

CHAPTER 29

Toward a Global Geography of the Life Course

Challenges of Late Modernity for Life Course Theory

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INTRODUCTION

From the beginning, social change has been a central theme of work in the life course tradition (Cain, 1964; Elder, 1974, 1975; Elder & Crosnoe, *this volume*; Giele & Elder, 1998). In the present historical moment, we are confronted with processes of social transformation and knowledge transformation that are likely to change the enterprise of life course studies itself. In this chapter, I sketch some dimensions of the present situation that may impel such change. This task necessarily assumes a reasonably clear statement of how one conceptualizes “the life course” as an area of study. As this volume powerfully attests, the life course area encompasses a richly diverse and sometimes incommensurate set of questions, methods and principles. Clearly, it is a term that embodies multiple intellectual perspectives.

To provide an organizing framework, I employ the basic conceptual distinction between “life course as *phenomenon*” and “life course as *theory*”, recently introduced into the literature (Dannefer & Uhlenberg, 1999; Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001). From one set of perspectives, life course refers to a *construct, a phenomenon to be described and explained*. Such is the

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perspective, for example, that informs work describing life course patterns at the macro-level and charting the aggregate stability and change of these patterns and associated factors over time. From another perspective, the life course refers to an *explanatory theory* which proposes to use earlier life course experiences as a *means of accounting for subsequent life outcomes*. Such work generally entails the tracing of individual change over time, exploring the degree to which later life outcomes can be predicted or interpreted from events or conditions experienced by the individual at a younger age.

In both of these domains—*phenomenon* and *theory*, the life course perspective faces challenges from recent and current social-structural, political, and technological developments. The developments in question are closely related to substantial changes of the structures of 20th century modernity, and the new conditions of what is variously called “postmodernism” (Harvey, 1989), late modernity (Giddens, 1994), or the “risk society” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996). Whatever term one prefers, these developments reflect “time-space distention” (Giddens, 1991), evidenced by new modes of relation between technology and information, such as the deployment of widely accessible, instantaneous technologies of global communication, or the near-instantaneous processing of the routine transactions of large financial institutions by semi-skilled workers in third world countries. Such developments both enable and reflect the growth of trans-national corporations (Soros, 2002). Beyond the level of everyday human activities and institutional practices, concomitant changes have involved the weakening of national political boundaries and systems (Castells, 2000; Reich, 1992), and of traditional regimes of social mobility, including the one-life/one-career imperative (Dannefer, 2000; Riley & Riley, 1994), and thus, possibly, a concomitant erosion of the institutionalized life course (Kohli, 1986). Above all, this constellation of changes represents a new global interdependence (Castells, 2000) which is transforming, enriching, and challenging the knowledge base and problematics of the human sciences. Fueled by possibilities of low-cost and near-instantaneous global communication, new modes of social organization, exchange, and social interaction are emerging more rapidly than they can be studied—from web-based businesses and educational programs that have a worldwide market, to the use of a worldwide labor pool to market as well as manufacture products, to on-line sex, to new efficiencies in extortion and other criminal enterprises (Castells, 2001, pp. 5–6; Stiglitz, 2002). These broad trends amplify further the globalization of communication and production processes in the latter half of the 20th century. The debates surrounding the details of these broad changes (captured in such terminological alternatives as “postmodernism”, “poststructuralism”, or “late modernity”) entail numerous controversies that lie well beyond the scope of this chapter. I use the term “late modernity” to refer to the constellation of forces that has produced a recognizably distinct historical period, even while many of the ideal-typical features of modernity remain robust and provide substantial continuity in the lives of both individuals and institutions (see Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Giddens, 1994; Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001).

In this chapter, I sketch some dimensions of how these changes may affect the study of the life course, both as “phenomenon” and as “explanation.” I argue that these developments are likely to pose major challenges to the current state of knowledge concerning the life course. Simultaneously, the same developments generate new questions, and provide opportunities for broader testing of generalizations and assumptions in the existing literature. I conclude by suggesting how the greater awareness of and access to cross-cultural data, and trends of social change emerging in both “less developed” and late modern societies over recent decades, may simultaneously offer research opportunities that transcend what is possible within a single society, and compel the attention of researchers to less familiar patterns of

biography and relationship. We can, in short, now envision the need for a “global geography” of the life course.

THE LIFE COURSE AS *CONSTRUCT*

The structure and organization of biographical experience has comprised one of the central questions of life course research. To this end, a major theme in the literature on the modern life course has been to assert its relatively orderly and age-graded role structure. This theme has relied heavily on demographic and other traditions of research that provide descriptions of the life trajectories of large segments of a population (e.g., Henretta, 1992; Meyer, 1986; Modell, Furstenberg & Strong, 1978). Over much of the 20th century, these patterns became increasingly standardized in the familiar form that has come to be called the “three boxes of life”—of education, work and retirement (Riley & Riley, 1994). It is also seen in “personal life”, in increasingly stable and prolonged family roles (e.g., Hagestad, 1988; Uhlenberg, 1978; Uhlenberg and Mueller, *this volume*.) As it has been increasingly defined by the crystallization of age grading in education, in the workplace and in the establishment of retirement, the life course itself has become a social institution (Kohli & Meyer 1986).

Some scholars have emphasized the role of individual choice in producing, paradoxically, uniform age-graded patterns (e.g., Hogan, 1981; Modell, 1989; cf. Dannefer, 1984). Others have pointed to the role of the state in shaping individual lives (e.g., Kohli, 1999; Meyer, 1986) and individual life chances (Crystal & Waehrer, 1996; Dannefer, 1988; 2000; O’Rand & Henretta, 1999) through the construction of the age-graded and stratified institutions of schooling, work careers and retirement (Phillipson, 1998; Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972; Rosenbaum, 1983). Despite these differences in interpretation, few have taken issue with the empirical reality of the life course as characterized by the “three boxes” as an empirically modal pattern generally characterizing modern societies through the 20th century and indeed, with the idea of the life course itself a social institution of modernity (Kohli, 1986)—an individual-level product of the combined effects of various age-graded institutions of childcare, schooling, work, retirement, and health care.

Cross-Societal Variations in the Shape and Degree of Life Course Institutionalization

Viewed in global perspective, it is clear that this “typical” life course pattern is not at all typical for much of the human population. Quite different patterns are found in the “Majority World”—the poorer and less developed countries where most of the people inhabiting the earth live (Ellwood & Crump, 1999). If the life course area is to encompass the full range of human diversity and human possibility, these diverse patterns cannot be ignored. Many “alternative” life course configurations are also strongly institutionalized. Such established patterns can be observed in spite of the high population turnover of countries that have not undergone the demographic transition—witnessing powerfully to the fact that the life course is indeed a social institution that transcends, and yet encases, the biographies of individuals. In some cases, such patterns are well entrenched, and are clearly older than the “three boxes” of the “modern” life course with which the term institutionalization has often been equated.

As an example, in some areas of Pakistan, India, and several other countries, the individual life course has, for substantial segments of the population, been shaped by intergenerational

patterns of familial bondage and child labor. Families routinely “bind over” their children to employers as a means of income. Often, it is reported that this practice is sustained as laborers seek to repay large and sometimes insurmountable debts in an ongoing, squirrelcage-like cycle that has for many families persisted for multiple generations, and from which old age is no escape. Bondage is one specific mechanism through which individuals are drafted into the labor force as children. Overall, there are an estimated 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 15 on the planet who work, about half of them full time (ILO, 1998; see also Reddy, 1995; Weiner, 1991). A substantial number of these are actually working under conditions of slavery or prostitution (Seabrook, 1996; 2000; U.S. Congress, 1994a).

With such planetary diversity more fully and unavoidably in view, the conventional preoccupations of life course studies risk appearing myopic. The magnitude and robustness of such realities challenge the life course perspective to approach its subject matter at a level of generality that can be applicable across societies, and to countenance an array of life course patterns and sequences that look quite different from the “mainstream” life course, but that are nonetheless institutionalized in the social systems that have produced them.

This challenge poses a particular problem for the study of the life course due to the unavoidable scope of its subject matter which is, at the most general level, the *human* life course (not just the Western European or Japanese or North American experience) and the elaboration of general principles to account for the interplay of structures and lives (Riley & Foner, 2001; Riley & Riley, 1994) in whatever societal context they are located, however different from our own. It must be acknowledged that it is a tall order, to take seriously the task of the opening up of the problem of developing a general, global depiction and analysis of the life course. Yet to the extent that life course studies seeks to characterize the life course as a human (and not merely a modern and mainstream) phenomenon, it is a question that cannot readily be avoided.

But beyond the recognition of global diversity, serious attention to the underlying structural dynamics that produce such variant life course patterns across societies, and especially between rich and poor societies, cannot ignore the fact that these variegated life course patterns have long been *interdependent*. This interdependence takes many forms. Trans-national immigration is one long-recognized source of new interpersonal interdependencies, complicated by changes in lifestyle and new modes of relationship (e.g., Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918) that remains highly relevant in contemporary contexts (e.g., Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, & Ogg, 2001).

More generally, mechanisms that create “linked lives” transnationally and transculturally impact large segments of the human population in ways that more directly shape life chances, the structure of opportunity and the meanings of work and career, of producer and consumer. For example, the lifestyles of affluent moderns depend on cheap raw materials and labor (including commonly practiced child labor)—in South America, the Caribbean, Asia and elsewhere (Lee & Brady, 1988; Lemoine, 1985; U.S. Congress, 1994a, 1994b). With globalization, these longstanding forms of linkage are expanded and further intensified.

The constellation of processes referred to as globalization cannot be seen as a generalized “first cause” of poverty, poor health, or inhumane work conditions. Indeed, many observers regard globalization as holding the promise of upgrading the material and perhaps cultural resources for all of humanity. Nevertheless, experts representing a range of theoretical and philosophical perspectives agree that the policies and institutional structures required to bring the promise of globalization have yet to be developed, and that powerful economic and political forces oppose their development (Soros, 2002; Stiglitz, 2002; Micklethwait & Wooldrich, 2000; Taylor, 2002). Again, a detailed consideration of these

issues is well beyond the scope of this chapter. My purpose here is simply to outline some aspects of the life course and issues that shape the life course for large populations of individuals, whose neglect by life course studies can no longer be justified.

In sum, globalization confronts life course studies with what has always been true, but has been long overlooked: That the relationships and connections that shape life chances and lives through time always are centrally shaped by dimensions of power between individuals, and between individuals and the institutions that organize their lives. The inherent individual-level focus of the subject matter of the life course, combined with the strong influence of the traditional functionalism on many early strands of life course theorizing (e.g., Clausen, 1972) makes the lack of attention to social-structural dynamics understandable. As with other aspects of the study of aging, studies of the life course have suffered from “microfication” (Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001). The role of these structural dynamics can, however, no longer be ignored. They inevitably confront life-course studies with complex issues of the asymmetry of power and resources (Dannefer, 1999; Stiglitz, 2002) and of “inclusion and exclusion” (Woodward & Kohli, 2001) within and beyond national boundaries. I return to this general issue in the concluding section. The next task, however, is to acknowledge alternative life course configurations “closer to home”.

Subcultural Variation in Life Course Patterns within Late Modern Societies

The theme of alternative, “nonstandard” life course patterns does not require travel to remote societies. They are also robustly institutionalized in minority subcultures within late modern societies. For example, in the United States structurally disadvantaged or privileged subpopulations have their own distinct patterns. The “lives of the rich and famous” often have not conformed very well to the standard, institutionalized life course, nor do those who belong to numerous subcultural minorities. Overall, the life course literature has largely ignored these alternative life course patterns. The work of Linda Burton and associates (e.g., 1996) comprises an important exception to this generalization; her careful research on disadvantaged minority families has documented well-institutionalized patterns of temporally compressed generations, and of generation-skipping patterns of functional parenthood.

Although not studied in detail from a life course perspective, we know that the social systems of urban street gangs in the United States throughout the 20th century also include a life course sequence institutionalized within the gang microculture. The sequence consists of temporally compressed but nonetheless objectively recognized stages of career development and something of a “normative life course” of gang membership, which includes an expectation of not surviving to age 30 (see, e.g., Bing 1991; for a detailed discussion in life course context, see Dannefer, 2002). “Homeboys” and “Tiny Gangsters” graduate, typically in their late teens, to the mainstream “adult” status of “Original Gangster”; older O.G.’s, in their 30s, have been called “Veteranos” or “Double O.G.’s”.

In short, within as well as beyond late modern societies, the human life course includes many well-established patterns that bear little resemblance to the “three boxes of life” spanning the better part of a century, that we have come to think of as “normal” and even “natural” (Dannefer, 1999; Morss, 1996). Under such alternative configurations, thirtysomethings may be grandparents (Burton, 1996); elders are workers, parents mortgage their children (ILO, 1998) and children themselves are laborers and parents, prostitutes and soldiers, criminals and explorers (e.g., Bing, 1991; Kett, 1977; Seabrook, 2000). Some children become independent at a remarkably young age, while others lose their lives at an early age. Few studies have illuminated

the life course patterns, norms, and expectations prevailing in such contrasting subcultures and circumstances.

To summarize, a global approach to the life course is confronted, initially, with a lack of knowledge about the diverse array of biographical experiences and concomitant life course patterns—the *global geography* of the life course. More than is usually the case with geography, however, such a task will inevitably encounter variation in the degree of stability of the life course itself at any given point in time, and varying rates of change in biographical patterning over time. In a time of extraordinarily rapid technical, organizational and social change, the life course in late modern societies is no exception.

Deinstitutionalization of the “Standard Life Course”?

In addition to the relatively straightforward matter of recognizing the global dimensions of the intellectual questions confronting the life course area, some have contended that the modern “standard life course” itself is now in a process of deinstitutionalization, in both private and public spheres. Whether or not this is seen as a manifestation of the general social deconstruction of modernity’s “grand narrative” envisioned by postmodernism, it clearly reflects a powerful set of economic and technological changes that have had multidimensional impacts on individual lives.

In the private sphere, a life course pattern that included a sustained period of time in a single marriage and survival to grandparenthood increased until the mid-20th century, and then began to reverse (Shanahan, 2000; Uhlenberg, 1978). In recent decades, the events of cohabitation, childbearing and marriage have become “disordered.” For example, cohabitation before first marriage has become the modal pattern for women (Bumpass & Lu, 1999), and the proportion of births to unmarried women has increased dramatically—more than 8-fold for white women from 1960 to 1992 (from 2% to 17%), and during the same time period nearly 3-fold for African-American women, increasing to nearly 70% in 1992 (Smith, Morgan, & Koropecyk-Cox, 1996). In the public sphere, the traditional pattern of a single career and an orderly “three box” progression from school to work to retirement has also been dramatically eroded. Education is increasingly extended throughout the life course, and public K-12 education is encountering competition with the vigorous industries of home schooling and private schools. Corporations are no longer seen as staid, hierarchical entities within which career ladders durable enough to last a lifetime of work are enclaved, but as subject to recombinant activities of contraction, transnational merger, and relocation. As a result, the content and career-plan of jobs is often so precarious that the idea of advancing within a career is uncertain and, perhaps, implausible. “Lifelong learning” and innumerable announcements of the need to plan for “multiple careers”, and multiple employers, have replaced the “one-career one-life imperative” (Sarason, 1977) in the rhetoric of employers and career counselors, and promises to erode the “three boxes” of the life course (Riley, Kahn & Foner, 1994).

At least in the United States, it is also contended that the pathways are also diversifying beyond midlife—as cross-pressures keep some employees working longer while early retirement options proliferate for others (e.g., Henretta, 1992, 2001), and a steady stream of retirees re-enters the work force (O’Rand & Henretta, 1999; see also Moen, *this volume*). Thus, an increasingly diverse array of life-course configurations exists, and no single pattern can legitimately be proclaimed as “normative” in any meaningful sense, either statistically or culturally.

Some contend that the arguments for deinstitutionalization in the public sphere are overblown since—despite some variations between and within societies—the “three boxes” still represent a modal pattern across late modernity. Kohli (e.g., 1994) has contended that the

rhetoric of deinstitutionalization has far outpaced the reality, and that the institutionalized life course remains robust, especially in the strong welfare states of Western Europe but also in Japan, other Asian societies, and North America. It may be that deinstitutionalization is progressing more rapidly in the United States, where school-to-work transition processes and labor market dynamics are both more fluid, unions are weaker, and both legal protections and norms of corporate obligation leave workers less secure. To the extent that this is true, it may be hypothesized that generalizations and projections that have been predicated on the institutionalized life course (concerning such matters as patterned role transitions, residential mobility and projected pension benefits) may become less powerful.

THE LIFE COURSE AS A STRATEGY OF EXPLANATION

As an explanatory strategy, life-course analysis seeks to understand the conditions under which events occurring early in the life course shape its direction in ways that can be observed decades later. Such analyses have produced valuable and often fascinating accounts of the long-term consequences of childhood deprivation (Elder, 1998), and the complex ways in which social-structural factors interact with exceptional or disruptive circumstances. It has been a highly fruitful strategy for demonstrating that diverse life outcomes can be ordered by relating them to differential constellations of early experience (see McLeod, *this volume*). Such analyses—which seek to understand the effects of a major disruptive event (e.g., the Vietnam War or the Great Depression) on people’s lives—are generally predicated on an assumption of *general social orderliness throughout the time period in question, apart from that focal event*.

Modernity and the Efficacy of Life Course Theory

Although modernity has typically been characterized as a mode of social organization in which *change* is “normal”, the development of modern societies has actually relied heavily upon the presupposition of a great deal of fundamental *stability* in basic institutional forms and in cultural, political, and economic conditions. This sustained period of relative political, cultural, and economic stability has both supported and benefited from the expansion of science, including the social and behavioral sciences. It has also provided an institutional matrix in which individuals have been able to lead comparatively orderly and predictable lives, and has thus provided a platform upon which the use of the life course as an explanatory strategy has been efficacious.

Thus, the “life course as explanation” has relied not merely upon the institutionalized life course, but upon the predictability of life routines and the possibility of life planning that have been made possible by an array of key characteristics of modernity, including bureaucratic control, economic stability and growth, and general cultural stability and continuity. These conditions provide a firm foundation of social order upon which the disruptions of events such as a major war seem remarkable, and could be traced over a protracted period of time, without undue further disruption.

Although some recent analyses within the life course tradition have begun to look at conditions at intervening time periods, the overarching heuristic focus of the life course as an explanatory strategy has been upon the early-event/late-life connection—as a later life outcome is interpreted as importantly shaped by an earlier experience, event or circumstance. Such analyses typically have proceeded without considering the potential causal significance

of socioenvironmental conditions or events occurring after the focal early-life event, thus implicitly assuming the irrelevance of such subsequent events for understanding subsequent outcomes. For purposes of empirical understanding and prediction, these subsequent social conditions and processes are thus rendered invisible (Dannefer & Uhlenberg, 1999). This assumption would seem easiest to justify and maintain when general social conditions are stable and orderly, allowing the effects of the early event to work themselves out on a placid historical landscape.

Thus, the general social conditions of modernity appear to have served especially well the research objective of finding empirical associations and causal speculations connecting early events and later-life circumstances. Clearly, they are conditions under which life-course research has produced a wealth of interesting findings and interpretations concerning, for example, the long-term effects upon coping skills and resilience of early experiences. Thus, a broad structure of social stability has provided the largely invisible and unremarked canvas upon which most of the lives studied from the life-course perspective are played out.

Life Course Explanation, Diversity, and Deinstitutionalization

Whether one uses the terminology of postmodernism or late modernity, few would disagree with the proposition that the character of the institutions of modernity entered a period of deep change in the last quadrant of the 20th century. The “standard” or “normal” life course sequences idealized through much of the twentieth century—the “three boxes of life” (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994) or more specifically, of “school-work-marriage” (Hogan, 1981), or of “marriage-cohabitation-childbearing” (Bachrach, Hindin, & Thomson, 2000) have for many people been rendered either unrealistic or undesirable, as has the “one-career imperative” (Sarason, 1977). Rather than being encouraged to develop loyalties in an anticipated context of lifelong employment situation, the cohorts of workers now young are being cautioned to expect to have multiple sites of employers and multiple careers over the course of their working lives.

Yet given the taken-for-grantedness of the broad conditions of institutional stability characterizing most of the 20th century, there has been little occasion to ask the question of *whether the apparent effects of earlier experience should be expected to have an impact of equal magnitude under these “late modern” conditions of institutional deconstruction*. To the extent that careers and family structures become disrupted and diversified, and to the extent that the deconstruction of families and corporate institutions as stable, enduring institutional entities expands, it may be questioned whether the rather robust connections often observed between say, the effects of the interaction of military service and childhood deprivation upon midlife accomplishments can be replicated. To the extent that observed T1–T2 life course connections rely upon conditions of institutional predictability and certainty, these connections may weaken or disappear if the institutional matrix is eroded. If late modernity is accurately characterized by greater variability and inequality across individuals, and by quicker pace, less predictability, and more career-switching or relational disruption within the experience of many individuals, how will this affect the explanatory potential of life course theory?

A Natural Experiment? Social Change and the Explanatory Potential of Life Course Theory

Interestingly, Caspi & Moffitt (1993) have proposed that these conditions of social turbulence and deconstruction are of special heuristic value. They contend that such conditions offer the

strongest and clearest tests of whether robust intrapersonal developmental effects occur under times of social instability and rapid change, since such conditions afford the opportunity to disentangle those continuities of personal life that are strong enough to survive the collapse of social constraints and social support from continuities that are sustained only by the stability and normative and structural constraints of a densely institutionalized social environment. Under precisely such conditions of disruption or upheaval, not only is the self-directed “power” of the individual actor maximized, but the power of the institutionalized social forces to shape and order individual lives and experience is minimized (Dannefer, 1993).

Thus, the deinstitutionalizing forces of late modernity offer both danger and opportunity to life course studies. The *danger* is that without the support of a stable and predictable institutional matrix that became increasingly established in modern Western societies in the second half of the 20th century, the kinds of long-term correlations between early events and life course outcomes that have been so extensively observed and reported may fail to materialize in future cohorts. On the other hand, the *opportunity* is that if such connections do continue to be found with the same levels of robustness, it would provide impressive evidence that these internalized life experiences depend upon socioenvironmental forces less than some might expect. In other words, with deinstitutionalization would come the opportunity to test two very general and fundamentally competing hypotheses concerning the forces underlying the strong and intriguing long-term outcomes so frequently reported in the life course literature. The “social-structural” hypothesis would predict that the patterns of continuity would evaporate along with the structures of modernity, signaling that one could not properly understand those outcomes in the first place, without recognizing the role of the institutional platform in providing key “necessary conditions.” Were such an outcome to eventuate, advocates of the social–structural view would properly point out that T2 outcomes that have been attributed to early experience in the life course literature have overlooked the essential importance of the enduring stability of social institutions as another set of vitally important contributing factors.

On the other hand, a strong version of the “selection” hypothesis would predict that the kinds of long-term associations reported in the life-course literature would be affected but little by even dramatically disruptive social changes and the permanent increase in levels of social unpredictability to which some attribute late modernity. In the event of such a finding, advocates of the selection hypothesis would have more grounds for disputing the claims and arguments coming from advocates of the social-structural hypotheses.

Thus, something of a “natural experiment” to identify forces underlying life-course connections may be facilitated by the changing conditions that we currently face, and will increasingly face. Whatever the outcome of such a natural experiment, undertaking it can only have the promise of strengthening the enterprise of life course studies, by applying it to an expanded range of social arrangements and populations, and by providing a more rigorous test that specifies the range of social conditions under which individual characteristics in later life can be associated with critical early experiences.

CONCLUSION: LIFE COURSE, GLOBALIZATION, AND SOCIAL THEORY

The end result of these challenges, if recognized and confronted directly, can only be good news for the study of the life course, both as phenomenon or construct to be explicated, and as explanation. I conclude with a comment on each of these.

First, as construct: Cross-cultural work that examines variations in the degree of orderliness in the structure of the life course, whether as institution or improvisation, can only mean that we gain in developing an understanding of the life course that is (1) global, encompassing a fuller range of human diversity and variation, and (2) more fully understood and specified in terms of the conditions associated with its various forms. A global geography would provide the foundation for a fuller and more rigorous test of the “institutionalization” hypothesis as a way of accounting for an age-graded sequence of social roles. At the same time, taking seriously the factors underlying the range of life-course diversity visible on the global landscape will ultimately require that we address modes of relationship among individuals that have heretofore received scant attention from life course scholars. For example, among the factors contributing to the differential shape of the life course in different societal contexts are transnational flows of capital, of labor market opportunities and consumer behavior. Millions of workers (many of them young people and even children) may be made better by the resultant access to jobs, while at the same time their life chances remain dramatically different than the late modern citizenry to whom their lives are connected. Under such conditions, the concept of “linked lives” (Elder, 1998) acquires a new and perplexing significance (Dannefer, 2002). Yet such dramatic power and resource differences are not reducible to a simple “inclusion/exclusion” formula of petrified advantage and disadvantage (Woodward & Kohli, 2001). By applying life course questions and principles to such global interconnections, the life course perspective may contribute to the larger discourses of theory and policy that are addressing such issues. As implied earlier, this task will necessarily require a new level of recognition and attention to the asymmetries of power and other structural variables in organizing aspects of the life course (Dannefer, 1999; Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001; Stiglitz, 2002).

With respect to “life course as explanation”, we currently have little knowledge about the extent to which the effects of early life course experiences and developments upon later-life outcomes that have been consistently reported in studies of lives in 20th century modernity (Block & Haan, 1984; Clausen, 1993; Elder, 1999) will hold under different cultural circumstances, or in times of institutional or economic turbulence. A systematic examination of how these life course effects play out within lives under a variety of different social and cultural conditions would enable a more rigorous test of the power of life course explanations, and would constitute a significant step toward a field of life course studies that is globally applicable and relevant.

At the same time, the development of a global geography should be of great interest to those interested in an integrated theoretical understanding of social and psychosocial processes. It would enable us to identify the conditions under which individual-level processes set in motion early in the life course are efficacious, and the conditions under which various configurations of the life course roles and trajectories are likely to be found.

Whether one focuses on the life course as phenomenon to be explained or a set of explanatory principles that can increase our understanding of other outcomes, a globally grounded approach holds the promise of enriching the field of life course studies with fresh questions and new ways of testing the applicable scope of its current knowledge base, and also has the potential to expand the relevance of the life course for other areas of theory, and of policy and practice as well.

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