The Study of the Life Course: Implications for Social Gerontology

INTRODUCTION

A leading policy expert of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), John Rothenburg (2009), has observed that the life-course perspective is the “missing element in the public policy debate” on ageing (2009). The significance of the life course has also been emphasized by Robert Butler, who joined colleagues to issue a call for a ‘new paradigm’ of gerontological and geriatric research and practice anchored in a life-course approach (Butler et al., 2008). Across multiple societies, the fields of medicine and epidemiology are being transformed by life-course methods as investigators probe the long-term effects of early nutritional status, toxin exposure and other risks on age-related diseases, which create differential patterns of ageing and outcomes in old age (e.g., Ben-Shlomo and Kuh, 2002; Gluckman and Hanson, 2006a, 2006b). In China and elsewhere, increasing public and governmental concern is focusing on old age by reference to earlier life-course events – specifically whether or not one’s job provided retirement pension (see Chapters 32 and 43). In advanced industrial societies around the world, many older people are engaging in a diverse array of activities and social involvement that build on earlier life experiences and shape the nature of their lives as older people – whether in continuing labor force participation, volunteering, or recreational or creative activities. In these and innumerable other examples, often from unexpected areas of policy and research, there is a growing acknowledgment that ageing and old age cannot be understood, either at the individual or societal levels, without paying attention to the cumulative life practices and experiences of ageing individuals.

What is the significance of this expanding emphasis on the life course? Most fundamentally, it represents the recognition of mounting evidence that demonstrates that the physical, psychological, and social aspects of individual ageing are often not dictated by chronological age per se, but instead shaped by a host of factors that cumulate in individuals over decades of living. This is a significant departure from the conventional practice of thinking about age in normative terms – reflected in ideas like ‘normal ageing’ or natural ‘stages’ of life. We now know that, even in childhood and adolescence, age by itself is not enough to define individual lives (Roberts, 2002). This is especially true in later life, when variability is greatest among age peers (Crystal and Shon, 2003; Nelson and Dannefer, 1992). This emphasis marks a paradigmatic shift away from viewing ageing as a general or inevitable process of organically governed change and
old age as a distinct phase of life to be understood on its own terms, and instead toward understanding aging as an experientially contingent reality involving continuous interaction between the body, psyche, and social world. Thus patterns of aging are organized not only by biologically based changes but also are fundamentally dependent on one’s social circumstances, opportunities, and experiences over prior decades. Old age is no longer viewed as embodying a set of common and universal experiences, nor as a dark period of inevitable decline. Rather, older age is recognized as comprised of a set of experiences that are highly variable across individuals, groups, and nations, and highly contingent on health, wealth, social relationships, and other factors.

It is notable that (iris shift in the concept of aging is now occurring in medicine, epidemiology and public health, and the policy sciences. Yet in no field is the emergence of the life-course perspective more significant than in research and theory in gerontology. Indeed, it was sociologists of aging who first elaborated the life-course perspective and gave it conceptual structure (Cain, 1956; Clausen, 1972; Elder, 1974, 1975; Riley et al., 1972), just as psychologists of aging did in originating the life-span perspective (e.g., Baltes, 1985; Schaeie, 1985).

What the life-course perspective brings to gerontology is the recognition that life experiences, which are inevitably organized by social relationships and societal contexts in which individuals are located, powerfully shape how people grow old. The life-course perspective seeks to make visible the significance of "macro," or "class," social forces, including the social institutions and practices that organize everyday life routines, and unique historical events and periods of social change (see Kohli, 2007; Mayer, 2004; Stueween and Clason, 2005). The life-course perspective also emphasizes the power of social ties, the ways in which the lives of individuals are intimately affected by the circumstances and actions of others.

Finally, the life-course perspective shines a spotlight on the significance of age, not only as a property of individuals but also as a property of social structure. Comparative studies have revealed that the meanings of age and old age, and even the very awareness of age vary historically and cross-culturally. Societies differ in how age is regarded, and the significance of age in societies may change over time. By way of example, society and the development of advanced industrial societies. The late 19th and 20th centuries saw a rise in "age consciousness" (Chuteoff, 1985), as age became an increasingly important organizing and regulation in arenas such as education and work. Age consciousness: a feature of a culture that is distinct from the biological ageing of individuals — becomes part of the social environment that has an effect on how people age. It shapes their ideas about what is appropriate aging through the production of age norms, which through the 20th century were increasingly calibrated to specific chronological age (e.g., Kelt, 1977; Lawrence, 1984; Neugarten, 1971; and Neugarten, 1996). Research on the emergence of age consciousness has focused on the United States, but similar developments occurred in Europe and elsewhere (Gliss, 1974; Kohli, 1986a).

From the vantage point of life-course analysis, then, the concept of age is itself a central object of inquiry, not a taken-for-granted part of the world. Yet in everyday lifespans it is precisely a taken-for-granted part of the world. When seen or experienced as social in origin is assumed to be an inevitable aspect of human nature, it is an idea that requires deconstruction. The social practice of mistakenly attributing social arrangements to human nature or other natural forces is called naturalization. When age becomes a central organizing reality of society, and a strong normative sense of "appropriate behavior" and perceived danger of being "off time" emerge in cultural beliefs and practices, age becomes naturalized. It is the task of sociological analysis to deconstruct the processes by which this occurs. This strong emphasis on social processes does not mean that we do not recognize the importance of biogenetic, organic processes. Instead, it reflects a growing recognition of the extent to which the organization itself is shaped by context and experiences in the process of development (Loehlin, 2007; Perry and Sulis, 2005) and through the life course (Langa et al., 2008; see Duhhilt and Marquis, this volume).

AGE AND THE LIFE COURSE: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

The concept of the life course was first articulated in sociology in Leonard Cohn’s (1964) classic paper, “Life-Course and Social Structure.” Cohn’s paper offered an initial conceptualization of some of the key paradigmatic dimensions of the life course that would later become central to life-course analysis. Cohn pointed to age as a feature of both individuals and social structure, and thus anticipated elaboration of the life course as a major basis for organizing social investigation of age as a property of both social systems and individuals was given its most elegant and systematic formalization in Matilda Riley’s initial presentation of the age stratification (Riley et al., 1972), of which the life course was an integral component (Clausen, 1972). Cohn’s early paper and the approach laid the conceptual foundations for subsequent elaboration of the life course as a social institution, an idea that developed both in Europe (e.g., Kohli, 1985; Mayer, 1991; and in the United States (Daufler and Uhlenberg, 1999). Hogg, 1981; Mayer, 1986; Setterlein, 1999).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Glen Elder began to analyze data from several classic longitudinal studies, which led to the publication of his classic book Children of the Great Depression (1974, 1999) and a prolific programme of life-course research (see Elder and Johnson, 2003). Elder’s work has comprehensively examined how discrete events and changes leave their imprint on the life courses of individuals and cohorts, and how their effects are mediated through family environments.

WCN focused on the life course as systemically related to social institutions and foreshadowed the later elaboration of the life course as a full-blown framework of social structure, scholars like John Clausen, and others developed a predictive approach that sought to understand outcomes in later life as a consequence of early life experiences. Below, we discuss these two distinct approaches that we call the "organizational" and the "institutional." But first it will be useful to set forth some general principles that apply to both of these approaches to the life course.

Life-course perspective, life-span development, and cohort analysis

Both the life-course perspective in sociology and a counterpoint intellectual tradition in the disciplines of psychology, life-span development (Baltes, 1968; Riegel, 1976), emerged as sites of intellectual excitement in the late 1960s and 1970s. Closely allied with a rapidly expanding new energy in the sociology of age (Riley, 1973, Riley et al., 1972), both of these traditions were initially catalyzed by the near-simultaneous introduction both in psychology (Baltes, 1968; Schaeie, 1965) and sociology (Riley, 1973; Ryder, 1965) of cohort analysis as a radically new and essential methodological approach to understanding age. An appreciation of cohort analysis is a key foundational element of the life-course perspective. Cohort analysis demonstrated the force of changing social conditions in altering patterns of development and ageing, and provided a method for linking lives and history. A cohort is generally defined as a collection of individuals who enter a system at a common time or time interval. In studies of individual development and ageing, the entry point is typically defined by year of birth. Cohort entry provides an anchor point from which individual trajectories can be constructed and change can be tracked, allowing comparisons across multiple cohorts. Before cohort analysis, research on "age change" (or naturalistic effects) and "age differences" almost exclusively assumed that patterns of individual ageing could be inferred by examining cross-sectional (point in time) age differences. Comparing cross-sectional findings with longitudinal (over time) trajectories made clear that the two often bore little resemblance to each other and that to infer biographical patterns from cross-sectional data entailed a risk of a life-course fallacy (Riley, 1973, Riley et al., 1972).

The introduction of cohort analysis had a catalytic impact. It stimulated interest and investment in longitudinal research, compelled a permanent stance of caution regarding the causal use of cross-sectional data to infer more about life course (age-based) changes, and brought with it a host of new methodological challenges and complexities. In short, it established a new methodological paradigm and standard for how to approach research on ageing.

Distinctively human features of ageing and development: organismic foundations of the life course

In this section, we discuss distinctive features of human development and ageing which, because of their universal and formative significance, comprise foundational principles for understanding life-course development. 'Cohort effects' and other forms of environmental influence may be found for nonhuman species. However, the magnitude of the effects of experience and social context in shaping development and ageing is especially pervasive and enduring in the human case because of several distinct characteristics of Homo sapiens. It is because of these features that life-course experiences matter so much in shaping patterns of ageing, and it is because of them that one's chronological age and bodily processes of ageing cannot, by themselves, account for how human beings develop and age over the life course.

A primary element in these foundational characteristics is the inherently interactive and continous character of human growth and development. Humans are, in psychologist Barbara Rogoff's...
individual life patterns and activity routines, and thus unavoidably organize the individual expression of agency, does not negate the significance of expressing agency. It clarifies that the expression of agency always operates within specific social contexts — what Berger and Luckmann term "agents acting in a specific, 'cultural' structure." Indeed, this recognition only enhances the significance of agency because it makes clear that agency is essential and constitutive of social relationships and social context.

These conditions begin at birth, as each of us enters the world and community helpless and uninitiated, with each being shaped by language and taken-for-granted practices of everyday life. Our actions, like those of others around us, largely conform to and reproduce those conventions. We are constructed within pre-existing systems of social relationships and, as our lives reflect the rhythms and characteristics of these systems, the systems are also reproduced.

Human world-construction, however, also has inherent impulses for innovation and change, deriving in part from the imagination and creativity of human consciousness. This is why human societies are unique in their ability to undergo change on scales of magnitude and rapid sol that are unknown to other species. Of course, whether the actual change that occurs corresponds to the goals and intentions of those who implement it is another question. This can well be demonstrated by familiar experiences of the "linked lives" — as when parental efforts at sanction and control backfire, and the intended change in a teenager's actions. This is a familiar illustration of the sociological principle of unintended consequences (Merton, 1968). Life-course change can be separated from dynamics of stability and change.

These established principles have implications both for scholars who study aging and the life course as determined by organic processes (e.g., Gusfield, 1987; Levitt, 1997), and also for those who emphasize individual choice, freedom, and intentional action (e.g., Gilliard and Higgins, 2003). As these organic processes meet social environments, aspects of these environments open or close, accelerate or delay, and in many cases shape their expression. Moreover, each is simultaneously "produced" by the actor's consciousness. Regarding choice, not only are the degree and types of options that individuals have facilitated or constrained by social circumstances, but their desires and interests are also shaped by culturally (and often commercially) imposed definitions of what to strive for as "the good life" (e.g., Ewen 1977; Ewen and Ewen, 1992; Schor, 2004).

The personological paradigm

The role of early experience in shaping later life outcomes

The personological paradigm is well exemplified in the influential research of Glen Elder, which has drawn heavily on the Berkeley Guidance, Berkeley Growth, and Oakland Growth Studies, begun in 1927-28. Elder brought great prominence to the life course as a field of study in North America and beyond, and his work has provided a nuanced view of how outcomes later in the life course may be influenced by earlier life experiences. His work has especially demonstrated how the social conditions of one's youth and early adult years have a lasting influence in psychological and social characteristics. Elder also demonstrated the interaction of biography and social change has also demonstrated the importance of timing — the effect of events may turn out to be quite different, depending on the age at which an individual encounters them.

The Oakland and Berkeley samples provided an excellent lens for analyzing the role of timing in the nature of the effects of change because the samples were based on different birth cohorts. Since the Oakland sample was born in 1920-21 and the Berkeley samples in 1928-29 they were at very different ages when they encountered key events. Elder's landmark Children of the Great Depression (1974/1999) examines in detail the life-course patterns and outcomes of these study participants. The effects of the Depression differed for boys and girls, by social class, and by whether families were economically deprived. Boys in deprived households more often aspired to or entered adult roles earlier than peers, but showed little evidence of persistent disadvantage relative to their counterparts.

In contrast, Oakland females were more vulnerable psychologically, especially those from deprived families. Elder found that they had to assume domestic responsibilities as their mothers sought work, they felt less well-dressed, more excluded and self-conscious, and they experienced more hurt feelings and mood swings. Relative to non-deprived girls, they married earlier and more frequently stopped working after marriage or childbirth.

Born nearly a decade later, Berkeley children had different experiences than their older Oakland counterparts (Elder and Caspi, 1990). As very young children, Berkeley subjects were dependent on the direct care of parents and vulnerable to family instabilities and conflict. Elder attributed their differential outcomes to the difference in their ages when hardship hit. Such findings have led life-course scholars to emphasize timing as a key determinant of how events shape life-course outcomes.

Another key finding of Elder's work relates to the interconnected nature of the Great Depression and inter-generational transfers of disadvantage (Elder and Chao, 1999). For example, the great majority (90 per cent) of Oakland men served in World War II. For many of those from deprived families, the draft provided "knifed off" disadvantaged positions, recalibrating one's position in relation to powerful structures of opportunity.

Over the life course, observed differences among age peers have been traced to such earlier experiences. Here, as in some of the analyses in Children, a notable theme of Elder's work has been that some degree of hardship in youth or early adulthood — as long as it is experienced in the foundation of some key forms of environmental support and resources — is correlated with positive outcomes later in the life course. For example, by the late 1960s, 40 years after the Great Depression, when the mothers of the Berkeley children had reached in old age, middle-class mothers who had experienced hardship and deprivation in the Depression years were faring better than any other subgroups in terms of psychological functioning, including middle-class mothers who were not deprived, comparatively deprived girls who were faring the poorest of any group (Elder and Litier, 1982). A popular interpretation for such findings posits that coping skills and resilience may be
The limitations on explanatory understanding imposed by Time One Encapsulation are made clear in recent research that takes a 'developmental origins' approach in medicine and epidemiology. This research focuses on the relationship between one's early environmental circumstances and subsequent life-style and disease processes (Gruenman and Hanston, 2006b, 2006c). An integral part of this approach is a systematic examination of early life stressor experiences in adulthood, and the health effects of a 'mismatch' between childhood and adult experiences. For example, individuals who survive nutritional deprivation in childhood but are developing into robust and resilient healthy adults—unless in adulthood they begin to engage in the stereotypically unhealthy patterns so characteristic today, including being sedentary and consuming high-fat diets, which lead to chronic positive energy balance, which has devastating consequences for health (e.g., Gruenman and Hanston, 2006b). Thus, health outcomes cannot be understood by looking at childhood lifestyle alone, but only by their interaction with practices in adulthood.

Another set of critical concerns about life-course analysis are methodological. For the study of ageing, early experiences are important to examine because they contribute to current status, yet their effects are challenging to demonstrate. Extending back so many decades, the life course becomes an unending causal system that seeks to explain the present while overlooking more immediate social effects with which earlier events may be correlated, thus creating a risk of spurious interpretations. The goal of understanding lives over many decades requires demanding research questions, methods, and data that often cannot be accomplished. The longer lives are studied, the more difficult it becomes to trace connections, and the potential for confounding variables is hard to know which variables are important, when they are important, how they might be arrayed in sequence, and what processes and mechanisms drive these connections. Variables are likely to be multiply confounded not only at single time points in time but also, especially, across multiple time points. These complexities aside, few longitudinal studies seem endless and issues can be hard to know which variables are important, when they are important, how they might be arrayed in sequence, and what processes and mechanisms drive these connections. Variables are likely to be multiply confounded not only at single time points in time but also, especially, across multiple time points. These complexities aside, few longitudinal studies seem endless and issues can be hard to know which variables are important, when they are important, how they might be arrayed in sequence, and what processes and mechanisms drive these connections. Variables are likely to be multiply confounded not only at single time points in time but also, especially, across multiple time points. These complexities aside, few longitudinal studies seem endless and issues can be hard to know which variables are important, when they are important, how they might be arrayed in sequence, and what processes and mechanisms drive these connections.
De-institutionalization of the life course?

More recently, a debate has begun over the possibility that the increasing diversity of life choices and the desire for personal autonomy has led to a de-institutionalization of the life course. This process has been facilitated by the increasing availability of information and the rise of self-help groups and other forms of informal social support. The trend towards de-institutionalization is evident in the growing number of adults who choose to live with partners without getting married, the increasing prevalence of single parenting, and the growing number of people who choose to live alone. The trend towards de-institutionalization is also evident in the increasing number of older people who choose to live independently, rather than in residential care facilities.

De-institutionalization of the life course?
experiences at both the individual and collective levels. The institutional approach demonstrates that the meanings of age are social constructs through which long-term historical trends of individualization, chronologicization, and standardization come to be widely accepted and taken-for-granted aspects of human nature, despite their sociopolitical origins. These trends have led to an increasing amount of social regulation based on age, and in consequence of "age consciousness" in the populations of late modernity. Seen from the vantage point of sociological analysis, these trends comprise a naturalization of age.

IMPLICATIONS OF LIFE-COURSE THEORIZING FOR SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY

We turn now to a more specific consideration of the implications of life-course theorizing for social gerontology. We propose four ways that the life-course is useful in sensitizing gerontology to the empirical realities of the process of aging.

The life-course perspective sensitizes social gerontology to the impact of social change on human aging

Virtually all of the scientific research on human aging is based on cohorts born early in the first few decades of the 20th century. The last century saw the bureaucratization of the major institutions of education, work, authorization, retirement, and health care through which people's lives and opportunities are organized, and it was also punctuated by remarkable events and changes related to war, economic calamity, health epidemics, social movements for civil and workers rights, and technological change in medicine, communication, and transportation. In many societies, the Great Depression and military service during World War II, in particular, heavily marked the lives of men and women who are now old (see Setzerrer, 2000) and profoundly economic and technological changes have shaped them in profound but often subtle ways.

The magnitude and rapidity of change in the 20th century meant that those who were born in the first few decades of the 1900s were quite different from those born even a decade or two before or after. As a cohort, they have had "distinctive experiences" with social change, to use Bowser's (1978) term, which brought "differential effects" for them relative to adjacent cohorts. For example, in the United States and parts of Europe, successive cohorts had better cognitive test performance because of gains in educational attainments; they had better physical health and longer life expectancy in nutrition and health care; marriage and family formation was promoted because of dynamics related to war and military service; postwar economic growth and the growth of industry opened up new opportunities for women.

We saw earlier, in discussing the research of Elder and colleagues on the Great Depression and World War II, that the same sets of historical events and changes can have very different effects on the lives of adjacent cohorts. Their different cohort positions mean that they are at different ages when those historical events and changes occur. Even a few years can make a meaningful difference. For example, those born in industrial societies in the late 1970s will recall at least part of their early childhood without personal computers, while most of those born in the mid-1980s and later will not be able to imagine life without them. Children today are immersed in and take for granted an expansive digital world that permeates their everyday lives and has dramatically altered how they think, learn, and interact with others.

Although we know much about how aging and life courses have been influenced by the circumstances, events, and structural conditions of the 20th century, the scope and magnitude of forces involved may well mean that some still are not well known. One the experience of 20th century aging has made abundantly clear is that aging is a variable and mutable process, not a universal and unchanging one. This is consistent with the foundational principles set forth at the beginning of the chapter. Theorizing for scholarship on age, the 20th century served as something of a laboratory for change effects — illustrating both the potentials for change and the uncertainty endemic to human circumstances, as well as the consequences they have had for individual aging in terms of changes in longevity (Riley, 2001), the postponement or elimination of what were assumed to be late-life disabilities (Langa et al., 2008; see also Chapter 7), and the institutionalization and then de-institutionalization of the life course (Chenfver and Putnam, 2007; Hogan, 1981; Setzerrer and Gianc, 2005). What the 20th century has made clear to us is that there is no such thing as "normal aging" or aging in a general sense, apart from the definitions of normality imposed by socially constructed notions of what counts as normal. These considerations require gerontologists to acknowledge that we do not know to what extent current knowledge of aging can be extended to members of future cohorts whose life experiences have been very different from those who are now old.

In some respects, we do not need to wait to see how they are different. In every society, the septuagenarians of 2075 and the octogenarians of 2080 and 2090 may be very different from one another. As their members age, these cohorts may challenge additional taken-for-granted assumptions about aging.

The life-course perspective sensitizes social gerontology to variability in patterns and experiences of age

As noted earlier, the diversity of the aged is often emphasized using several stereotypes or overly "normalized" versions of aging, but it also raises the significant question concerning the sources of diversity and inequality among older people. What are the processes that make responsible for this phenomenon? Available evidence suggests that this phenomenon results neither from sudden late-life changes in individuals, nor from cohort differences. Rather, it appears to develop biographically, as a life-course process.

As anticipated earlier in our discussion, the consistency of this pattern has significant implications for the study of age. If increasing diversity and inequality are regular features of cohort aging that regularly recur in each succeeding cohort, it is misleading to describe aging in terms of central tendencies or "normative" patterns, and it is especially misleading to describe older people in homogenized ways (Danner, 1987, 2003a).

Describing trajectories of variability is not the endpoint but the beginning of understanding the factors underlying old age. Trajectories themselves reveal nothing about the underlying processes that bring the variability about as members of a cohort. For example, it would be misleading to explain by a single set of causal variables. In part, the diversity of the aged reflects the accumulation of particular experiences over many decades. Further, the diversity of individual life courses that are in some ways as unique as fingerprints. Some scholars have emphasized the role of personality factors and processes of psychosocial "accentuation" in which the characteristics and experiences of individuals become more pronounced with the passage of time, creating greater distinction and differentiation (Claussen, 1993; Feldman and Weiler, 1976; Neugarten, 1979b).

Such enduring individual characteristics, which emphasize factors such as biographical uniqueness, personal choice, and personality characteristics, are well established and familiar — and they are, understandably, a natural starting point in psychology and in societies characterized by a strong ethos of individualism.

Yet it is clear that trajectories of diversity and inequality develop as people encounter stratified social institutions as they live out, starting with early experiences in the family and educational systems, including preschool (Kanter, 1972; Rogoff, 2003). These are early points of entry into a life-long and lifelong process of cumulative disadvantage described earlier. Schools, work organizations, and healthcare institutions inevitably generate inequality because they are naturally structured to regulate access to scarce and desirable resources — whether effective teachers, safe working conditions, and intellectually and socially satisfying work, or access to needed medical technology.

A considerable and growing body of evidence supports the power of these social processes, which also operate in ways that are subtle, hard to detect, or intended to appear so (Chenfver, 1997; Shae, 2003; Danner, 2003b, 2009). This is a conceptually significant development because it makes clear the fact that patterns of aging over the life course cannot be understood at the individual level but also must include analysis of generic properties of cohorts. It is therefore misleading to think of age as something that simply happens within individuals, or as something that occurs between people and can only be grasped in the context of cohort processes and as a central feature of social structure (Danner, 1987; Rosenbaum, 1976).

In view of these developments, a life-course perspective should sensitize gerontologists to variability and to socially structured processes of inequality that produce it. Indeed, the extent to which major economic changes continue, social class seems likely to become an even more powerful factor determining aging and in creating serious divisions within societies (see also Kohli 2007; Setzerrer and Trauten, 2009). Given the great degree of variability among old people, it seems likely that subgroups of people who are disadvantaged by economic circumstances have great competing needs — especially in terms of wealth and health — which further the potential for political solidarity that is often assumed to be true of older age groups (see also Blustock, 2004).
The life-course perspective sensitizes social gerontology to ‘linked lives’ and their expanding significance in the context of global ageing

The general principle of ‘linked lives’ is an explicit part of life-course frameworks (e.g., Elder and Johnson, 2003; Sotersten, 2003a). This principle simply states that the course of an individual’s life is intimately shaped by the needs, circumstances, and choices of others. Despite the recognition that in everyday lives simply cannot be understood in isolation from others, the irony is that we analyze lives as if they are somehow purely individual. Yet most of the things people struggle with, buy, or leave for, and feel pain around are tied to relations with others.

At a micro level, there is a voluminous body of research exploring the linked nature of lives creates unexpected changes and circumstances. When lives are "out of sync," relationships are often strained. This principle applies throughout the life course. Common examples of such interdependence are found within the domain of family, and include many direct applications to later life. Widowhood, for instance, destroys what is typically assumed to be the most central "linked life" — the partner relationship — and usually brings profound effects. The linked nature of lives may also contain or facilitate opportunities, or drain individuals of important resources. One example of this offered by the now-historically named "sandwich generation," in which middle-aged adults must simultaneously deal with the demands of raising children and care for ageing parents, creating a "life-cycle squeeze" (Oepplenuhner, 1983) that constrains time, energy, finances, and choices.

The emphasis on ‘linked lives’ has focused almost exclusively on familial or other face-to-face exchange of "microfiction" in scholarship on the life course (Hagedorn and Dannefer, 2003). Yet there is a largely undeveloped potential and increasing need to explore linked lives at least macro level of analysis — such as the linkages across generations in a society, or across nations.

The global linkage of lives is often unimagined, yet powerful. The increasing global organization of late modernity, the lives of both young and old, and indeed the lives of age peers who live far apart and will never meet, are linked through sets of global flows of capital, culture, and commodities — not to mention the increased scale of cross-border movements of people, beyond national borders. For example, with the lives of child laborers in the Global South and in East Asia, who work long hours to make products ranging from toys to T-shirts, which are consumed far away (Bates, 2002; Dannefer, 2003).

In some cases, such global linkages become intensified personal: some nursing homes in countries like Singapore are built with dormitories to house migrant workers from India and other nearby countries who staff frontline care positions. In the United States, immigrants from the Philippines, Ghana, and other demanding, low-paid positions of nursing assistants (Foner, 1994). In a study in the United States of nursing home reform, the staffing levels of residents involved resident managers. Among a diverse pool of applicants, the residents selected candidates from Ghana because they demonstrated a palpable spirit of caring respect for elders that was evident in native North American applicants (Dannefer and Daub, 2009). At the same time, such laborers are also spouses and parents, and the migrant worker experience imposes strain on and changes power dynamics for linked lives within the family (Burawoy, 2006; Dannefer and Siders, 2009; Smith, 2003). Here, the focus is upon how care may be spaced across continents, part of the "globalization" of family life affecting migrants moving from the Global South to the Global North. This process generates new forms of transnational caregiving, with supportive and financial ties maintained between "first" and "second homes" (Phillipson et al., 2003).

The life-course perspective sensitizes social gerontology to the existence of age as a variable and alterable property of social systems

The articulation of age as a property of social systems — i.e., as an integral part of cultural and symbolic systems that define and organize social life within a society — was given its most precise and elegant theoretical formulation in Riley’s original formulation of the age stratification framework (Riley et al., 1972; see also Dannefer et al., 2003). That framework’s principal assumptions differ in how they recognize and deal with age, and that in modern societies, all ages exist at once within a matrix of age-graded institutions that direct how we think and vary our views of the different age categories. These institutions exist independently of the individuals who constantly pass through them as they age, a process that Riley and her associates called "political cohort flows." Akenson’s earlier paper, Riley’s ideas laid a firm foundation from which social science scholars could conceptualize the formal segmentation of age groups into institutionally differentiated spheres as a major, long-term process of social change, a process life-course scholars now refer to as the institutionalization of the life course, described earlier.

In conceptualizing age as a property of social systems and not just of individuals, another potentially radical implication emerges for social gerontology: If social organization and institutionalization of the life course is occurring, and the implications of such a trend for ageing are questions of engaging and vigorous debate that will likely last for some time. However this debate plays out, one positive result is that it demonstrates the arbitrariness and often destructive nature of taken-for-granted notions of ageing — as well as the potentials of older people, and of people at any age, to challenge the constraints of their lives in terms that are less defined by restricted social roles that reify age and ignore human potentials.

NOTE

1. For a critical and comparative analysis of the perspectives of life-course sociology and life-span psychology, see Dannefer, 1984; Diekow and Mayer, 2009; and Setzler, 2009.

REFERENCES


