1964). Their point was that it is a misconception to assume that life is composed of fixed stages that inevitably and invariably unfold with convincingly predictable beginnings and endings. Another point was that people do not develop or grow old insulated from the conditions in which they are grounded (cf. Riegel, 1975).

As Alwin avers, sociologists, among others, formulated an alternative paradigm of life course analyses that emphasized cultural factors, social circumstances, and social interactions as the building blocks of change, integral to understanding the life course. This dialectical interaction between people and their contexts emphasizes that people are not passive beings, rather they create and manipulate their environments individually and collectively. Despite his attentiveness to the work of those two eminent grise in matters of the life course, Featherman and Elder, Alwin’s exposition do not take into account the work of the psychologist, Klaus Riegel (1975) who became an early point of reference for those maintaining the life course and individual biographies are contingent on person–environment interaction. He does, however, acknowledge the essential work of the sociologist C. Wright Mills in noting that the intersection of biography and history are central to what
happens to individuals. Without meaning to quibble, Alwin does not appear to be au fait with Anthony Giddens’ (1991) constructive contributions to current considerations of social environmental opportunities and constraints (Settersten, 1999).

One obvious question is why should we care whether one more authority is cited? The short answer is that Giddens provides an informative point of view on the correlates of what Cain, Riley, and other social scientists call age status, a socially constructed concept grounded in particular circumstances that provides a red thread connecting actors to the social capital at their disposal, roles and opportunities open to them, how they experience life, and how they are perceived by others. Extrapolating a bit, age status imposes prescriptions and expectations for how we think and how we behave. I am among those who would assert that by looking at what happens to people in a life course perspective, we are implicitly assuming that the nature of one’s experience and life’s unfolding are interrelated. We assume that both commonalities among and differences between people are rooted in life experiences and that those experiences are grounded in social circumstances (Giddens, 1991). We might think of it as life’s pathways being benchmarked by the milestones of age. As Riley asserts, age grades and age statuses are central to life’s unfolding, to our social interactions, our access to opportunities, to our conceptions of ourselves, and to our explication of the life course. Alwin is effectual in pointing out that none of us moves through life alone, insulated from what is going on around us, and that we are all embedded in our lifeworlds.

Alwin’s essay corroborates the contention that actors do not grow up or grow old unaffected by broader social forces. By that I mean to say our identities, our sense of self, and our experiences of opinion with Alwin, I feel he might have given and axiomatic to an actor’s life. In one of my rare differences of opinion with Alwin, I feel he might have given greater attention to the role of such social institutions as the life course as access to life’s chances surely influences life’s outcomes. In addition, outcomes are cumulative, piling atop one another, and yielding both continuity and change in our lives. Brofenbrenner (1979) provides a key interpretative frame by casting life as a social construction captured in his notion of an “ecology of human development” to characterize the contextualized relationships that create what we think of as the life course. Although the exact nature of the effects is sometimes debated, Alwin is correct in stating that there is consensus about life’s contexts, including what happens first, affecting what happens later.

Having said that, I am of the opinion that we need to closely examine the claim that later life is contingent and continuous at the same time that the process is ongoing from beginning to end with successive sequela building upon the preceding. Each new step is a building block for the next steps, always predicated on what happened earlier.

Most sociologists agree that there are countless commonalities adhering to group memberships: crosscutting regularities that arise from social institutions and significant impacts of structural location giving rise to observable life patterns. The latter issue, that of structural location, more commonly called social class or socioeconomic status, cannot be overemphasized in the discussion of the life course as access to life’s chances surely influences life’s outcomes. In addition, outcomes are cumulative, piling atop one another, and yielding both continuity and change in our lives. Brofenbrenner (1979) provides a key interpretative frame by casting life as a social construction captured in his notion of an “ecology of human development” to characterize the contextualized relationships that create what we think of as the life course. Although the exact nature of the effects is sometimes debated, Alwin is correct in stating that there is consensus about life’s contexts, including what happens first, affecting what happens later.

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What Figure 1 depicts are three alternative models for thinking about how earlier events influence later outcomes. In the top trajectory, early life experiences are thought to be highly significant, regardless of whether they are grounded in fetal conditions, relative economic status, individual factors, or social conditions that shape later outcomes almost independently of events occurring in-between. The effects of the early experience may not be immediately evident, and, in fact, they may not become apparent for years to come. Nonetheless, they are capable of shaping outcomes that do not materialize for years or even decades. The contention is that early life experiences are embodied in the individual upon their occurrence and have a direct impact on not only later circumstances but also a variety of later life outcomes. As should be evident from the causal arrows, adult contextual factors may have no impact on later life health effects as it is the early occurrence that makes all the difference. In the context in which they formulated the figure, Berkman and colleagues (2011) focused on health conditions in later life and assert that early exposure inevitably plays out in the adult years. Those early events need not be physical to effect later life health; they emphasize that some of the early life exposures may be social experiences of a wide variety of types.

The middle model portrays adult social conditions as intermediate factors, filtering what happens subsequently. In each instance, adult social conditions refer to a panoply of events and experiences occurring during the adult years. Some of these may be macro-level influences such as public policies and immersion in social institutions, such as work, careers, families, and so on, but others are unique individual experiences. As might be inferred by the lines of causality, there are both direct and indirect influences of childhood and adolescence experience. In other words, both early and middle life events combine to have both correlated and uncorrelated yet cumulative influence on later life conditions. Of course, it also implies that middle life factors have potential offsetting influence over what happened previously. It is important to bear in mind that the timing of an event and the presence of supportive social networks will affect the potency of intermediate experiences and late life occurrences.

In the lower model, there are thought to be little or no direct consequences from early life experience on later life. They are there, but they are indirect, filtered through the social circumstances of adulthood. As with the middle model, those adult social conditions can run the gamut of every conceivable experience. A good illustration of this model can be seen in thinking about how early life education or family life colors careers and a variety of life experiences that unfold during the adult years. These in turn set the stage for what happens in the later years because of advantages or disadvantages accruing along the way and throughout the middle years. Social environments experienced throughout life foreshadow experience in old age, just as early life social environments anticipate adolescence and young adulthood. There is plenty of plasticity and malleability in the life course, to be sure, and social environments
reflect people and places as well as policies and structural considerations.

The models illustrated in Figure 1 are intended to put forward a broad framework for thinking about the unfolding of the life course. In all instances, the box labeled adult social conditions implies societal arrangements, their stability or instability, and their dynamic impact on people in their adult years. Although not depicted in the figure, life course analyses are predicated on the notion that life is emergent and socially situated; all models agree on that point. Another implication of the models is that how we conceive of life’s script not only colors the way we live it as individuals but how we analyze it as well. I might add, the same holds true for individuals and the way they live their lives.

MAKING SENSE OF AN INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Alwin touches on a number of pertinent points in what he terms his integrative model, labeled as an age stratification–life course framework. He emphasizes pertinent dimensions such a framework contains in terms of a synthesis of historical and biographical time; within-person change; the value of the concept of a life cycle for making sense of what we see; the impact of salient events, transitions, and trajectories; and finally, the role of stages or labels in laying out areas of inquiry. To properly evaluate how Alwin or any other scholar handles questions posed by a life course framework, it is useful to bring a set of evaluative principles to the deliberations.

As broad as it may seem at first blush, a life course perspective may be defined by a small number of guiding principles. That is not to say that each must deal with all in extensive fashion but to say that they must spell out a model in such a way that none are precluded. Among those who helped establish the agenda for looking at life through a life course lens, Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe (2004), Bengtson, Elder, and Putney (2005), and a host of others have offered the following principles as providing a fundamental framework for evaluating life course perspectives.

DOES THE MODEL RECOGNIZE OUR TIES TO OTHERS?

To fully understand the life course, we need to recognize that our lives are linked to others around us. All of us are connected to others through a web of social relationships and travel through life as if in a convoy (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). From those relationships, we derive a great deal of what may be regarded as social capital, a resource that helps us make our way in the world. Whether in the family, or in school, work, or in other affinity groups, a great deal of learning occurs, and our lives are touched by those with whom we have contact and who function as significant others from whom we take our cues and whose reactions are integral to how we think of ourselves. Social relationships make a profound difference in the life course and those relationships serve as resources available during times of need. Any life course framework worth its salt must address the relevance of these social interactions.

ARE RELEVANT DIMENSIONS OF TIME PART OF THE FRAMEWORK?

Another factor life course analysts consider essential to how life unfolds is comprised of various aspects of time and temporality. Time is one of those chimerical phenomena simultaneously operating on a number of distinct levels—historical, social, and personal. Life is affected by each concurrently, and though they are hard to separate except for purposes of discussion, time, and temporality are essential to understanding the life course (Hendricks, 2001). There is neither space nor reason to delve into the many aspects of time that matter, but a short comment is apropos.

Alwin’s integrative framework does consider the impact of history as time. The historical period in which a person lives has a profound effect on the life course, and attention to it helps demonstrate life’s pliability. Being alive 200 years ago heralded a far different life course than being alive today. Not only was life expectancy shorter but also the pace of life was far different than today. Furthermore, the dimensions of daily experience were more constrained than is generally the case today. The conditions of life in the 19th century were vastly different and far more circumscribed than the circumstances of those alive in the 21st century.

Gerontologists are well familiar with the influence of historical time or historical context on life experiences through our concept of a period effect. Being 20 years old in 1812 was much different than being 20 years old in 2012. The definition of childhood, adulthood, and older age differs at the two points in history based on life expectancy, imputed responsibilities, productive roles, education norms, family life, and so on. Similarly, life course frameworks need to countenance the concept of generations not only as a birth cohort but also as a cultural generation—those who share meanings and therefore look at the world in similar fashion as a consequence of the indelible effects of analogous experiences at similar ages. That is, those who were 20 in 1952 look at the world through a lens different than those aged 20 years in 2012. Changing worldviews are linked with shifts in technology, modes of production, economic structures within a society, and the structure of knowledge giving form to the meaning of experience. Together they result in the formation of generational groupings, which look at the world in similar fashion. Adults on either side of the so-called digital divide are an easily recognizable illustration and a good example of what is called a cohort effect—a linking of age and historical time. The basic notion of event history analysis is that where a person is in life when events occur makes a difference in how they affect them.

Time is relevant in at least two other ways as well. At an extrapersonal level, temporal benchmarks and timetables...
are integrated into all societies. That is, there are social clocks, which exert normative influences over individual lives. Transitions or those rites of passage help synchronize individual lives and time reckoning, marking movement through various age strata. Those who travel outside their homeland are sometimes brought face-to-face with different reckonings of time. The disconnect may be subtle or dramatic; the point is that temporality is grounded in surrounding cultural worldviews. Social structures have implicit or explicit temporal dimensions, for example, educational transitions, labor force participation, careers or formal retirement with their age-specific benchmarks, and passage through results in successive age statuses that give meaning to the trajectory that is the life course. In fact, a number of scholars contend that the structure of work life, along with other social institutions, stipulate a great deal about how the life course unfolds and the two are often confounded. The thinking is that the timing posed by the different events in life’s trajectory reflect what is labeled social time, imposing pathways and sequencing present in individual biographies as well as providing the rhythmic structuring and shared temporal perspectives present in age grades, cohorts, and generations. Social time is time by consensus; it structures the pace of life and is symbolized by the culture. The age grades of a society represent exactly this symbolization of time. It is possible, however, that individuals may be “off-time,” meaning certain transitions or experiences occur outside the normative parameters and may not be synchronized with other events. In many instances, being off-time brings on at least a modicum of stress: at the low end perhaps no more than a feeling that one feels some distance from others acting out similar roles.

The third facet of time that ought to be considered is personal time or biographical time. With its multiple facets—from biological to perceptual—personal time is melded with social time to constitute one’s biographical temporal world. Where a person is in life will alter the impact of external events and experiences and that temporal location is central to understanding why and how events have one effect or another. As a matter of fact, as we move through life, the way we think about time’s tenure and ourselves may shift and refocus our priorities.

Some of how we think about time and experience has to do with the nature of the periodicities of our biological makeup. Sleep–wake cycles are just part of it, but they do indicate the importance of our biological clocks and biorhythms. A great many scholars believe that the changing cognizance we have of time, which is grounded in these rhythms and cadences, is part and parcel of a life course perspective.

Subjective sense of time, time as we know it, also reflects our personalities, age, and experiences. As thinking units, we attach meaning to time and that meaning is contingent on a combination of societal time and individual perceptions. Few people think only of the present, they think back and they think ahead. This forward thinking about time, what is customarily referred to as sense of futurity, is another facet of biographical time firmly grounded in the life course. Some scholars believe that sense of futurity ebbs as life goes on; others say it simply shifts focus. Either way, locating ourselves vis-à-vis what has already happened, those keepsakes of memories as it were, or what is yet to happen is central to the way we think of ourselves and our life course. Most life course analysts concur that the way we think about time is developmental and reflects such phenomena as health status, other life experiences, and personalities.

Is Place or Location Addressed?

Another aspect relevant to the evaluation of life course frameworks is one Alwin readily acknowledges: the role of place or location. As I touched on the issue above, suffice it to say where we live, geographically as well as socially, affects daily practices as well as how life is experienced. Like historical time, where we live affects how lives unfold. Not to belabor the point but place can also be considered on a different scale. Living in a place only just modernizing or not yet launched toward modernization is very different than living in a place in a postindustrial phase. If for no other reason, and there are plenty, the nature of work will vary a great deal from one locale to another, even though all are part of the 21st century. Living in a part of the world where technology is rampant and the pace of change is rapid is likely different than living in a place where the pace of life is slower, where cadences are rooted in long-established ways of doing things, and where nanoseconds are not yet a part of everyday parlance. Not to be overlooked is the fact that living in a neighborhood where risk or insecurity is rampant might lead to far different experiences than living in a stable, safe neighborhood.

Social location is another aspect of location that shapes the life course. As Alwin avers, Riley and a host of other sociologists are accustomed to thinking about socioeconomic strata—the hierarchical stratification that occurs in all modern societies. There is no doubt that our position within that structural stratification affects a great deal about our lives by virtue of access to opportunities and constraints on individual agency. Our lifestyles and our entry into and out of various social roles reflect our relative standing in the social order. Generally speaking, those from higher status groups accrue more advantages as they age, but those from lower status groups experience more disadvantages. What social scientists refer to as social capital reflects such memberships and certainly influences the shape of the life course. The accumulation of risks or other disadvantages are as important as the whole range of advantages we can imagine. The relevance of social location is that access and opportunities to garner valued resources are affected and in turn affect how life unfolds.
What About Personal Agency?

None of the above is so deterministic that we march through life in lockstep with one another. There are patterns, but these are general tendencies not individual prescriptions that cannot be altered. Many of us have the potential to affect how our lives unfold. Social scientists speak of agency, meaning that we as individuals are actively involved in imputing meaning and shaping outcomes. Some of us likely have more freedom or recognition that we can make a difference and that life is not set in stone but regardless of that fact we each have the potential to negotiate our way within our circumstances. Agency implies that we do not have to follow some hard and fast or normative rules but have a range of options available to us. In short, we do not passively receive all social stimuli, rather we exercise individual volition or choice and actions that result in our individual life course.

Conclusion

So what is the takeaway message? One important thing is that the process is ongoing from beginning to end with successive sequela building one upon another. Each new step may be a building block for the next either directly or indirectly. The point is that the experience of life is cumulative, continuous, and never ending so in order to make sense of any given period, we need to consider whole lives in the contexts in which they unfold. In his review and assessment of life course research since 2000, Mayer (2009) remarks that life course sociology still has a long way to go to fulfill its potential. Fortunately, Alwin touches on a number of essential issues; now it is up to readers to contribute a step change by advancing additional conceptual and empirical building blocks to push our understanding of the life course to the next level.

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References