(Re)considering the Life Course as a Key Concept in Social Gerontology

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As a graduate student in the mid-1980s, I was captivated by the full-throated scholarly debate in the American Sociological Review between Dale Dannefer and Paul Baltes over the role played by social forces in structuring adult human development (Dannefer, 1984a, 1984b; Baltes & Nesselroade, 1984). Particularly impressive was the way this exchange clarified the distinction between ontogenic and sociogenic perspectives on the life course and for the intellectual vigor it brought to the issue.

In the intervening years, applications of the life course concept have variegated such that the term “life course” has taken on a virtual Rashomon-like quality, a malleable concept shaped and given meaning through the eye of the beholder. Much like the myth of the blind man who touches a body part of an elephant and concludes that the animal it belongs to is anything but an elephant, the life course is a perspective that has, depending on one’s point of view, either been abused beyond recognition or liberated to include diverse views on human development. Has the life course concept been used so broadly so as to lose its underlying meaning? Does the life course need to be reclaimed and have more discernible borders drawn around it? Such fundamental questions form the core of this symposium reappraising the life course as a set of integrated concepts that have become a key framework in social gerontology.

In the articles that follow this introduction, you will first encounter the central article authored by Duane Alwin who probes the meanings of what he calls “life words” and stands as a provocateur questioning whether the life course concept provides added value to life-span studies, or is little more than the sum of its parts. This article is followed by commentaries from Dale Dannefer and Jon Hendricks who critique Alwin’s piece from their vantage points as long-time critics of the theoretical landscape of social gerontology. Alwin then follows with a rejoinder to the commentaries, and finally, Angela O’Rand provides an overview of the entire conversation and offers her observations of the proceedings.

To provide a framework for the coming scholarly interchange (and at the risk of oversimplifying), I suggest that life course studies emanate from two distinct but interrelated orientations that are represented to varying degrees by the authors participating in this symposium. One orientation consists of demographic–structural perspectives that focus on cohort flow and social change, particularly the power of great events to shape life paths and life chances (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Elder, 1974; Ryder, 1965); a second orientation consists of institutional–constructivist perspectives that focus on the life course as a socially constructed institution that guides the sequencing and timing of life transitions across the age span (Heinz, 2003; Mayer, 2004; Settersten, 2003). The tension between these two meta-theoretical camps forms the scholarly backdrop for the give and take to follow.

The concept of the life course may have reached a level of maturity that puts it on par with venerable concepts in the social sciences, such as social class, where contentiousness over their conceptualization and operationalization has almost become proof of their utility. I hope that the ensuing articles provide food for thought about the evolving nature of the life course within this context. Ultimately, my wish is that they instigate more debate than they quell, much like the celebrated scholarly exchange in ASR almost three decades ago.

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