

# Enriching the Tapestry: Expanding the Scope of Life Course Concepts

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**D**UANE Alwin is to be thanked for an ambitious effort to provide a systematic review of the diverse array of meanings of “life course” and related terms and to contribute to the discussion of the possibilities of integration of this important but often unwieldy literature. It is an undertaking that invites reaction at many points. Of course, space precludes a comprehensive response to the full range of ideas and issues Alwin presents. I limit my comment to three topics that warrant further attention: (a) the importance of the life course as a social institution, (b) the relation of the “life span” and “life course” concepts, and (c) the need to address what I have earlier identified as theoretical deficiencies that are common to both life span and life course perspectives.

At the beginning of his essay “Integrating Varieties of Life-Course Concepts” (hereafter termed “IVLC”), Alwin counterposes the risks that may be present when a single term is used to connote “a multiplicity of meanings that are at variance with one another” with the benefits that may come from a concept whose breadth offers “rich tapestry of different emphases.” I am sympathetic to Alwin’s caution of the dangers inherent in requiring a single term—life course—to carry a “multiplicity of meanings,” which is the more worrisome when the use of the term is accompanied by unexamined assumptions and a lack of consistency in explanatory objectives. In attempting to bring some order to this unwieldy domain, I applaud and appreciate the taxonomic and integrative objectives of IVLC. In this comment, I will note some significant arenas in which the formulation offered in IVLC needs to be extended in terms of conceptual scope, precision, and critical analysis.

Although the array of terms, concepts, and issues introduced in IVLC do indeed represent quite a varied collection, I must begin by taking note of the need to add yet even more “richness to the tapestry.” The task of integration presupposes that the components essential to the integrative effort have been identified, and it is necessary to begin by pointing out at least one omitted but essential class of phenomena, which revolve around the concept of the life course as a social institution.

## BRINGING IN STRUCTURE: THE LIFE COURSE AS A PROPERTY NOT OF INDIVIDUALS BUT OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

As several scholars have noted, one major conceptual divide in life course studies is the distinction between life

course questions focused on individual-level outcomes and the significance of the life course as itself a social construct, as a property of social systems (Dannefer & Uhlenberg, 1999; Kohli, 1985, 2007). It has been noted that this distinction reflects a longstanding difference in intellectual emphasis between North American and European scholars (e.g., Dannefer & Kelley-Moore, 2009; Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001; Mayer, 2009), with the former focusing on the early-life antecedents of later-life outcomes and the latter focusing on the inscription of age into social institutions and social structure through social policies and practices. Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to characterize these two perspectives as reflecting a clearly bounded transatlantic divide. After all, the idea of the life course as an element of social structure (via age-related roles) was present in the foundational work of Cain (1964), and it occupies a central place in Riley’s formulations—both in the original age stratification perspective (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972, pp. 7–9) and also later in her presentation of the tripartite (schooling/work/retirement), age-graded role structure of the modern life course (Riley & Riley, 1994, pp. 24–28). In Riley’s elegantly formulated Parsonian model, roles are treated as components of social systems and hence are properly understood as elements of social structure.

Although it is important to note these precursors, the structural perspective on the life course was given a different order of magnitude in the work of Kohli (1985, 1986, 2007), who has been the principal architect of the idea of the life course as a social institution. Here again, the life course is properly regarded as not only an individual-level phenomenon but also as a structural feature of society. It is composed of the interrelated set of age-related roles and criteria of role access through which individuals move as they age, but it endures the passage of individuals through the roles. Thus, for a substantial segment of life course scholars, a primary orientation is to understanding the life course in terms of institutionalization processes and as a feature of social structure. From this perspective, the problems and “outcomes” of interest have to do with the life course as a constructed social reality—with historically specific but socially plausible and normative meanings and definitions of the life course as a component of social structure. The institutionalization of the life course (hereafter ILC) perspective brings its own set of concepts, providing additional tools for

life course analysis. For example, the concept of chronologization (see Kohli, 2007), referring to the temporal aspects of life standardization that are integral to the institutionalized life course, intersects with other work on the relation of time and aging (e.g., Baars & Visser, 2006; Hendricks & Seltzer, 1986).

From the beginning, the life course as a component of social structure has been seen as consequential for the specific individual outcomes that are the specific focus of IVLC—health and well-being. For example, one of the key elements of the ILC has been the establishment of pension and health care policies in late modern societies that have reduced poverty and its attendant health risks in later life.

Beyond this widely recognized effect of policy upon individual aging, Kohli argues for a subtler and yet possibly more fundamental mental health benefit of the ILC. He proposes that by providing a coherent and meaningful narrative to organize individual's sense of the passage of time, the institutionalized life course makes an important contribution to solving the fabled existential problem of meaning in modern society. He argues that as a social construct, the life course offers to individuals "... a set of biographical orientations by which to organize one's experiences and plans" (2007:255). As a consequence, he contends, "... the institutionalized life course has come to achieve social order by processing people through the social structure and articulating their actions, in other words, by providing the rules by which individuals unfold and conduct their lives" (2007:256). As such, the ILC is seen as having an independent causal impact on health-related outcomes. It serves both to organize experience into a sequence of age-graded roles and institutional matrices and also provide an existential anchor by defining it as a humanly recognized and agreed upon set of biographical meanings.

Despite Alwin's lack of reference to this social construct perspective on the life course, I believe that few could disagree that this is a centrally important and indeed more encompassing approach to life course studies and that the ILC and related concepts must be added to the inventory presented in IVLC, if the full range of meanings and forms of the life course is to be considered.

#### CONSIDERING THE SCOPE OF LIFE COURSE AND LIFE-SPAN CONCEPTS

The relationship between life span and life course concepts is a topic that has received considerable recent attention by scholars in both traditions (e.g., Dannefer & Daub, 2009; Heckhausen, 1999; Mayer, 2003; Settersten, 2009). Alwin suggests in IVLC that life course is the narrower of the two concepts, an appraisal with which Mayer (2003) concurs. In my own writing, I have suggested the reverse (Dannefer & Daub, 2009). The difference is accounted for by the use of different criteria for assessing breadth. It is interesting to note that Alwin and Mayer differ in their

reasons for considering "life span" to be the broader concept: Alwin focuses on the age range covered, suggesting that life course analysis begins "... after some arbitrary point in the life span", whereas the life-span perspective "... considers 'aging' to begin at the beginning." Mayer, by contrast, bases his assessment on the scope of explanatory principles, noting that "life course sociology tends to exclude evolutionary, biological, and genetic factors from its explanatory toolbox" (2003:469).

Without becoming sidetracked into a debate over which of these (or possibly other) factors should be regarded as more central, I would suggest that more fundamental criterion on which to base such a judgment is the outcomes of interest—the array of characteristics or phenomena that researchers in a given field are trying to understand. That is where any field of study must logically begin, by identifying the phenomena which it seeks to understand. By this foundational criterion, life course is considerably broader, for it encompasses at least three different classes of phenomena, each representing three different types of units of analysis—individual, collective, and structural/symbolic (Dannefer & Kelley-Moore, 2009; Dannefer & Uhlenberg, 1999). The life-span tradition shares with the life course perspective the first of these—*individual-level* outcomes—but is largely restricted to that level, thus targeting a narrower field of study as its problem.

The discussion of the ILC in the prior section offers a prime example of what I mean by *structural/symbolic* outcomes; in such research, the questions are about social structure rather than individuals. By *collective* outcomes, I refer to those studies that treat as the unit of analysis the distribution of a characteristic in a cohort. This has been done in many different ways, such as the application of the interquartile range to measure cohort transition behavior (e.g., Hogan, 1981) and the measurement of intracohort inequality to study cumulative dis/advantage (e.g., Crystal & Waehrer, 1996; Dannefer, 1987; Dannefer & Sell, 1988; O'Rand, 1996, 2002). Range and inequality are, of course, examples of collective measures, which describe characteristics of populations. As Mayer put it, "... it is not just individuals but populations that are allocated to and streamlined through the institutional fabric of society across the lifetime" (2003:466). This richly varied and multidimensional array of life course research problems represents a field of study of remarkable breadth, within one just portion of which is contained most if not all of the subject matter concerns of the life-span tradition.

But it also needs pointing out that to the extent that it has been accurate to suggest that the life course perspective is "narrower" based on either its age range or explanatory toolbox, this appraisal is also overdue for modification. Recent developments in the sociology of the life course suggest that with respect to both of these, the scope of life course inquiry is changing and, certainly, that it needs to change. Nothing in the logic or principles of the life-course

tradition preclude an examination of the impact of circumstances and events earlier in the life course nor of genetic factors.

Indeed, some scholars have long called attention to the importance of biology for life course studies (e.g., Dannefer, 1999, Riley & Bond, 1983) and more recently, the study of gene–environment interactions has become an active field of life course scholarship (e.g., Dannefer, 2011; Douthit, Dannefer, & Kelley-Moore, 2011; Shanahan & Hofer, 2005; Shanahan, Hofer, & Shanahan, 2003). Specifically related to later life health and well-being, there is increasing attention to social conditions both in prenatal and early childhood environments (e.g., nutrition, toxicity) that may fix with some permanence hormonal and metabolic parameters (Adair, 2007, 2008; Barker, 1990; Dannefer, 2011; Gluckman & Hanson, 2006; Gluckman, Hanson, Cooper, & Thornburg, 2008). Along with additive and accumulative processes over the life course, such factors may have a direct impact on adult health (Ferraro & Kelley-Moore, 2003; Ferraro, Shippee, & Schafer, 2009).

It is noteworthy that the work on fetal origins represented in Gluckman and Hanson's research has presaged what is now a burgeoning enterprise of research in developmental biology, with some biologists now explicitly defining their work as "life course" research, in terms that are remarkably consistent with social science life course work: "There are at least three aspects to consider: the various strands of inheritance, the environment experienced during development, and the environment now being faced" (2006:204).

To the extent that such arguments are correct, they suggest that if life course studies ignore the early life course, it does so at considerable explanatory peril—even though outcomes in adulthood depend not on these earlier experiences alone but on their interaction with subsequent conditions.

#### **LIFE COURSE AND LIFE SPAN: COMMON GROUND, COMMON HEURISTICS, AND COMMON DEFICIENCIES**

Beyond ways in which the life course and life-span approaches may be seen as divergent, IVLC emphasizes that they also overlap and share a significant range of common elements, an appraisal within which I am in full concurrence. However, the common ground shared by the two perspectives needs to be not only described on its own terms, but also to be critically scrutinized.

Such scrutiny brings into focus a series of significant problems for both the life span and life-course traditions as they have operated to date, for it reveals in both traditions a general lack of engagement with the explanatory power of social forces. This can be well-illustrated with the reactions of both life course and life-span traditions to a phenomenon that was a common and strong catalyst to the beginning of both life-span and life course studies, the discovery in the

late 1960s of the importance of cohort analysis. As I have shown elsewhere, the consistent response to cohort analysis can be characterized as reflecting an heuristic of *containment* (Dannefer, 2011), which entails a reluctance to embrace fully both (a) the implications of the discovery of cohort differences for the reconceptualizing individual lives as socially constituted (Baars, 1991) and (b) the implications for analyzing society (and specifically, age-graded social institutions) when the legitimacy of taken-for-granted institutions is called into question by the decoupling of age and ontogenesis. With the insights catalyzed by cohort analysis, it was time to stop regarding major institutional configurations of society (e.g., schools, nursing homes) as accommodations to the needs of the individual, without simultaneously considering the possibility that individuals are also needed to populate such organizations, these driving the creation of the need for such institutions in individual consciousness (Dannefer, 2008). Owing to the reliance on the heuristic of containment, the opportunities afforded by life course analysis to rethink the full range of human possibilities accompanying the experience of aging have so far been realized only to a quite limited degree.

With such concerns in mind, I suggest that the descriptive analysis of the field of life course studies and its relation to life-span psychology presented in IVLC be complemented by deliberate attention to the pervasive problem in these fields (their enduring accomplishments notwithstanding) of an underdeveloped sociological imagination.

#### **CONCLUDING COMMENT: ENRICHING THE TAPESTRY, EXPANDING THE SCOPE**

In sum, I appreciate Duane Alwin's effort to catalog and systematize a number of the key concepts comprising and surrounding the study of the life course. Despite the conceptual richness he presents, I have called attention to the need to "enrich the tapestry" still further, by adding the ILC perspective to his inventory of terms, by recognizing the broader array of both life-course outcomes and explanatory social forces that are essential to understanding life course phenomena, and by applying a critical lens to the discussion of these concepts. Such an expanded characterization of the subject matter of the life course is necessary if we are to capture fully the breadth and richness of the field that is life course studies.

Alwin's treatment of the enduring question of the relationship between the life course and life-span perspectives is simultaneously informative and provocative. Yet, if a primary criterion for assessing the breadth of an intellectual tradition is the range of phenomena that researchers in that tradition seek to address, the life course is clearly a broader field of study. Whereas both the life span and life-course traditions are concerned with individual outcomes, many life course scholars have also been concerned with at least two other classes of phenomena—with both collective cohort-level, collective outcomes and also with the social-

structural and cultural constructions of age, as represented by ILC. It also needs to be noted that there are other ways (expanding age range and more integration with biological characteristics) in which the life-course tradition is continuing to broaden its scope.

Finally, an adequate analysis of life course, life span, and other “life word” concepts cannot be achieved without going beyond the characterizations of these concepts offered on their own terms. The extensive review and systematic description of concepts in IVLC provides a useful catalog and a necessary first step for life course studies. However, the premises and claims of the various perspectives described cannot be accepted without careful and critical scrutiny. Scholars of both the life course and the life span will be unduly limited in the kinds of questions they ask until they are prepared to reject the untenable assumptions—both individual and social—underlie the functional developmental symbiosis and the heuristic of containment.

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