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## The Life Course Metaphor: Implications for Biography and Interpretive Research

### **Abstract**

This paper reviews qualitative research in the United States, highlighting the ways research has changed in the era of the third age. With growing attention to positive and uplifting aspects of aging, qualitative research has played a critical role in the exploration of the ways in which older adults are engaging in meaningful ways with others. We describe two key methodological approaches that have been important to examining positive aspects of aging and exploring the extent to which a growing number of years of healthy retirement are redefining the aging experience: ethnographic research and grounded theory research. We also review key topics associated with qualitative research in the era of the third age. These topics fit within two dominant frameworks – research exploring meaning-making in later life and research exploring meaningful engagement in later life. These frameworks were critically important to raising attention to meaningful experiences and interactions with others, and we propose that the agenda for future qualitative research in the United States should continue contributing to these frameworks. However, we note that a third framework should also be developed which examines what it means to be a third age through use of a phenomenological approach, which will assist in the important task of theory building about the third age.

### **Keywords**

Third age; Qualitative gerontology; Meaning making; Meaningful engagement

Appreciating that persons have a “life course” has changed the field of gerontology. Since the emergence of this construct, persons are imagined to have biographies. Rather than passing through discrete stages, in a somewhat linear fashion, their life experiences are cumulative and reflect many changes. Instead of sequenced, the “vocabulary of the life course”—with stages, transitions, and plateaus—suggests that a personal history is integrated but multidimensional

(Holstein, Gubrium 2007: 1-18). At any phase of a person's life, accordingly, a confluence of factors are presumed to be operating. In all, the complexity of any station in a person's life is thought to be revealed through this style of imagery.

The conceptual themes that emerge from a life course paradigm are considered to be important in making gerontological studies more holistic. In point of fact, multiple causes, or influences, are now commonly accepted as contributing to a behavioral episode, as well as a course of action (Elder 1978: 17-64). The life of a person thus represents a pattern, with recurring themes and many beginnings. Indeed, a life course is variegated and malleable, but coherent (O'Rand, Kreckler 1990: 241-62).

Such a description of personal development, at first glance, appears to be consistent with qualitative or interpretive research. If anything, interpretive researchers strive to be holistic and avoid the reductionism linked traditionally to positivism and other styles of crude empiricism. The idea is that persons are better understood when the myriad of considerations that shape and give meaning to behavior are grasped, along with the context of these elements (Harris, Parisi 2007: 40-58). Especially in the social sciences, such sensitivity has considerable appeal. How persons define themselves and their environment, and integrate these experiences, provide the texture of a life course. According to interpretive researchers, ignoring this wisdom has dire consequences in terms of analyzing adequately the nature of aging, or for that matter any other social phenomenon.

But there are problems with the life course analogy that may contradict the aims of interpretive research. The focus of this paper is the metaphors that have been used to describe the life course. These descriptive devices, even after much critical work on this topic, tend to reify personal and collective existence. In other words, the life course is portrayed in such a way that the stages or trajectory of a person's existence can be viewed as natural or inevitable. And when conceived in this way, a life course can be reduced easily to a series of events and a matrix of causes. The unique manner in which this pattern has been constructed and regularly modified can thus be easily obscured. In fact, this strategy is considered to be the state of the art by many quantitative researchers.

Such an outcome is inconsistent with gaining insight into the existential character of a person's life. Clearly interpretive researchers are interested in knowing how the various factors that comprise a life course are defined and organized to become a coherent and meaningful existence. At the same time, there is another factor related to reification that contravenes interpretive methods but is not often discussed. Stated simply, the political side of interpretive research is muted! The existential character of the life course presupposes that social reality is not necessarily fixed or stable. This lack of stability, accordingly, has very interesting and powerful political implications with respect to the social impact of interpretive research.

These issues, however, have not gone unnoticed by gerontologists (Holstein, Gubrium 2007). Some critics have scrutinized the potential of life course metaphors to reify a person's biography. Nonetheless, their reformulation does not necessarily change anything substantially. Particularly noteworthy is that the *ad hoc* character of the life course is not clearly illustrated. In this respect, time is treated as a medium rather than the capacity of persons to organize their biographies. The result is that the political promise of interpretive methods is not given any serious attention. Persons may modify their lives, but within very narrow confines. They may be restricted, for example, to acting simply within the contours supplied by the natural transition points (Hittlin, Elder 2007: 170-91).

The purpose of this paper, accordingly, is to extend beyond how the life course has been rethought by these critics. How time has been discussed by writers such as Husserl and Schütz is central to this task. And following this reconceptualization of time, the truly existential thrust of a life course should become clear. Additionally, the politics of interpretive method, which are relatively unexplored, should become apparent.

## The Life Course

The life course perspective or model is eclectic in many ways. This outlook tries to incorporate a variety of disciplines, such as biology, psychology, and sociology. Additionally, persons are assumed to adopt many, and often conflicting, roles during their lives (Karp, Yoels 1982). And finally many transitions are thought to occur throughout a person's life. What the life course orientation does, simply stated, is give a somewhat reasonable portrayal of the aging process. A person's existence is an integrated and dynamic event (Russel 2007: 173-92). Many other theories have existed that include various stages and transitions, such as those in psychology and child development. For the most part, however, they are insensitive to the actual social or contextual conditions of persons. Everyone is presumed, for example, to pass through identical stages at approximately the same time. Specifically, the onset and nature of adolescence or old age is not thought to vary appreciably among persons.

Although the aim of life course analysis is to be more holistic than in the past, normative prescriptions have been linked to this model. Assumptions are made regularly, for example, about how persons are expected to behave at any particular stage. Furthermore, violating these norms is often treated as indicative of illness or deviance. Human development is thus considered to follow a particular path, which everyone must traverse with few exceptions. For example, the life course of women is often messier than for men, due to obligations that regularly pull them "off time" (O'Rand 1996). But in both cases, strong norms are implied.

The originators of this theory wanted to emphasize the malleability of the life course, but they presupposed a theory of time that would compromise this aim. As will be demonstrated, the life course has been associated, nowadays in a subtle fashion, with a Newtonian theory of time (Arxer, Murphy, Belgrave 2006: 51-60). Within a Newtonian framework, time is imagined to be an independent measure of the location of events and people. Based on the logic of discrete succession, time assigns *what was, what is, and what will be*. Persons, in the end, are free to make evaluations and adjustments in their lives, but only within an autonomous timeline. Specifically, a base-line is available to orient all people because everyone is located *in time*. Aging, therefore, is said to be a cumulative event that results from the addition of experiences, changes, and interventions. Again, persons are left to confront a mechanically inspired aging process. Within this temporal viewpoint, aging unfolds along exact and thus universal guidelines, because life now represents a fairly rigid pattern or timetable of events.

What this outlook tends to obscure, however, is how aging is a fundamental commitment to potentially different interpretations of existence and not a cumulative process. But because aging is considered a chronological phenomenon, only so much personal variation is possible—namely, moving forward (progress) through time. And if persons' interpretations deviate too much from these natural stages, their views are dismissed as inappropriate or misinformed. How persons might define

themselves, therefore, does not affect appreciably how age is understood. Similar to previous theories, a developmental path is clearly prescribed that everyone is expected to follow.

The life course, in the end, reifies development. Because of the image of time that is adopted, "age norms" are introduced with little critique. In fact, due to the dualism that supports the Newtonian position, serious reflection on the life course would not be expected. Rather than situational or contextual, the life course transcends these limitations and thus has universal application. How human growth should proceed, accordingly, is not relative to culture or contingent in any other respect. Although recognized as varying at different stages, times, and places, in any given period or location behavioral norms are unambiguous and applied with little critical analysis.

When conceived in this manner, the life course is consistent with the thrust of Western philosophy. This approach to human development, in other words, provides a standardized basis for making comparisons between persons. That is, behavior can be evaluated against a particular course and judged to be either adequate or deficient. But gradually this course becomes a template that overlooks the uniqueness of persons. In more sociological terms, the life course becomes an ideology that disregards how persons perceive and assess their own development.

The aging process is thus not viewed as discontinuous and multivalent. Indeed, Bury's (1982) discussion of "biographical disruption", due to chronic illness, highlights the expectation of a smooth life course. Most of the emphasis is placed, instead, on persons conforming to the demands of an institutionalized path. Special emphasis, in fact, is placed on adjustment and so-called productive or successful aging (Butler, Gleason 1985; Rowe, Kahn 1998). In effect, what the life course does is provide a blueprint for effective and appropriate adaptation and gradual decline. At each stage of the life course, roles are provided that detail how this end should be realized, expect perhaps the very last phases. Persons can thus begin to envision where they should be on the aging continuum and make the necessary adjustments. As might be expected, life becomes relatively predictable.

Within the context supplied by the life course, the study of aging is straightforward. A person's health characteristics or behaviors are compared to the norms operative at a particular stage in life. Any interpretations are treated as subjective opinions that blur the facts. Hence personal or collective experience is dismissed as a distraction. Rather than a life project that reflects commitments and decisions, aging proceeds like a clock. There are no jumps or reverses, but only continuous and unrelenting moments.

At this juncture a particular issue becomes important. That is, what about human agency? While this theme is not necessarily the focus of life course theorists, this ability is presupposed by themes such as malleability (Elder 1994: 4-15). But with respect to the assumed Newtonian backdrop, persons do not invent their lives. Those who are intelligent and resourceful, instead, learn how to age gracefully. They internalize the demands of the life course and make rational decisions within these parameters. Persons try their best in an age-appropriate manner and make the most effective use of the time that is available. Any existential angst is thus calmed by the predictability of the life course. In line with the design of the life course, social existence becomes routine and narrow. Of course, such a description is antithetical to the original intention of supporters of life course imagery. And because of the promise of this theory, some writers have tried to reconstruct the life course. The question is whether or not their efforts have truly animated the life course.

## A Constructionist Turn

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) understand this issue of reification. They recognize that the life course can be transformed easily into a naturalistic development path. Therefore, they strive to avoid terms such as stage, phase, or progression when describing the aging process. What they want to overcome is precisely the sort of reductionism these ideas can encourage, whereby a person's existence is little more than an evolving scheme. These authors do not want to make the error of portraying the life course to be autonomous, so that everyday life becomes a faint image of a more fundamental course of development. In order to avert this problem, they try to link the life course with constructionism. Specifically, their strategy is to embed the life course in the *Lebenswelt*, or "life world" (Husserl, 1970: 113). To borrow from Habermas (1984, 1987), aging is forged from within the constellation of meanings and practices that comprise a community. The idea of a life world suggests that the life course represents a socially grounded discourse, as opposed to an obtrusive object that guides the aging process.

In pursuit of this aim, Holstein and Gubrium (2007: 2-3) rely on phenomenology, particularly writers such as Berger, Luckmann, and Schutz. Basic to phenomenology is intentionality, which Husserl defines as "consciousness is always consciousness of something" (Husserl 1975:13). Although this phrase sounds trite, his point is to undermine the Cartesian distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. With consciousness linked to whatever is known this dualism is passé. Now the influence of consciousness on the production of knowledge becomes the focus of attention. Facts are thus no longer objective, but, as constructionist like to say, a social production.

Instead of dealing with the objective or empirical features of phenomena, importance is given to their meaning. Persons do not simply reflect reality, if they are properly trained, but ascribe significance to behavior and events. The emergent reality of human values, beliefs, and commitments is referred to as the life world. This world is living because conscious activity cannot be extracted from reality to reveal a purely independent material realm. All phenomena are material and experienced, but only through the activity of meaning construction.

Accordingly, the life course should not consist of stages that are naturally disposed or socially imposed. Each stage, as Holstein and Gubrium (2007: 4) declare, is implicated in this process of ascribing meaning and can be defined or experienced in a host of ways. The result is that age-specific criteria become elusive and gain relevance only as a consequence of particular decisions and commitments.

Each stage of life may thus have multiple meanings, none of which should be considered natural. One version may become a "paramount reality", according to phenomenologists, while other possibilities fade into the background, at least momentarily (Schutz 1962: 207-59). This prominent interpretation, furthermore, may eventually be treated as a natural stage in life, but there is nothing inevitable or ultimately real about any phase. Which interpretation becomes relevant pertains, for example, to the social organization of power and the resulting consensus or conflict and the enforcement of age norms. Nonetheless, Holstein and Gubrium are not entirely successful in their attempt to abandon the Cartesian base of the life course. Specifically, their depiction of time may permit the life course to retain a sense of autonomy and re-emerge as a natural progression or series of behavioral expectations.

Although language use is difficult and imprecise, Holstein and Gubrium use phrases to recast time that rely on familiar dualistic imagery. They repeat often that the life course behavior exists “through time” (Holstein, Gubrium 2007: 3; 2003: 836; Gubrium, Holstein 1995: 209), “across time” (Holstein, Gubrium 2007: 17), and “in relation to time” (Holstein, Gubrium *ibidem*). In each case, time appears to be either a medium that carries persons along or a referent that serves to unite a person’s life. Time is presented as a phenomenon that remains autonomous, as in the Newtonian tradition, and continues to provide a natural background or logic for aging.

Holstein and Gubrium are sensitive to this issue, for they understand that if the life course is autonomous, the ability of persons to construct their lives is severely truncated. Nonetheless, they seem to be uncertain about the role of human action. Contrary to phenomenology, their description represents a weak constructionist position because meaning-construction does not touch the existential core of reality. In Holstein and Gubrium’s approach, speech acts are not allowed to “go all the way down”, in the manner intended by Stanley Fish (1989: 344), and give shape to reality. In this sense, these two authors seem to retain a measure of dualism that phenomenologists reject.

In fact, often Holstein and Gubrium seem to equivocate on this point of dualism. At times language is given its full constructive nature, while at others speech is only given the capacity to describe the world. Sometimes critiques of the life course are invoked to make sense of behavior, while at others behavior is understood as simply conditioned by circumstances (Holstein, Gubrium 2007: 10). In the end, the point is whether their constructionist position allows for behavior to be merely interpretively described or constituted. Can a life’s possibilities be merely modified, recast, or relabeled, or do persons have the latitude to (re)invent themselves and construct their lives? (Holstein, Gubrium 2007: 7, 32, 183-84, 205; Gubrium, Holstein 1995: 210). The nature of the life course changes significantly depending on how this question is answered.

Some of this confusion could have been avoided, however, if Holstein and Gubrium provided an alternative conception of time. Instead of simply softening the traditional imagery, they could have applied a phenomenological version of time to aging. If this were the case, there would be no justification for the autonomy of time and the accompanying life stages. In fact, adopting the idiom of the life course would not make any sense. If time is constituted, simply put, life is neither progressive nor digressive, but represents a socially maintained montage of possibilities, some actualized and other not.

## **Time and Biography**

Rethinking time from a phenomenological perspective begins with intentionality. Due to the primordial connection between consciousness and reality, the dualism that supports the autonomy of time is undercut. Hence in view of intentionality, a Newtonian vision is no longer justified. Time, in other words, should not be treated as a medium that traverses space, has direction, and unites locations. Such a decontextualized time is now fictional and, as will be discussed, a viewpoint that frustrates an interpretive account of life experiences such as aging.

As Husserl notes, time must exist within the realm deployed by consciousness. The position advanced by phenomenology is more radical than the proposal advanced by Bergson (1967), for example. His notion of *durée*, although different from the passage of clock time, seems to have an inherent flaw and implied

directionality. While Bergson challenges standard chronology, he introduces primarily the possibility of a subjective perception of objective time. Bergson, for example, highlights how persons are often heard saying that today passed a lot faster than yesterday, even though both are twenty-four hours in length. Objective time, however, is left relatively intact, although modified to include the human experience of this phenomenon.

A more social example of not going far enough to overcome dualism is supplied by Flaherty's (1999) important work on lived time. His emphasis on protracted and compressed duration, for example, is based on so-called subjective deviations from an implied objective standard. The inability to overcome the Newtonian backdrop, accordingly, prevents him from appreciating how lived time is the measure of personal and collective experience.

Husserl's rendition precludes such dualism because temporality emerges from the vast field of consciousness. When associated with consciousness, time is not first based on notions of "extension" and "length", but shifts in interpretation. What is interesting is that consciousness does not have any inherent divisions, such as inside/outside, back/front, and, especially important for this discussion, past/future. Consciousness, in a word, is never fragmented and must be intentionally demarcated in order to appreciate these differences. The past and the future, for example, are merely the products of consciousness engaging in an activity of self-demarcation. Husserl refers to the resulting experience as "immanent time", because temporality is dependent on human activity for stabilization. In this way, the domain of consciousness is unending, and any fundamental distinction between a subjective realm, and a more real one referred to as objective, is impossible to justify.

Contrary to typical chronology, conscious time does not progress, with certain elements falling in to the past. Likewise, the future is not a period that has not yet appeared in the present. If this description were true, as even Bergson recognized, time would fail to exist. All that could be known would be a very faint remembrance of some incredibly slim presents—the "knife-edged" presents identified by William James. But persons make distinctions between the past, present, and the future without this kind of discontinuity. Accordingly, these differentiations are made in the already integrated expanse of consciousness. As a result, there is no split between the past and the present, but a difference in commitment to certain experiences. The past does not fade away, in other words, but refers to experiences that have been reduced in priority and relegated to the background of other options.

Time, in this sense, represents divisions in consciousness. But because time is the work of consciousness, the past can never fall away or out of this field of experience. The past does not shift backward one or two stages following the arrival of a new present. The passage of time is not this mechanical. The appearance of the movement of time is created, instead, by persons making a shift in conscious orientation that generates a sense of "forward motion." An artificial, and often temporary, fissure is made in consciousness that allows persons to differentiate blocks of experience.

As Husserl (1966: 48-49) states, rather than separate states, temporal moments "run-off" into others and constitute a shift in time. His point is that in order for the present to be known, this dimension must be compared to the past through shifts in conscious attention and interpretation. Therefore, the past and present co-exist in consciousness, in that they represent an effort to organize experience through thematic relationality. What is important to note is that the differentiation between past/present/future is still "real", but only in terms of generating behavioral consequences. The past, for example, can now carry a different sense of urgency

than the present and foster shifts in behavior. In other words, the past is still retained and contrasted to the present in the field of consciousness. In sum, the past, present, and future reflect boundaries erected within consciousness for the purposes of establishing a world of meaning.

According to this phenomenological description, the reason why time is not a medium or any other mechanism can now be understood. Simply stated, time does not carry a life along or cause persons to act. What time encompasses, instead, is the activity of persons organizing their lives for the sake of specific purposes. For this reason, Heidegger (1962) argues that time is the most fundamental philosophical principle, even more profound than "Being", in that temporality constitutes how people organize their senses. Time, therefore, does not pass, but entails persons making meaning through *difference* (i.e., as the past/past/future) in order to give purpose to their lives.

Obviously this new version of time has implications for the life course. Quite noticeable is that lives no longer have a course or stages. Such terminology is simply too naturalistic and deterministic, and thus obscures the ontological role of consciousness and human agency. Instead of naturalistic portrayals, persons can be thought of as creating any number of possibilities for organizing experience, some of which may gradually become less relevant and relegated to the past. Rather than thinking of time as passing or fleeting, temporality should be viewed as the composite of existential shifts made by persons, or possibly the result of power relations that demand the elevation of certain temporal modes over others.

In this temporal framework, persons do not age, as if time is running a natural course. After all, persons of any age can be seen as simultaneously declining and growing in reference to specific personal and social norms. Age suggests, in large part, the way a society interprets the utility of persons to do socially valued tasks. Therefore, the life course might be abandoned altogether as an inappropriate metaphor to describe how persons conduct their lives. More appropriate, perhaps, would be to say that persons continue to make choices and create identities or biographies with others until death intercedes. What are commonly called stages merely represents a naturalistic cast given to this creative activity. Their reification, nonetheless, justifies relegating some persons to positions that deprive them of utility or value.

## Research and Politics

The rendition of time associated with phenomenology is indicative of a strong constructionist position. Human action does not simply flirt with reality, but rather is instrumental in differentiating fact from fantasy. In this matter, dualism is clearly untenable and a poor resource for conceptualizing time and aging. Following the advent of intentionality, human conscious activity is inextricably united with all constructed realities. *Any talk about constructions conditioning behavior, for example, already has attributed too much to a construction and obscures the capacity of human agency to self-develop.* A constructed reality can never gain such authority, since the power of legitimation rests within the field of human activity. At the same time, people do experience these constructions as a collective or intersubjective reality.

A researcher, therefore, never confronts or even investigates a reality. Within the context of strong constructionism, situational exigencies and interpretations do not vie for inherent recognition and legitimacy. Such a description of the knowledge



acquisition process is replete with dualism and convoluted, due to the assumed hierarchy of knowledge. In other words, certain knowledge bases could be viewed as less subjective than others and given more consideration because of their epistemological legitimacy. This differentiation, however, would certainly link power to knowledge; in short, those modalities identified as objective would have no reason to defer to perspectives viewed to be subjective. But constructionists do not typically separate knowledge bases in this manner, or deal with absolute epistemological foundations. Holstein and Gubrium (2008: 379), nonetheless, seem to waver on this issue, when they appear to make the distinction between situation and interpretation.

The validation of knowledge occurs, for constructionists, through a process of co-interpretation. Those who undertake a research project must reinterpret, in an appropriate manner, a cultural reality that is already socially constructed, experienced, and shared, possibly in several ways. What appropriate means in this context refers to the manner intended by those who are studied and have constituted their reality. In such a scenario, one interpretation may hold sway, while others loose intensity. At another time, a confluence of interpretations may be relevant. The important point is that no reality is simply recorded, but is always co-interpreted and thus shown to be relevant through human action.

What co-interpretation assumes is that researchers engage those who are studied. And at this nexus is where politics becomes important. This process of co-interpretation must proceed in a way that allows those who are studied to speak. Holstein and Gubrium also note the importance of encouraging multiple voices to speak during the research process, such as respondents recognizing their multiple social positions (mother, daughter, poor, young, old, etc.). In their terminology, "multivocality" allows for the possibility of "narrative linkages", which illustrate to respondents the multiple ways they are connected to one another and to themselves (Holstein, Gubrium 1995: 69). Clearly a wide range of power is operative at this juncture. Class, race, and gender, for example, may play a role in intimidating research subjects and researchers. Accordingly, co-interpretation may be transformed into a researcher monologue by any one of these considerations. A privileged position will thus influence the credence that is given to one interpretation or another. Such coercion, however, can be somewhat overt.

But one factor that is often overlooked relates to privileged knowledge bases. If one is thought to be fundamental, although modifiable, the stage is set for realism to infiltrate research. That is, what research subjects say may begin to be interpreted by norms or categories assumed to be more profound or valid, thereby undermining these persons' claims. Holstein and Gubrium, for example, do not discuss how "narrative linkages" can "demonstrate the reach of the political into areas typically assumed to be personal" (Reinharz 1992: 249-50). In other words, Holstein and Gubrium do not consider how even "co-construction" is implicated in "relations of ruling," or the dominant interpretations of reality (Smith 1987). Holstein and Gubrium make a compelling case for how the life course is "unavoidably collaborative", however saying that reality is co-constructed does not automatically address how even social constructions can unwittingly reinforce (un)equal power relations, or other institutionalized symbol systems.

Take the life course, for example. If the life course is thought to be a social construction, but is constrained by practical contingencies, possible favoritism is introduced pertaining to how any so-called stage should be interpreted (Holstein, Gubrium 2008: 379). For example, co-interpretation may be overshadowed by these empirical or practical requirements that restrict the focus of research to a technical description of the life course. The use of a participant-anchored-time-line to collect

life-history data comes to mind. In this scenario, a “soft realism” guides the research agenda that emphasizes the *characteristics of constructions* at the risk of downplaying the *praxis of constructing*. As a result, authentic co-interpretation is undermined and an inappropriate interpretation occurs that ignores the process of how persons give meaning to their world. In short, when dualism is left in-tact, coercion can assume new forms.

The politics of interpretive research are subtle but profound. Indeed, claims about sensitivity and care may be sidetracked by (often well intentioned) metaphors and descriptions that carry a hint of realism. And once this fundamental predicate is accepted, interpretations may suddenly be arranged in ways that betray co-interpretation. Put differently, a subtle framework is available and grants autonomy that may subvert the intentions of those who are studied. That life is presumed to have any direction at all, for example, may begin to infringe on how persons constitute their lives and how their biographies are interpreted.

An important problem is that often researchers live according to reified categories of time, and thus impose these during the research process. What is necessary, therefore, is that this critique of time becomes a part of the sociological discourse, particularly methodology. But such philosophical work is regularly overlooked nowadays, due to the emphasis that is placed on technique. Without such reflection, however, the stories people tell about their lives will be distorted by unexamined assumptions related to time or other issues. The point of interpretive methods is to determine, instead, how certain age norms are constructed and possibly eventually taken-for-granted. Only real co-construction can reveal this activity.

Given that interpretation is uncertain, furthermore, suggests that the life course is far more than malleable. In short, there is no basic orientation of a life course that may be reworked or reorganized. Such a reality is never merely encountered but constituted, even when a so-called traditional portrayal is enacted. The basic concern here is that a person’s life may be coerced by various unwanted interpretations. Care should be taken, therefore, to avoid any equivocation about realism that may overshadow co-interpretation and persons’ ability to make themselves *for themselves*.

## Conclusion

Fundamental to the problems with the original formulation of the life course and the constructionist remake by scholars, such as Holstein and Gubrium, is dualism. Consistent with the traditional thrust of Western philosophy, certain knowledge is assumed to be unaffected by the human presence. In the case of the earlier position on the life course, an autonomous temporal and evolutionary scheme went unchallenged. And with respect to their constructionist position, Holstein and Gubrium (2003: 215) leave relatively untouched so-called “practical exigencies.” To justify this omission, they cite Marx’s claim that persons make their world, but not under the conditions they always choose. Marx may have been able to tolerate such realism, but subsequent to the onset of phenomenology, and certainly postmodernism, this sort of lapse is very difficult to sustain.

With everything mediated by conscious experience, even the world into which a person is born is not encountered as a brute datum. This world of interpretation, for example, must be consolidated and transformed into a normative requirement, before this reality begins to seem rational and adopted. The point at this juncture is that an

interpretation can become a dominant reality and be described as natural, but this process is replete with human action. But this philosophical maneuver does not destroy the possibility of persons living a coherent life or adhering to particular norms. A person's life may even appear to constitute a course. Nevertheless, all dominant norms represent interpretations that are given priority over others; a course, accordingly, is manufactured out of choices that are not inherently connected.

Unless this critique of realism is truly appreciated, historical or contextual residues will be provided with a rationale for restricting human possibilities. Even though the traditional life course may lose some appeal, persons can be reminded subtly, and even with a measure of concern, that certain behavior is naturally beyond the pale. Although philosophically such a conclusion may not be warranted, so-called practical realities are often invoked to enlist conformity from persons.

Rather than the life course, social gerontologists might want to borrow from existentialists and start referring to a "life project." Indeed, this designation seems to be more accurate. No matter what persons inherit, they must (re)construct these realities and their biographies (if only to maintain them). This project, furthermore, is ambiguous with no obvious direction. In this regard, social gerontologists must not subvert these life prospects through (albeit subtle) political acts that limit how persons can define themselves. Even so-called realist considerations are not exempt from this command to respect human agency.

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