Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose: Latest Words on “Life Words”*

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I was invited by Merrill Silverstein to comment on an exchange among three other friends, Duane Alwin, Dale Dannefer, and Jon Hendricks. Although I was reluctant at first for the usual reasons associated with other obligations and time constraints, I decided that I might very well have something to say and that this may very well be my only chance to say it. I add that none of these friends has the opportunity to respond to my comments in this venue. Thus, this may be an occasion for the unintended tyranny of the last word, though I doubt it.

Conceptual stocktaking is an episodic but useful task in any research area, especially one that is rapidly developing and spreading its impact across disciplinary boundaries. Any tracking of the spread of the idea of “life course” using citation databases reveals a conceptual pandemic of sorts (I think Dawkins might even classify it as a social scientific “meme,” the cultural equivalent of a gene; Dawkins, 1989) with references spanning widely diverse social science specialties, but also the sciences, the humanities, and multiple applied areas of policy making, and social and medical intervention. A point I will return to later. As such, life course language has been adopted and adapted not only in fields proximate to aging such as family, criminology, medical sociology, social psychology, and demography but also in political science, cultural anthropology, history, public policy areas, applied biomedical areas, and the humanities.

My reaction to the Alwin–Dannefer–Hendricks exchange is in part informed by my own experience in a similar exercise examining the idea of “life cycle” in the social sciences published over twenty years ago with Margaret Krecker (O’Rand & Krecker, 1990). We were charged with examining the uses of the idea of life cycle in the social sciences. We encountered a conundrum similar to Alwin’s—wide application of a concept with diverse and sometimes inappropriate and nonrigorous applications. The first argument we put forward was that some ideas have a “linguistic economy” that carries an intrinsic appeal for reducing complex phenomena to an economical language or metaphor. “Life cycle” appeared to fit this argument. It served in the formative role, usually as metaphor, for framing research questions across several areas that eventually moved beyond the originating idea.

We then proceeded to examine the uses of “life cycle” in three areas of sociological research: individual aging, family life cycle, and organizational ecology. Without going into much more detail here, in our assessment of the individual aging area, we distinguished this idea from two others: life span and life course. We limited the strictest application of the properties of the life cycle to its biological origins and its relevance to butterflies and oak trees: successive forms (stages); necessary, irreversible development (maturation); and the reproduction of form (generation or reproduction). Life span was restricted to the definition as the expected duration of life from birth to death. And life course was defined as the product of variable temporal (aging) processes: the timing, duration, and sequencing of socially meaningful transitions over the length of life (the life span). We argued, in addition, that by the end of the 1980s, more and more life course research on individual aging linked this phenomenon to historical–institutional factors associated with cohort, family, economy, social status, and polity that expanded it to a multilevel phenomenon.

The explosive growth of life course research continued following this interim assessment. Life course research, as we distinguished it then, has moved in new directions in the last 20 years. Critical in this change is the convergence of political economic, demographic, sociological and life-span developmental (with increasingly stronger biological) orientations on the life course. Life course is genuinely a multilevel construct, not reduced to any single level of analysis in the broadest sense. It reflects history, biography, age and biologically related development, social structure, and human agency. Hence, its affinity with the usage of the “life cycle” concept at an earlier period—though economists still cling to the latter concept—approximates a concept apparently so natural and fundamental that it comes to be applied often without formal definition. This trend may have prompted Alwin’s stocktaking and cataloguing exercise.

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*An epigram by Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, often translated as, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”
The delineation of life course principles or dynamics has proceeded over four decades, propelled chiefly by the works of Glenn Elder and numerous colleagues (e.g., Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008) that extend back to the 1970s. Today, some of these principles have such wide currency that their origins are occasionally not recognized. Linked lives, accentuation, situational imperatives, and human agency are ideas that appear sometimes without reference to their originating sources—a phenomenon associated with successful concepts (Merton’s ideas of self-fulfilling prophecy and unanticipated consequences come to mind here). Occasionally, one of these principles is treated as equivalent to the entire life course perspective. And researchers add new concepts to extend or putatively improve upon these concepts. Arguably, both the power and the pliability of life course principles have facilitated their spread and survival. When they are applied by middle-range theories to address specific questions, their currency is bolstered, but, in turn, their meanings can also be altered. The stress process in medical sociology and cumulative dis/advantage theory in life course stratification are two such middle-range theories that have been linked to life course dynamics (George, 2003). These theories have provided the frameworks for modeling life course dynamics and have been enriched by these observations; in turn, life course concepts have gained more refinement and nuance, as they have been deployed by these theories.

A recent interesting study by Schafer, Ferraro, and Mustillo (2011) is an exemplar of the progressive program of the life course perspective that links its key concepts to theory and pushes both the concept and the theory forward. Using the MIDUS data, the study is interested in the impact of childhood adversity on “diachronic life evaluations” (reflective and prospective reflections about the past and future, respectively) and particularly on the impact of favorable expectations of the future on prospective life evaluations. Here, the researchers are concerned with applying the human agency concept to cumulative advantage theory to determine whether compensatory mechanisms can offset the long-term negative effects of childhood adversity. (I must insert here that they prefer their own concept of “cumulative inequality” about which I will only quibble here: inequality appears to me a property of systems, whereas patterns of cumulative advantage or disadvantage are experiences of individuals and subgroups.) They find that childhood adversity has enduring effects on life evaluations, even in the presence of “buoyant expectations.” In effect, this study reflects the best normal science that inheres in progressive research programs, and it also raises challenges to older conceptions with newer ones.

To this point, I have been reflecting on how the spread of concepts in the social sciences lead to conceptual development and theory change but also to occasional confusion. Now I will turn to some major points of contact between Alwin’s arguments and those of Dannefer and Hendricks as well as my own. First, Alwin has undertaken an encyclopedic effort to clarify life course language and to propose a synthesis of the work of Glen Elder and David Featherman into principles of life course research that are more general than either proposed individually and is intended to be useful in guiding future research. The synthesis attempts to reconcile the life-span development perspective that Featherman delineated in the 1980s (e.g., Featherman & Lerner, 1985) with Glen Elder’s decades’ long empirically grounded efforts to identify life course principles across cohort, historical, socioeconomic, and familial contexts. Indeed, the two approaches are compatible and can be integrated, and Alwin’s general principles are plausible.

Dannefer and Hendricks share two major concerns with this iteration of Alwin’s synthesis. The first is that not enough emphasis is placed on the life course as an institution embedded within a larger social system, with strong normative (or scripted) influences on the age-graded course of lives and the structural allocation of resources that differentially channels individuals and status groups within the institution. This critique goes beyond Alwin’s language of life course as life cycle (childhood, adulthood, old age) to require a more focused delineation of the cultural and structural factors that define phases of the life course across history—their timing, their sequencing, and age-relatedness—and that differentiate the observable life course experiences of subgroups within populations. The second, relatedly, requires more emphasis on the intercohort and intracohort differentiation of the life course. Perhaps because Alwin has contributed significantly to cohort analyses over the years (e.g., Alwin & McCammon, 2003), this weaker emphasis can easily be remedied. But also, contrary to Dannefer’s assertion that the cohort analysis has been “contained” by more individualistic biases due to conceptual and methodological challenges, rigorous conceptual analysis of cohort analysis has recently become achievable (see e.g., Yang & Lee, 2009) and less heuristically intractable.

Hendricks’ emphasis on the life course as change emanating from both ontogenetic and sociogenetic factors resonates with Alwin’s synthesis. But Hendricks’ emphasis on patterns of life course differentiation within cohorts based on master statuses and the differential impact of environmental factors calls for a stronger case for social stratification in Alwin’s narrative, something that is at best implicit in this presentation, although highly evident in the body of Alwin’s work.

Relatedly, Hendricks’ discussion of the varieties of social time across biographical and historical time and social place imposes similar requirements that Mayer (2009) has recently advocated as necessary for the future of life course research. Mayer proposes three general requirements for progressive life course research that changes in human lives must be (a) considered over long stretches of the life span rather than limited to discrete transitions or shorter periods in the life course, (b) compared across multiple cohorts, and (c) harmonized across domains of life (education, work,
family, health) as sequelae that emerge as both analytically separate and interdependent. Longer stretches of observations permit a “longer view” of the life course and more reliable pictures of the enduring impact of earlier events on later events and of deflections and agentic reversals of earlier trajectories. Multiple cohort comparisons, now more methodologically tractable than before, provide a litmus test for the study of social change. And the rigorous treatment of the interdependence of trajectories across life domains assists in disentangling the causal puzzles of life course development. The call for this complexity is not inconsistent with Alwin’s synthesis but requires more explicit attention in future conceptual analyses.

In short, I am sympathetic with conceptual stocktaking as a forward-looking device for life course research. Conceptual rigor often includes burying old conceptual battles, as Alwin, Dannefer, and Hendricks intend, in behalf of generating new questions, refining earlier concepts, and moving theories forward.

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References