

Lifecourse and Aging

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Abstract

This essay addresses the need of peoples everywhere to think about the human life span as a series of discretely identifiable stages here characterized and analyzed as a series of fundamental dimensions around which dominant cultural beliefs are commonly organized. They include: Universality versus diversity; determinacy versus indeterminacy; social time versus experienced time; and course versus cycle. Each dimension is described and exemplified, resulting in a framework to guide future studies of aging and the life course.

From the riddle of the sphinx to the topsy-turvy life of Scott Fitzgerald's Benjamin Button, the course of life trajectory straddling cradle to grave and beyond, has played on human imagination as well as on the formulation of methodical paradigms. The perceptual, cultural need to encode the continuous indivisibility of experienced living into discretely identifiable units of life sets the intertwined public and academic scene that comprehends life course and aging in contradictory terms of opposing outlooks.

Thus, developmental perspectives on the course of life so entrenched in contemporary therapeutic culture and in age-graded institutional arrangements, such as schools, are anchored in the spirit of progress embedded in modernity, whereas the postmodern, global specter of "anything goes" invokes representations of effervescent, erratic, multidirectional flows in its own kaleidoscopic image.

Notwithstanding, epoch-related transformations in notions of the movement through life, certain persistent dilemmas could be identified as key topics that mobilize conflicting scholarly discourses concerning the underpinnings of life course debate. The following is set to unfold these dilemmas as a basis for offering an agenda for looking at diverse aspects of deliberating life course issues. Each dilemma profiles yet another feature in the Janus face of the concept of the life course as an architecturally constructed process on one hand and as an experientially shaped phenomenon on the other.

The interplay between these two epistemological impulses generates various dialectics of power and knowledge that embody both theoretical models and their interlocked social action.

Such ideological and practical cultural products could, for example, take the shape of psychosociobiological models of benchmarks laid throughout modernity oriented preset developmental trajectories, that in turn chart age-biased normative maps. When this perspective is infused with the zeitgeist of progress-driven modern time, it is incarnated in the regulatory forces and ethics of presumed age-related cultures.

Such are contrived idioms of youth culture, midlife culture, and old age culture—all under the guidance and surveillance of omnipotent and uncompromising therapeutic rituals of correction. Conversely, cyber and cinematic society propels legitimated imagery of and opportunity for transgressing and subverting otherwise sacrosanct age boundaries.

This dissolution of age norms, like the collapse of gender markers, not only reshuffles the pack of life stages cards but also changes the rules of the game to the extent that being off course in terms of socially anticipated timetables, be it regressively or progressively, behind or ahead, is not considered deviant, and no longer affirms the appropriate passage of life. Thus, a confluence of two states of the cultural matter is implausibly concocted. That is, a conjunction of quiddity and liquidity. The quiddity is that of arbitrary numbers and their subsequent solid bureaucratic thresholds, whereas the liquidity is of meanings and forms. This dialectical union renders nowadays age-riddled culture both insoluble and soluble at once.

The four sketchily unfolded dilemmas are as follows:

The first is in the nexus of universality versus diversity

Biologically determined and visibly apparent, the ontology of life changes is turned into seemingly universal epistemology that presupposes correspondence between physiological-functional transformations and assumed social standing. The nadir of such congruity is the overall postulation of common essential exigencies deemed vital for human survival and fulfillment in all cultures. While this approach could be taken as somewhat obsolete due to its in-built predicates as to the reductive driving forces that predetermine the course of life, it nevertheless taps some of the general tenets of human existence.

Thus, social arrangements for procreation such as the family, necessities of economic viability, the pursuit of meaning, and the quest for a dignified final exit could all be regarded as arguable human universals that transcend personal differences, cultural boundaries, and social milieus.

However, as anthropology is a diversity sensitive discipline, it either documents various cultural manifestations of responding to such universals or, alternatively, displays a spectrum of courses of aging in which each culture

is of a different exceptional hue. This form of relentless cultural relativism, while stymieing the anthropological imperative for systematic comparison, offers divergent native's points of view that highlight infinitely disparate forking paths of life.

From the claim that social aging is absent from Indian culture through the high emphasis on aging in Samburu gerontocracy, to the depiction of culturally contingent life course in Japan as a moving caravan of long-term generational commitments, ethnographers of life span transitions throw into relief the outstanding cultural outlines that renders a given setting unique.

However, diversity is not merely a matter of cultural differences but also of discrepancy in formations of identity. While in modern Western settings the ethos of individualism reigns supreme in reckoning the predicted and expected life span, other cultures are based on socially undifferentiated selves that are submerged into an amalgamated oneness. This distinction between the two modes of belonging is based on a gulf separating a notion of selfhood as transient embodied personal entity from the idea of selfhood as a constant, communally shared, universal-like body social. Diversity and universality therefore are temporal signifiers rather than spatial parameters.

This observation transposes the run-off-the mill anthropological debate of cultural relativism versus human universals from focusing on synchronic associations to concentrating on diachronic continuities and discontinuities; that is an epistemological shift from being to becoming, from staging to flow and from discreteness to duration—all evidently draw on different schools of thought and yet suggesting one dialectic of determinacy and indeterminacy.

The second dilemma thus is of determinacy versus indeterminacy:

Psychocultural developmental orientations rationalizing the vagaries that erratically outline the course of life have invincibly permeated modernity-stricken, progress-obsessed sociology and anthropology as well as some branches of psychology. The patterning of life is consequently encoded as a meaning seeking journey moving along a desired life project, or through culturally prescribed plots. In either case, a culturally determined, almost fatalistically carved train of change is inadvertently imagined through implicitly embodied or explicitly scripted texts of identity.

Such tracks of meaning seeking are designated to finally arrive at a tellingly desirable departure from life, one that signifies a culturally contingent view of the preferable ending. Subsequently, life stories rather than life histories become yardsticks for tracking down retrospectively schemed, meaningfully strung, chains of life events striving for the right finale.

This search for the "good death" across the life span coupled with the Aristotelian dictum of a life worthy of living seems to impregnate that presumably ubiquitous human pursuit. No matter what the rudiments of this set course are—evolutionary forces, innate psychological traits, fundamental

cultural themes—the paradigm of “soft” or “hard” determinacy prevails in most interpretations of the dynamic forces that engender and orchestrate the construction and the rhythm composing life courses, hopefully securing good deaths, as many as the worldviews breeding them.

Notwithstanding the quest for determinacy, the postmodern bias toward relational and relative veracity does take its toll on the poetics and politics of everyday living. This is accomplished through the emphasis on the autonomy to exercise individual choice and apply personal agency against the grain of presaged scenarios. The seeming irony of that conflated language of contradictory terms of validating reality draws its inner persuasion from the nexus of immortality and postmodernity in an era of endless short lived routes and countless endings.

This duality is spectacularly highlighted by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his discussion of the ceaseless masquerading of appearance and disappearance in today’s public sphere. Such a rebellion against fateful trajectories is evinced in a number of slants to the predictable accountability to one’s life career such as in the increase in cases of opting for individually chosen autobiographical paths or in turning to an ad hoc situational navigation of life. A culturally expected premium is hence given to experienced reality over superimposed structures, which in our terms means the third dilemma.

The dilemma of social time as against experienced time.

Perhaps the most dominant monitoring controller of the movement through life is concepts of age categorization. Unlike other physiologically apparent classificatory principles such as race and sex, age is still a Gordian tie intractably entangling the natural and the social, thereby surpassing both cultural codification and historical periodization. In some simple societies where the lives of all members are converged to follow one track of living from birth to death, “life term social arena” as coined by anthropologist Sally Moore, the social gaze is sufficiently powerful to ensure rigid scrutiny of age group norms subjected to nil degrees of freedom of choice.

But, age-charted normative maps are not prevalent only in such age-segregated societies organized around age class systems based on peer-biased division of labor. They also apply to various extents to “limited social arena” societies where role differentiation and specialization launch people on different, interchangeable identity tracks. In effect, the bureaucratic nature of modern society assigns a multitude of chronologically set positions, hence amplifying the foundational power of age-fabricated stratification. Such institutional imperatives delineate and maintain age-grounded boundaries turned out to be principal features of a culture that, contrary to its subordination the tyranny of age, proverbially and declaratively flouts the importance of age as a source of meaning.

By contrast, in cultures where functional age accounts for accomplished and acknowledged status transitions as performed in the course of rites of passage, in modern societies that accord almost mythical significance to the value of bureaucratically furnished numerical indices, chronological age obtains the social classificatory and regulatory qualities of age-related competence tests. Hence, not only has the ascribed power of age not been curtailed in complex societies, but, in the absence of constantly consensual criteria for allocating social resources and rewards, the prominence of the common denominator of age as both a cultural equalizer and divider is on the increase as identity structuring device. This happens in inverse relation to the eclipse of the shining predominance of hegemonic cultural narratives. Childhood and old age are complimentary yet contradictory representations of such dual process.

While childhood is invariably assessed, carefully drafted and handled with meticulous developmental standards and respective disciplinary apparatuses, the category of the old is deemed loosely static and stagnant. Although academics as well as some policy makers have long proposed a reclassification of the elderly into subcategories of young old, old and old-old, third age and fourth age, octogenarians and centenarians, the cultural imagery of that general human type is of a monolithic character often dubbed euphemistically as senior years or golden age.

The "forth age," however a scholarly sensitized subcategory comprising those whose life world is distinctly different from that of the rest of their old contemporaries who still struggle to emulate midlife style, has gained only scant heed in relevant research. This is in spite of the challenges posed by that supposedly distinct phase to the orthodox perspectives on the life course as a progressive sequencing of continuous change or as reflection of a steadfast ageless self.

The elderly in general and the very old in particular are thus denied the status of pilgrims to the temples of modernity that bestow on their worshipers an aura of socially stamped inclusionary accreditation. In that respect, the vacuum of social death assigned to the category of the old becomes a breeding ground for the emergence of extracultural, exclusionary indestructible, ultimate otherness. The suggestion of another time zone inherent in this kind of conjecture broaches the fourth dilemma that destabilizes the whole concept of a life course.

That is the conflict between course and cycle or rather the transmutation from course into cycle.

The paradox of aging as a continuous experiential process of becoming as against the discrete category of old age as being in the world calls for cultural resolutions to tackle its discontents. To that aim, two divergent paths are followed, each taking a different perceptual stance. The first is the insistence

on the conviction that elderly people are haunted by the pursuit of meaning through dwelling on memories to the extent that some students of aging urge elderly researchees to revisit their past as a reconstructed source for therapeutically attaining self-realization. The justification for this line of inquiry lies in the assumption that notwithstanding apparent bodily transformations, the old sustain an unassailable sense of a durable self.

In opposition, the second outlook turns its gaze to the terms and conditions that circumscribe the disjointed cultural territory of the old and subsequently re-form their lived-in experience. Thus, the forced moratorium from temporal constraints is sited in a-temporal spaces that resist or ignore change by being exiled from the predictabilities of the course of culture. Such enclaves range from institutions for the old, through cinematic representations to the uniquely discordant music and literature created by the old. Contrary to received gerontological wisdom, all of these “cultures of aging” seem to indicate the prevalence of closure rather than flux, the presence of the body natural rather than its symbolic embodiment, metonymic patterning of living rather than open-ended metaphoric imagination, incoherence rather than coherence, spatial construction of reality rather than teleological evolution, and present-bound existence rather than future-oriented life.

This temporal turn from course into cycle, from modern-biased linearity into pre/postmodern repetitious fragmentation offers the old a triple opportunity for taking advantage of the split between the quiddity instilled in their phase of life and the liquidity surrounding it. Hence, and owing to that divergence in inner and outer epistemologies, the tension that produces the four existential dilemmas no longer operates. That leaves the life world of the old as an arena for conducting an unleashed, uncontrollable experiments in aging in preparation for the expected and yet unknown. Three existential options for living with and within that socially discharged last phase could be explored, practiced, and studied.

First, a newly gained sense of liberation from norms, values, commitments, and the futile quest for meaning; second, freedom to be concerned with the now and here management of living under the auspices of limbo time in which they are marooned; and third, enlisting still time to arrest impending death by sabotaging its inevitable course.

This freshly formatted cyclical repetitive time could be pivoted on daily recurrence of daily habits and routines, on socially affected amnesia annulling past and obliterating future, or on holding on to unarticulated fragments of postmodern life styles. In that sense, the monotonous patterns of either cycle or fragment, both in defiance of coherent contexts, juxtapose, as suggested by anthropologist Marylyn Strathern, the premodern to the postmodern. Trapped in between, the penultimate pulse of life of the very

old is thus turned into a-historical moment of timeless immortality just before the final stroke of mortal time.

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