



Connecting Life Span Development with the Sociology of the Life Course: A New Direction

Sociology

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Abstract

The life course has become a topic of growing interest within the social sciences. Attempts to link this sub-discipline with life span developmental psychology have been called for but with little sign of success. In this paper, we seek to address three interlinked issues concerning the potential for a more productive interchange between life course sociology and life span psychology. The first is to try to account for the failure of these two sub-disciplines to achieve any deepening engagement with each other, despite the long-expressed desirability of that goal; the second is to draw attention to the scope for enriching the sociology of the life course through Erik Erikson's model of life span development; and the last is the potential for linking Eriksonian theory with current debates within mainstream sociology about the processes involved in 'individualisation' and 'self-reflexivity' as an alternative entry point to bring together these two fields of work.

Keywords

Erik Erikson, identity, life course sociology, life span psychology, reflexivity

Introduction

It has been widely accepted that explaining social phenomena necessitates an engagement with the whole of an individual's life course and not just a reliance on cross-sectional snapshots. The interplay of age, period and cohort further situates this approach

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and has proved fruitful in a number of different arenas of study from understanding the impact of childhood on health in later life through to the impact of the Depression of the 1930s on the lives of the cohorts who grew up during it. However, what is noticeable is that any view of the life course framed in terms of individual or personal development is generally absent from sociologies of the life course or is reduced to a consideration of general life stages such as childhood, youth, adulthood or old age. An exception can be found in the use of biography in the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al., 2002; Merrill and West, 2009) but even here there is little engagement with theories of individual life span development.

Paradoxically within the field of life span psychology while great attention is placed on the nature of individual development, this is done in generally ahistorical circumstances and with minimal social contextualisation. The work of Erik Erikson, which has been particularly influential in life span psychology, is an exception. His work has among other developments brought to prominence (i) the centrality of the identity crisis as a pivotal moment in shaping adulthood and (ii) the continuation of structured development *within* adulthood. The possibility that his approach and the concerns that he raises can bridge the varied paradigms of life course sociology and life span developmental psychology is the stimulus for this paper, though, as we hope to show, the outcome of such bridging may take us beyond the parallel but unconnected narratives of many current 'inter-disciplinary' textbooks and handbooks on 'the life course' (e.g. Green, 2010; Hunt, 2005; Larkin, 2013; Mortimer and Shanahan, 2006).

This paper addresses three interlinked tasks concerning the development of 'life course sociology' and 'life span psychology' (Featherman and Lerner, 1985). The first is to outline and try to account for the ongoing failure to achieve any deepening engagement between these two sub-disciplines; the second is both to note the relative neglect of Erik Erikson's model of adult development and to draw out its scope for enriching a sociology of the life course (and vice versa for Eriksonian scholarship); and the last is the potential for sociology more generally to engage with Erikson's ideas and develop an alternative point of reference that goes beyond those employed in conventional life course sociology. This would, we argue, allow for the linking of Eriksonian theory with debates within sociology about the processes involved in 'individualisation' and 'self-reflexivity'.

Life Course Sociology

Life course sociology in its modern sense can be said to have been first championed, if not created, by Glen Elder (1975).¹ He described the life course as 'an emerging paradigm' that stressed 'the social forces that shape the life course and its developmental consequences' (Elder, 1994: 4–5). As Elder noted there had been significant growth in the sociology of the life course since the 1970s. Within this sub-discipline, two approaches could be delineated – one that focussed on the stratification *of* the life course 'that produces age-based obligations, entitlements and privileges' and another that concentrated on stratification *over* the life course with the purpose of showing how 'historical events and institutional arrangements shape life pathways and individual biographies' (O'Rand, 1996: 188–9). The relative stability of the life course has been the subject of much debate utilising concepts such as its de-standardisation and individualisation in modern society

(Widmer and Ritschard, 2009). Specifically what was being discussed was whether or not the structures of the 20th-century modern welfare state, which used chronological age as a way of organising people's lives in terms of education, work and retirement, are still relevant. This process, described by Kohli as the 'institutionalization of the life course' (Kohli, 2007) has been challenged on the grounds that the life course is becoming less standardised in relation to the 'progression' of individuals through prescribed phases of life in conditions of 'late' modernity (Brückner and Mayer, 2005; Elchardus and Smits, 2006; Kohli, 2007; Shanahan, 2000; Widmer and Ritschard, 2009). Less attention, however, has been paid to the question that most interested Elder, of just how temporal change in institutional arrangements and cultural practices affected developmental life pathways (Elder, 1994). As Mayer has recently put it: 'the interaction of psychological dispositions and processes and socially constructed life courses still awaits a systematic investigation with adequate data and research designs' (Mayer, 2009: 426).

What obstacles have made this interchange between these two sub-disciplines so seemingly unrealisable? Several issues stand out. First, much life course research focuses upon the relationship between one set of sociological variables or events recorded (or recalled) at one point in the life course (childhood, youth, early adulthood) with another set of variables or events measured at a later point (middle age or old age). While it may be helpful to confirm that the social background of home and schooling exercise long-term impacts on adults' health, wealth and wellbeing, such empirical confirmation of Wordsworth's poetic injunction that 'the child is father of the man' (Wordsworth, 1994) reveals little about society's influence upon the development of human character. Second, demonstrating secular shifts in the age of completing education, leaving home, marrying, owning a house or indeed leaving the labour force – in short in the stability or variability in 'age norms' – does little to illuminate the social shaping of human development – i.e. what difference is it supposed to make and what difference does it seem to make. Third, life course studies have tended to place human individuality 'below the sociological radar', focusing upon the social role of institutions rather than on the drives, needs and experiences of persons becoming, being or remaining 'grown up' (Diewald and Mayer, 2009: 8).

Attempts to overcome the gap between life course sociology and life span psychology have been made, although they have been far fewer than might be imagined. Emler, for example, proposed focusing upon 'social identity' as a central theme connecting individuals to their social world (Emler, 2005: 197). Drawing upon Henri Tajfel's idea that 'people's subjective sense of who they are is to an important degree determined by the manner in which they define themselves socially', Emler suggested that life course transitions such as those associated with leaving school, co-habiting, having children, divorce, unemployment, widowhood and so on involve a gradual shift in social relations (Emler, 2005: 200). As the network of people an individual knows changes during each transition, so do the resources associated with that changing network and the expectations of these new contacts within the new networks. Hendricks developed a similar perspective to Emler when he argued that 'our identities, our sense of self ... are all relational, reflecting a variety of social networks, social capital and the contextual circumstances in which we live' (Hendricks, 2012: 227). At the same time and in the same issue of the *Journals of Gerontology* that Hendricks' comments were published, Dale Dannefer raised several criticisms of this kind of relational perspective. Life course

institutions, he argued, are treated as if they respond to the age/life-span-related needs of the individual rather than as shaping the individual's expectations associated with a particular age/stage of the life span (Dannefer, 2012: 223). Furthermore, he argued, while life span developmental psychology seeks to understand individual outcomes, life course sociology is as concerned with collective and structural/symbolic outcomes, if not more so (Dannefer, 2012: 222).

A common interest in the use of 'biography' and 'narrative' has been suggested as a means of linking an interest in individual development with social and political change. The origins for this tradition can be traced back to Thomas and Znaniecki and their use of personal documents such as letters, diaries, interviews and so forth (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1919) but, as Bertaux and Kohli have pointed out, 'life story' research is more specific, applying 'oral, autobiographical narratives generated through interaction' to a variety of sociological issues (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984: 217). However both biographical and narrative sociology which are exemplars of the 'life story' tradition are essentially methods of data collection rather than theories themselves. As Bertaux and Kohli recognised, as methods they can be applied to a variety of theoretical approaches and sociological themes but, despite their methodological flexibility as forms of research practice, they have not led to the development of a conceptual bridge between the sub-disciplines, or, more pertinent for our purposes, to any significant theoretical approaches being constructed from such a 'life story' approach.

A more recent review of this area by Levy and his colleagues has pointed out that divisions within the wider discipline of sociology itself make such linkages more difficult to achieve. They note, for example, that 'life course and biographical analysis (in the sociological ... use of the term ...) have long been considered to be strangers ignoring each other – if not hostile antagonists' (Levy and the PAVIE team, 2005: 23). While some promising starts have been made, it is difficult to move away from this assessment. Liz Stanley, for example, has explored the historical context for sociological work on biography, arguing that the rise of modernity 'permitted or even required the emergence of a particular notion of "character", "personality" or "self"' (Stanley, 1993: 45). This connection between lives, times and 'the historical moment' she argues, renders biography and autobiography 'fundamental to sociology' (Stanley, 1993: 50). Drawing such a connection between individual and collective lives and times, however, has not led to or progressed any theoretical interchange between life course and life span studies. This is arguably the more surprising, given the value attributed to the biographical approach by Erikson, the doyen of life span psychology (Erikson, 1975). Once again, this demonstrates the lack of connection between these areas of study.

An alternative 'point of connection' between the two sub-disciplines of life course sociology and life span psychology has been proposed by Frieder Lang and his colleagues, through a common interest in 'interpersonal functioning' (Lang et al., 2009). These authors proposed that 'the principle of co-developing social individuals is of relevance to ... life-course sociology, of life span psychology and of life history theory in biology' (Lang et al., 2009: 41) and that the processes of 'regulating closeness' and of 'monitoring reciprocity' can serve as the bases for an interpretive life course framework to explore the social structuring and personal control of these two processes from childhood to old age. Although they make no explicit reference to Eriksonian theory, it is not difficult to read

the Eriksonian ideas of ‘intimacy’ and ‘generativity’ into their two proposed dimensions of regulating interpersonal relationships – and vice versa. However their paper remains resolutely close to the concern with personal control and individual outcomes and they frame these two mechanisms primarily as ‘contingent on developmental challenges and [the] tasks of different life phases’ (Lang et al., 2009: 50). In so doing they fail to take into account Dannefer’s warning that life course institutions shape individual expectations associated with a particular age/stage of the life span as much if not more than the institutions reflect or respond to the individual’s ‘needs’ at that stage (Dannefer, 2012: 222).

The conflict between the paradigms employed in these sub-disciplines was first raised by Featherman and Lerner in the 1980s when they discussed the contrast between *ontogenesis* and *sociogenesis* in theories of development and socialisation across the life course (Featherman and Lerner, 1985). Explanatory models based upon age-graded stages of development, they argued, imply that the mechanism of change lies within the individual organism, or within that organism’s biological history. In contrast ‘sociogenetic’ models locate changes within collectivities, institutions and their histories – each operating at a different level of explanation. Although they tried to resolve this clash of approaches, subsequent progress – or lack of progress as Diewald and Mayer (2009) would argue – suggests that crossing these different levels of explanation may be hard if not impossible to achieve. Between the sub-disciplines of life span developmental psychology and the sociology of the life course, ‘little convergence and integration has actually occurred’ and they ‘now seem to stand further apart than they did in the 1970s’ (Mayer, 2003: 464). A ‘notable lack of transfer of knowledge between these disciplines’ remains the rule (Lang et al., 2009: 42).

Linked to this lack of communication and apparent incommensurability of paradigms is the more general difficulty in distinguishing between change per se – in people, in people’s lives and/or in the institutions of society and its culture – and changes that can be considered ‘developmental’. Featherman and Lerner’s proposed resolution to this latter problem was to distinguish three types of graded ‘developmental’ change – age-graded contextualised changes, history-graded changes and event-graded changes – from ‘ungraded’ changes that take place more or less randomly with respect to birth, age, historical period or social timetables – such as those explored in the life events literature (Featherman and Lerner, 1985: 670). However the ‘de-standardisation’ of the life course that many argue is now taking place implies a growing overlap between individualised and organised transitions, rendering the life course much more contingent – and such conceptual distinctions are now empirically harder to demonstrate than they once might have been, as in the period of ‘classical’ modernity of the mid-20th century with all of its structuring institutions. Indeed some sociologists have argued that the very concept of ‘adulthood’ is changing its traditional cultural and social reference points, as individuals ‘yo-yo’ between youthful and adult orientations (Blatterer, 2007; Hodkinson, 2013).

Erik Erikson’s Model of Adult Development

Erik Erikson’s model of psychosocial development was outlined over half a century ago (Erikson, 1950, 1963) and exercised a formative influence on life span developmental psychology. While his account of early development is given relatively less attention

nowadays by students of child and infant development, his concept of adult development – that is of psychosocial development evident from adolescence onwards – continues to stimulate considerable quantitative and qualitative research, both in the fields of life span development and in the psychology of adulthood and ageing (Bradley, 1998; Hamachek, 1990; Kotre, 1984; Logan, 1986; Marcia, 1966; Orlofsky, 1993; Waterman, 1999; Yufit, 1969). Unlike previous models of psychological development that were outlined by Freud, Kohlberg, Piaget and Vygotsky which all mapped the growth of the person against biological development, in effect, stopping at puberty, Erikson first articulated the idea of lifelong ‘epigenetic’ development, located within a matrix of biological, psychological and sociological processes, and leading to the progressive ‘maturing’ of human character (Erikson, 1963). This model assumed that development took place through a series of eight distinct stages, four during infancy and childhood, followed by adolescence as a pivotal fifth stage between childhood and adulthood, shifting the individual’s concerns away from the institutions of childhood toward those of adulthood. Adulthood in turn was seen as a second ‘cycle’ of development, with three stages of early, mid and late adulthood, characterised by the development of intimacy, generativity and integrity, respectively (Erikson, 1950, 1963, 1982).

During the evolution of his model, and especially after his rise to the status of public intellectual in the 1970s, a number of criticisms were levelled at Erikson’s theory from psychology as well as from the wider social sciences. These include sustained critiques of the lacunae in his model – particularly its gendered bias (Gilligan, 1982) and its historical specificity (Arnett, 2000) – as well as criticisms over the lack of rigour in its formulation and Erikson’s frequent propensity ‘to go well beyond the information given’ (Stevens, 2008: 112). Researchers in personality theory have questioned the very idea of ‘adult development’, arguing that stability rather than change characterises adult personality, pointing to the lack of empirical evidence of ‘points of transition’ in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of personality (Costa and MacRae, 1994).

From a sociological perspective, Erikson has been accused of having ‘a conformist cast to his psychosocial perspective ... using his psychology to buttress the conventional pieties of post-World War II political ideology’ (Roazen, 1980: 339). Roazen among others criticised him for too readily accepting the nature of the American society in which he forged his own identity. He and others pointed out the lack of any critical interrogation of the social context in which adult personality is formed (see for example, Kovel, 1988: 68–74). The failure to examine the social context in which individuals grow up or to offer any conceptual framework to explain how different societies may accentuate, moderate or attenuate the various ‘crises’ of adult development is all the more noteworthy because Erikson himself had frequently argued – against the Freudian emphasis upon the dominant influence of intra-psychic processes – that body, mind *and* society were equally critical in determining the processes and patterns of growing up (e.g. Erikson, 1963: 243; Erikson, 1980: 49).

Perhaps because life span developmental psychology has become obsessed with developing operational measures and refining theoretical formulations of Erikson’s stages of adult development to the relative neglect of its social context, life course sociologists have tended to ignore the call made by Erikson for social scientists to provide a fuller account of how systems ideologies and power groups support or fail to support ‘the

generative potential in adults and the readiness for growth and development' (Erikson, 1982: 82). Given that one of the principal aims of this paper is to offer such an account, connecting the development of what Erikson, following Jahoda, termed 'the healthy personality' (Erikson, 1980: 53) with broader social change, the relative neglect of Erikson's ideas within the sociology of the life course is arguably another factor contributing to the continuing failure of life course sociology to engage with life span psychology.

Even within the sociology of ageing and old age where a life course perspective has long been actively pursued (Marshall and Bengtson, 2011) the emphasis has been on either exploring the influence of early life conditions on health or economic outcomes in later life, or on tracking the extent of reciprocity between the generations. Rather than framing old age as a dynamic stage in life, with crises and conflicts of its own, the sociology of ageing and old age has treated it as a destination arrived at, after the engine of social change has moved on (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). The marginality of age remains, *pace* Erikson, as ensconced as ever in the social and behavioural sciences despite his attempt to reformulate its 'virtues' within society (Erikson, 1964: 113). Although the work that led to *Childhood and Society* (1963) was conducted through a mix of clinical casework, ethnographic observation and participation in the longitudinal study of adolescence, part of his motivation was to ground the study of human development within society (Erikson, 1963: 13; Friedman, 1999: 234; Stevens, 2008: 12). He introduced the term 'triple book-keeping' to reflect the need to take into account the various interaction between somatic processes, ego processes and societal processes in shaping individual lives (Welchman, 2000: 40).

This 'triple book-keeping theme' however was never further articulated nor was it theoretically elaborated by Erikson, though it continued to preoccupy him throughout the rest of his career. In planning his never-accomplished re-write of *The Life Cycle Completed*, his last book published in 1982, he expressed his desire 'to register the fate of the basic human strengths and core disturbances under changing technological and historical conditions' (Friedman, 1999: 459). We would argue that pursuing this task might well produce valuable results both for life course sociology and for the sociology of ageing and old age. To do so, we suggest, necessitates that we turn away from the current themes of life course sociology and instead explore an alternative entry point, that of the concept of identity in Erikson's work and within sociology more broadly.

The Significance of 'Identity' in Erikson's Model of Adult Development

In his book, *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson introduced the concept of an eight stage life cycle, with adolescence a pivotal moment in the transformation from the four stages of 'child development' to the three stages of 'adult development' (Erikson, 1950: 229–33). Identity was the fifth stage, the critical point when adolescence re-orientates individual development toward adult goals. This stage – and the general topic of personal identity – continued to preoccupy Erikson throughout the rest of his working life (Friedman, 1999). This concern with identity could be said to reflect a conjunction of issues, some that were personal to Erikson's own life and others that reflected the social historical time in which he was working. 'Identity' and 'identity politics' emerged as

important themes in the decades that followed the Second World War – reflecting the ‘identity possibilities’ of the age, as Erikson was quick to note (Erikson, 1963: 256), growing in importance throughout the second half of his life.

For Erikson the development of identity was the first developmental task that an individual faces in becoming ‘grown up’. It sets the stage for the development of ‘intimacy’ – the transfer of emotional attachment away from the individual’s family of origin towards new and more stable peer relationships, a task that can only be successfully achieved once a stable sense of identity has emerged. Intimacy in turn helps create the conditions for developing a concern for others, specifically a concern for other generations, as if loving and being loved forms an essential element in caring about the future, a future stretching beyond one’s own horizons. The ‘generativity’ that this concept implies was the penultimate step before achieving integrity – the last goal of individual development that Erikson set aside for old age – when the person can finally lay claim not just to their individual identity but to the course of their life and all those networks within which it was co-produced.

The pivotal role played by identity therefore sets the conditions for development as an adult. Erikson saw this developmental moment as a combination of two processes – the one individualised by ‘the selective affirmation and repudiation of an individual’s childhood identifications’, and the other by the way that the social processes of the times identify and recognise the evolving configurations of young people’s emergent public identities (Erikson, 1982: 72). The capacity for conceptual thinking, alongside the desire to form new relationships and the challenge of obtaining recognition, represented for Erikson a mixture of somatic and psychological processes; the ease or difficulty of acquiring, as well as the scope for framing particular identities represented, on the other hand, social and psychological processes which constituted what he called ‘plausible’ adulthoods (Erikson, 1975: 217). While the outcome of this developmental process might appear to be fixed – the individual adult does or does not acquire a coherent sense of his or her personal and public identities – Erikson rejects an all or nothing ‘status’ outcome. Instead he proposes a model of ‘emergence’ or ‘epigenesis’ such that the processes constituting a new stage of development are initiated at a particular point in time, in personal, social and biological time, but their resolution can easily become a life-long issue, re-activated at various times, by various personal and social events that touch upon the identities accepted and the identities that were rejected (Erikson, 1974: 36).

Subsequent life span development psychologists, working within an Eriksonian framework, have sought to extend or operationalise this model by distinguishing between identity as status and identity as a narrative process (Syed, 2012; Van Hoof, 1999), by looking at the connections between ‘ego’ and ‘social’ identities (Adams and Marshall, 1996) and by considering the application of identity ‘reformulations’ or ‘reconstructions’ to subsequent periods of early and late adulthood (Marcia, 2002: 14). Despite claims within the social sciences that identity ‘has become one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debate’ (Jenkins, 2004: 7), the focus for these post-Eriksonian studies has been resolutely upon the psychological processes underlying identity and the psychological outcomes of those processes, expressed as status outcomes, neglecting the opportunity to explore identity as a process embedded within particular social and cultural circumstances.

Identity and Self-reflexivity in Sociology

As we and others have already noted, despite repeated calls for the integration of life span psychology with life course sociology there are to our minds, few signs of it actually happening. The topic of identity offers an alternative and potentially more fruitful location from which to pursue Erikson's stated aim of grounding the study of adult development within society. An engagement with those social theorists concerned with the changing social context of identity therefore offers an alternative entry point for the task, pursuing a line implied (even if not explicitly recommended) by Emler (2005: 197).

Identity is for Erikson a point of intersection, first within the life course, between childhood and adulthood, and second within the institutions of society, between those dominated by the family and those engaged with the social institutions of adulthood. Social theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Anthony Giddens have established debates within sociology about identity, linking 'identity agency'² with identity performance, social relations and a self-reflexive engagement with the various, competing interpersonal and age-associated rules and expectations that qualify these times as being 'an age of identity' (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 2001; Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1991, 1992). The emphasis placed by these key canonical thinkers of contemporary sociology on the issues of 'individualisation' and 'reflexivity' as attributes of 'late', 'liquid', or 'reflexive' modernity (Outhwaite, 2009) indicates a heightened concern and deliberation over the making of 'lifestyles' and 'self-identities' as well as the related instability that has emerged around the boundaries and determinants of adulthood (Blatterer, 2007). While these concepts have not gone unchallenged (Atkinson, 2007, 2008; Dawson, 2012) they have provided a template that many contemporary sociologists have used creatively across a number of arenas from employment practices to the nature of transitions in contemporary Japanese society (Deery and Mitchell, 1999; Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Katagiri, 2013).

The 'self-reflexivity' associated with the individualisation thesis can also help set the conditions for a more examined life course, where issues of identity, intimacy and integrity are foregrounded and where the more traditional concerns of the sociology of the family have been transcended (Gilding, 2010). For Giddens, the new contingency that defines the 'pure relationship' extends beyond the 'intimacy' of adult relationships to the relationship between parents and their children. 'Can a relationship between a parent and young child be democratic?' he asks. 'It can and should be' is his reply, 'in exactly the same sense as is true of a democratic political order' (Giddens, 1992: 191). Generativity, intimacy and identity, such contemporary readings seem to suggest, are subject to both a greater degree of 'reflexivity' and a more open institutional order that make choice and autonomy 'imperatives' for living. As such, one might hypothesise that the course of adult development – becoming, being and remaining grown up – has become more difficult, diffuse and demanding on the ego or self as 'identity-agency', rendering the orderly progress of Erikson's four stages less regular and less distinct than earlier in the life of the welfare state.

But while these 'canonical' social theorists have examined the problems of identity, intimacy and inter-generational solidarity as critical phenomena in contemporary society, we would argue that they have done so without much regard for the trajectories of individual lives. These and the related theorists of 'individualisation' have explored these

phenomena as effects of processes of social change without any felt need to relate them to the stage and circumstances of an individual's life, focussing largely upon what Dannefer has called 'social-symbolic' outcomes (Dannefer, 2012). There is however considerable scope to integrate such sociological thinking about the processes of individualisation and reflexivity with the personalised struggles of becoming, being and remaining 'grown up', in Erikson's sense. If the developmental 'virtues' of adulthood – of constructing a sense of identity and integrity, and a capacity for intimacy and generativity – are more effectively achieved through deliberative actions and controlled narrativity than 'reflexivity' as a trait might serve as the necessary, if not sufficient, condition for such outcomes. Similarly the processes connected to 'reflexive modernisation' can be seen as singularly attuned to facilitating such practices.

Anthony Giddens has furnished the following definition of 'reflexivity': 'the capacity via which individual and social lives are produced and changed as people react to their circumstances in ways no longer governed by tradition' (Giddens, 1990, cited in Holmes, 2010: 140). This definition is cited by Holmes to emphasise the contrast with one outlined by Margaret Archer, another theorist of reflexivity whose works are perhaps not yet part of 'the canon' (Outhwaite, 2009) but whose star is certainly rising. Archer proposes that 'reflexivity is the mental capacity of people to consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and their social contexts in relation to themselves' (Archer, 2007, cited by Holmes, 2010: 142). Holmes takes theorists such as Beck and Giddens to task for their ambiguity in that they appear to locate reflexivity in both social systems and individual persons. In contrast, Holmes argues, Archer is more thoroughly committed to treating reflexivity as an unequivocal property of persons (albeit in relation to others as well as oneself) shaped by but not residing in institutions and systems.

For Archer, reflexivity is indexed by a process of 'internal dialogue' which she defines as 'the practice through which we "make up our minds" by questioning ourselves, clarifying our beliefs and inclinations, diagnosing our situations, deliberating about our concerns and defining our own project' (Archer, 2003: 103). This narrative account of the 'self project' bears a close relationship to the narrative approach to identity evident in some Eriksonian accounts of adult development (Syed, 2012). With the expansion of consumer culture and the growing individualisation of life choices, the need for reflexivity has been enhanced and extended. Identity issues are no longer confined to the period of adolescence and have been replaced by the idea of identity as a life-long lifestyle preoccupation. In a similar fashion the rise of the 'pure relationship' and its applicability to both partner and parental relationships might be seen to extend the search for intimacy across the whole of adulthood and over a wider range of relationship types than Erikson envisioned in his own work. This preoccupation with issues of identity and intimacy throughout adulthood may limit or attenuate the expression of generativity (and integrity) given Erikson's assumption of the 'epigenetic' emergence of mid-life concerns out of the resolution of earlier stages of development. Furthermore, it might also be argued that the growth of four and five generation families may diffuse the focus of generativity from caring primarily for what the person has 'produced' to a potentially 'conflicted' set of concerns for one's children and for one's parents. This often being done at the same time as still struggling to maintain mid-life identity agency longer and later in life.

Pursuing such lines of inquiry through Archer's categorisation of the various habitus of reflexivity (Archer, 2007) may be particularly illuminating. Her 'meta-reflexives' (those for whom the social order is not internalised but represents a problem to be overcome) could be hypothesised as displaying features of both identity striving, intimacy searching and generativity diffusion throughout early-, mid- and later-life, while her 'communicative reflexives' might display a much more 'ordered' pattern of development through Erikson's adult stages. Furthermore, it could be argued that people in societies where a greater degree of 'de-standardisation' of the institutionalised life course has taken place, might show a less ordered progression through Erikson's stages of adult development, compared with those living in societies where the state retains a stronger influence in organising the timing of transitions through adulthood (for such examples of national, cohort-historical and domain-specific variability in the de-standardisation of the life course, see Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011; Liefbroer and Elzinga, 2012; Widmer and Ritschard, 2009). These kinds of hypotheses are rendered potentially more testable as national (and international) longitudinal surveys of the life course become more common (Mayer, 2009) and as operational measures of Erikson's stages become more sophisticated. However, as long as the individual outcomes sought in longitudinal life course sociology remain focused upon measures of health, wealth and happiness, the changing nature of growing up older – maturing – will remain a matter confined to journalistic speculation and political posturing (cf. Beckett, 2010; Howker and Malik, 2010).

Conclusions

We started this paper by pointing out the paradox that life course sociology has had very little engagement with life span developmental psychology despite continued expressions of the desirability of such interchange. Ironically, we would argue that this lack of engagement has become more problematic in what many sociologists would term an era of increased individual reflexivity. We would argue that it is this latter set of circumstances that makes the potential of Erik Erikson's developmental psychology so germane both to life course sociology and to sociology more generally. The issues that Erikson makes critical in adult development – the drive to obtain, sustain and continue to develop a sense of identity, to foster personal intimacy and closeness with one's fellow human beings, to exhibit a 'generative' concern for others and a feeling of integrity and responsibility for one's life and one's choices in life – are all matters central to the concerns of many contemporary sociologists.

Changes in the social organisation of the life course not only extend the pervasiveness of individual self-reflexivity, but also engage the individual both in telling one's own story and in being involved in performing it. These changes in the everyday 'social imaginary' by which people measure out their lives have become matters of sociological concern, but while the sociologies of identity and reflexivity have offered several entry points to a reconsideration of the social context of Erikson's model of adult development, the expanding empirical base of life course sociology has failed to integrate these issues, employing as its individual outcomes relatively static measures of health, wealth and happiness. We have argued in this paper that it is time for a broadening of paradigms in the study of adult lives and we have offered some suggestions of how this might be done

in terms of a changed focus both on the individual outcomes studied and on the social processes influencing them.

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Notes

1. The origins of life course sociology are subject to interpretation, with some authors tracing it back to Thomas and Znaniecki's (1919) study of the biographies of Polish peasants immigrating to the USA in the 1920s (Heinz and Krüger, 2001: 31). A sustained interest in this field, however, cannot be identified before the work of Glen Elder in the 1970s.
2. We have taken the term 'identity agency' from Hitlin and Elder's discussion of the use of the term 'agency' in the social sciences (Hitlin and Elder, 2007: 179–81).

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