

Invited Article

Precarity, Inequality, and the Problem of Agency in the Study of the Life Course

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Abstract

Although long neglected, the themes of inequality and the differentiating consequences of structurally organized constraints and opportunities for individuals have recently become a major theme of scholars in aging and life-course studies. Beyond the evidence of intracohort patterns of cumulative dis/advantage in health and resources, recent societal trends of increasing inequality have added another dimension of theoretical interest and practical urgency to these concerns. These trends have been noteworthy both for the dramatic increase and for their planetary breadth, affecting Asia and Europe as well as America. Both researchers and popular writers have observed the growing importance of the *precariat*, an emerging subpopulation with tenuous connection to the primary economy encompasses individuals of every age. At the same time, individual agency and related concepts such as “choice” and “decision-making” continue regularly to appear as featured terms in studies of life course and related fields. Such concepts accord a strong explanatory force to the individual, and continue to be widely accepted as unproblematic and legitimate. This article examines the relevance of these two domains of life-course scholarship in analyzing an urgent contemporary problem—struggles associated with the “transition to adulthood” and the situation of young adults. Young people confronting this transition have been the focus of both the celebration of agency and of the growing attention on inequality and adversity and its effects on vulnerable periods and key transitions in the life course. Their situation provides an opportunity to resolve some of the tensions between perspectives that emphasize agency and those that emphasize inequality.

Translational Significance: The analysis presented in this article should enable researchers to expand and deepen understanding of the challenges involved in the transition to adulthood. It is intended to provide resources to place researchers’ understanding of the conceptualization and measurement of agency on a firm foundation, and it should provide resources to enable more attention to the effects of inequality within cohorts.

Keywords: Life course/Life span, Sociology, Social Factors, Theory

This article examines two important themes in the life-course literature, inequality and agency, as they intersect in the experience of the transition to adulthood. Agency is, of course, a popular and widely used concept in life-course studies. Inequality, inherently a collective phenomenon, has been rapidly gaining attention in life-course studies as it has

in society generally. This interest has been spurred by growing recognition of the robust, cohort-based phenomenon of cumulative dis/advantage as a regular feature of cohort aging, but even more, by the dramatic increases in societal inequalities seen since the 1980s. The dramatic growth in inequality has presented a stark change in perceived

possibilities for citizens in many advanced postindustrial societies, changes with substantial relevance for understanding trends of age-related change and life-course processes.

In this article, we consider the implications and interrelations of these two thematic concepts—agency and inequality—by examining them in relation to a feature of the life course that is also a matter of growing societal perplexity, the transition to adulthood. Indeed, the diverse and often-daunting circumstances faced by many young adults have also received growing public as well as scholarly attention. We begin by reviewing briefly the current state of knowledge and trends in the transition to adulthood, in which issues of inequality and precarity are increasingly prominent. We then turn to a consideration of how this transition has been framed in life-course and related traditions of research, which will bring into focus some key problems with the concept of agency. In response to these problems, we offer an alternative, sociologically grounded approach to conceptualizing agency which, we contend, offers three specific benefits to life-course analysts.

The Transition to Adulthood

The transitioning into adulthood has in recent decades become a “life stage” that is increasingly problematic and widely discussed, yet poorly theorized. This period is undersocialized in two senses—first in the sense that the “objective” reality confronting young adults less structured or readily available for the individuals to internalize the corresponding norms as a result of the ever-growing uncertainty and insecurity in major social institutions of Western societies—essentially comprising a gap in the institutionalized life course. It has also been earlier suggested that it is *theoretically* “undersocialized”, since microfication and personological approaches have often characterized efforts to conceptualize and theorize this transition (Dannefer, 1998; Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001).

Emerging Precariousness in Young Adulthood

The transition into adulthood in the 21st century faces a level of uncertainty and insecurity that is perhaps unprecedented since the industrial revolution. The disappearance of stable life-long full employment, spurred by globalization and the digital revolution, has challenged the working-age population as a whole (e.g., Moen, 2016). The effects have been especially consequential among young adults, for whom established safety nets are disappearing at multiple levels (e.g., intergenerational transmission, dysfunction of higher education, collapse of welfare state, etc.). Especially among marginalized subgroups (e.g., working-class, ethnic minority), young adults experience multiplied risks with diminished societal options, and limited resources to seek individual-level solutions.

Work, which has served as a primary marker of adulthood and a major component of the institutionalized life course, has changed dramatically in response to changes in major institutions. After the post-WWII boom and the

expansion of a highly institutionalized safety net, the 1970s comprised a watershed between “age of security” and “age of flexibility” (Mortimer & Moen, 2016) and precarity (Standing, 2014). Employment and the labor market during the 1970s were “secure”: both the white-collar and blue-collar job opportunities expanded and were characterized by an internal labor market that facilitated a secure and predictable within-organization job ladder and diminished possibility of lay-offs (e.g., Stone, 2004; Kalleberg, 2011).

Such conditions were a primary basis for the framework of institutionalized life course (Kohli & Meyer, 1986; Kohli, 2007), reflected in increasingly uniform transitions patterns from education to work (Hogan, 1981, Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976) and to retirement, a pattern that powerfully defined the mid-20th century socioeconomic realities.

However, since the 1970s, the labor market has become increasingly “polarized and precarious” (Kalleberg, 2011). Opportunities for well-paid, and sometimes low-skilled manufacturing jobs shrank dramatically under the challenges of globalization and the digital revolution. The shift to a knowledge-intensive economy required increasingly specialized skills, and an increasing preoccupation with credentials, thereby amplifying the exclusion of the disadvantaged. Income inequality exploded as a result of the stagnant salary of workers at the bottom combined with rapid growth at the top (Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Deaton, 2013; Piketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2016). Accompanied by such macrostructural changes, the ideological shift to individualism further spurred the privatization of risks, reinforcing what Michael Lewis has described as a resilient “culture of inequality” in the United States (Lewis, 1993).

The term *precariat*, coined by Guy Standing, is intended to capture the common plight and growing ranks of subpopulations who are subject to the vicissitudes of a chronically insecure labor market. Among subgroups at risk for precarity, young adults figure prominently (Standing, 2014). Young adults are likely to enter precarious positions such as temporary jobs and unpaid internships that often have tenuous links to future opportunity. Aiming at job preparation, higher education increasingly emphasizes specialized certification programs tailored for young adults to pursue targeted field of work. This may entail a reduction in educational breadth that actually takes choices from the table.

Failure to obtain financial independence is considered to be responsible for delays in marriage and childbearing (e.g., Danziger & Rouse, 2008; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Mortimer, Kim, Staff, & Vuolo, 2016). The average earnings of men in each subgroup of age 18–34 dropped between 1986 and 2000 in the United States, and only a small proportion of men in their early 20s are household heads (Danziger & Rouse, 2008). The lack of stable long-term jobs and youth unemployment undermines not only economic well-being but also young adults’ psychology. Mortimer and colleagues (2016) found that respondents who were not able to integrate into labor market are at risk

for a decline of self-efficacy and an uneven development of work-related identities.

Self-efficacy theorist Bandura is among those concerned that the transition to adulthood is “less marked than it was in the past” (1997:184) and that its lack of structure and opportunity may imperil subjective well-being. Emphasizing the need for a “firm sense of efficacy”, Bandura observes that those who enter adulthood poorly equipped with skills and plagued by doubts about their futures find many aspects of their adult lives aversive, full of hardships, and depressing (Bandura, 1997:184). He makes clear his concern for the large number of young adults who “...find themselves in a marginal work status by exclusion from the primary labor market rather than by choice...”

Similar challenges face European young adults. Indeed, in some countries, the situation is markedly more dire than in the United States. A recent Eurostat report indicates a persistence of extraordinarily high youth unemployment (aged 15–24 years) in several EU countries, including Greece (47.9%), Spain (39.3%), and Italy (34%) (Eurostat, 2017). Since youth unemployment rate is calculated from this age group who are in the labor market while the majority of their counterparts are still in education or training, the measure of neither in education nor employment or training (NEET) rate may better reflect the portion of young adults who are at the risk of becoming precariat (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). Even factoring in such consideration, the NEET rates remain high in the aged 20–34 population in Greece (32.4%) and Italy (31.6%) (Eurostat, 2017).

The missing link between school and work is not unique to the West. China has also experienced the transformation from an age when jobs can be arranged to one that is more market-oriented. Civil service jobs—“the golden rice bowl”—have gained popularity among the young college graduates who face a job market that is less stable than in the past. Once characterized as risk-takers, they increasingly prioritize security over adventure. About 1.4 million people took the civil service exam in 2012, a number 20 times more than a decade ago (Economist, 2012). Getting a “golden rice bowl” has become one of the ideal jobs for college graduates.

Whether in China, Europe or the United States, confronting these contemporary challenges compels attention to the daunting circumstances that form the daily experience of tens of millions of young people across the planet, and to the sources of exclusion that underlie them. Obviously, these circumstances have implications for the possibility of a “self-determined life” and for the kinds of decision-making prospects that are often referenced in life-course research by the term agency.

Characterizing Young Adulthood—Constraint or Choice? Disruption or Opportunity? Exclusion or Potentials?

The conditions of young adulthood sketched above, as framed by the upheaval in life experiences and expectations and structurally driven increases in precarity and inequality stand in marked contrast with manner in which such issues are often framed in life-course and related areas of research, where a heavy emphasis is often placed on opportunity and potentials, and even more, on positive individual “control” characteristics such as planfulness, resilience, decision-making, agency. Especially in North America, the latter is an interpretive theme that is closely aligned with the longstanding and continuing emphasis of depictions of life transitions in the field of aging and life-course studies, especially in North America.

A popular narrative in the life course and developmental traditions portrays this period as one full of potentials, as a time of life that is promising and itself inherently fulfilling. If a dearth of normative signposts poses challenges (Mortimer & Moen, 2016), that same lack of structure has also been regarded in positive terms. The concept *emerging adulthood*, coined by Jeffery Arnett, is characterized by the possibilities and freedom to explore, entitled invariably to young adults.

“For today’s young people, the road to adulthood is a long one. They leave home at age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, and find a long-term job until at least their late twenties. From their late teens to their late twenties they explore the possibilities available to them in love and work, and move gradually toward making enduring choices” (Arnett, 2004:3).

This theme is also given voice in Settersten and Ray’s study (2010) of the transition to adulthood, *Not Quite Adults: Why 20-Somethings Are Choosing a Slower Path to Adulthood, And Why It’s a Good Thing for Everyone*. The fateful importance of decision making and choice figures prominently in the Settersten and Ray’s interpretation, and it extends beyond the young adults they are studying to their parents’ generation. “As the 2008–2009 economic crisis exposed, Americans had been living beyond their means... Families had fed their spending habits by refinancing their mortgages...” (2010:30).

At the same time, Settersten and Ray present a nuanced view of the struggles of young adults and that recognizes the economic tenuousness and paucity of options confronting many of their respondents “... because the system as set up simply has no room for them... there were no other options, at least not ones that could be identified” (2010:17).

The theme of restricted and undesirable options has been strongly echoed by other scholars of young adulthood. In her work based on interviewing 100 working-class young men and women (2013), Jennifer Silva

describes the transition to adulthood as an experience that does not involve decision making at all in any meaningful sense, but an “*absence of choice*” (Silva, 2013: 30). For such youth, the path to independence and achievement of traditional markers (i.e., leaving home, finishing school, finding a job, getting married, and having kids, to adulthood) is daunting. Among the working class young adults, many traditionally taken-for-granted “choices” are altogether missing from the horizon of possibilities. Young men found it hard to transfer skills learned in the military to civil jobs. Rather than exploring adventuresome options, they behaved very conservatively to avoid using the limited security that they had. Yet in many cases traditional institutions no longer provide protections for the disadvantaged young adults who make “good” choices (see Also Mortimer & Moen, 2016).

Agency, Individual Characteristics and Choice

The concerns raised by Standing, Silva and to some extent by Settersten and Ray present a reality of daunting challenges and limited life horizons with few options. Too often, “(t)he economy makes that choice (of foreclosed opportunity) for them” (Settersten & Ray, 2010: xiii).

Nevertheless, the themes of volition and choice, generally framed in a less problematic sense of life possibilities, continue to hold a prominent place in contemporary research on human development and the life course. As many readers will know, in the life-course literature these terms are closely associated with the popular notion of “agency”: “Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances ...” (e.g., Elder, 1998:961–962; Elder & Johnson, 2002). Even more explicitly, Csizmadia, Brunsmma, and Cooney (2012:1) state that “... weakening structural constraints permit overall higher levels of human agency...” (see also, e.g., Gillespie & van der Lippe, 2015; Settersten, 1999; Shanahan & Hood, 1999).

Despite its dominance in the life-course literature, it should be noted that “choice” is not the only individual-level meaning that researchers have attached to the notion of agency. A contrasting approach defines agency in terms of temperament-related characteristics—relevant individual skills and personality characteristics such as self-efficacy or planful competence (Clausen, 1993.) Self-efficacy has been conceptualized as an ability to exert control over one’s life and influence on outcomes and this property of vital to personal agency. Self-efficacy in particular is considered important, because its presence catalyzes the purposeful action toward desired outcomes (i.e., “If people believe they have no power to produce results, they will not attempt to make things happen.” Bandura, 1997:3).

Since these potential explanatory principles—volition and “temperament”—represent inherently logically contradictory themes, it is not surprising that a focus on one of them leaves little room for the other. For example, Bandura,

whose observations about the psychological damage of precarity were noted above, clearly recognizes the limited relevance of “choice” for many young people:

“the transition routes for non-college youth are unstructured, marked by early detours and directional changes, and left largely to individual initiative”, creating an, “uncertainty in important matters is highly unsettling” (Bandura, 1997: 185).

Similarly, Reiter (2012:31) characterized “the inability to appropriate lived life and use it as a basis for projecting oneself meaningfully into the future” as a form of “biographical alienation”.

Hitlin and Kwon suggest a view of the concept of agency that, remarkably allows for both types of definition—as anchored in fixed or stable individual characteristics at the same time that it is also volitional—thus combining freedom and choice on one hand together with, on the other, orientations that reflect fixed characteristics over which individuals have little control. They seek to justify this inherently contradictory logic by arguing that agency benefits from having a “... slippery nature ... which allows it to serve as a placeholder for scholars interested in carving out room for individual volition within a range of social forces” (2016:433).

In all of these approaches, whether the focus is on “temperament” or “volition”, a common denominator is that agency is viewed as originating within the individual. Agency and context are, again, implicitly counterposed, and agency is viewed as effectively asserting the interests and choices of the actor whenever she somehow acts in a way that resists or does not conform to the expectations of the surrounding social context.

Agency, Social Theory, and Life-Course Research

Despite its widespread popularity in life-course studies and related fields, the self-contained, volition-based approach to agency has been vigorously critiqued by some life-course scholars. Marshall (2005:63) observed that “... agency functions in this theoretical perspective in the same way that ‘unexplained variance’ functions in statistical models” (see also Dannefer, 1999; Dannefer, Kelley-Moore, & Huang, 2016; Marshall & Clarke, 2010). “Agency within structure” thus is imagined as individual autonomy in decision making as that which is left over after the constraints of structure have been explicated as predictors in one’s SEM model. As the present authors have noted in another context, when agency is used in this way, it has “...achieved its conceptual status without any requirement that it be empirically measured or analyzed” (Dannefer et al., 2016).

Yet there is a much more basic problem with the prevailing use of the term agency in aging and life-course research.

This problem is the misconstrual of the fundamental nature of agentic action as it has been classically understood, and as it is situated within a properly sociological, understanding of the individual and of self-society relations. This is not just a matter of semantics; it goes heart of the question of the nature of the empirical phenomena that sociologists of the life course seek to understand.

Within sociology proper, agency as a concept has been the beneficiary of considerable scrutiny (Bourdieu, 1977; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1976; Sewell, 1992). With few exceptions, such critical scrutiny has been largely absent in discussions of agency by life-course researchers. Although this may be in part because the implications of such discussions don't translate easily into empirical measures, the problem goes deeper than that. Indeed, some life-course scholars explicitly deflect these more fundamental questions of agency, and even are content to allow inherently contradictory notions to coexist, as noted above (e.g., Hitlin & Kwon, 2016). Since agency is fundamentally essential to the constitution of self-society relations and the formation of social institutions as well as action within them (see, e.g., Baars, 1991; Dannefer, 1999, 2008), we consider such an approach untenable.

When one pursues thoughtfully the question of what agency entails, the ambiguities inevitably push the conceptual search back to the interactionist insights in Mead's and Weber's classic discussions of the fundamental meaning of social intention and action. Informed by the principles deriving from this classical work, agency can be defined as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments ... which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; see also Giddens, 1976). Within the context of life-course and developmental studies, we have earlier proposed a less elaborate distillation of the same view, that it is "the externalization of conscious intentionality into human action" (Dannefer, 1999; Dannefer et al., 2016). Interestingly, we note that self-efficacy theorist Albert Bandura defines agency in almost identical terms, as "acts done intentionally" (Bandura, 1997:3).

While intentional human action may occasionally entail resistance, innovation and/or deliberate efforts at self-assertion over against contextual forces, the lion's share of it does no such thing, but simply reproduces established patterns of practice and thereby the existing social order—an "iterational element" that is guided by existing regimes of social practice (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, see also Ortner, 1984). Moreover, when change does occur as a result of agentic action, it is often an unintended consequence of those actions (Merton, 1968). The extent to which agentic acts produce the change that was desired or intended by the actor is a question that must remain beyond the scope of the present argument.

Individual consciousness—where purposes and agentic intentions are formulated and then externalized in social action—is irreducibly shaped by socially organized activity routines and culture-specific language (Bourdieu, 1977; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Dannefer, 2008; Sewell, 1992), by the multilayered complex of structures that pattern social interaction, expectations, taste, and aesthetics within every individual's consciousness, beginning while she is still in the womb. This is close to what Bourdieu intends with the concept of habitus as the field within which consciousness emerges and is sustained: "...the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions and no others" (Bourdieu, 1977:95).

When the social organization of intentionality is recognized, it quickly becomes clear that it is meaningless to treat agency and structure simply as counterposed forces in a zero-sum game. The agency of each individual actor is profoundly and unavoidably organized by the social structures within which that individual lives her life, and much of her agentic action is inevitably directed toward the reproduction of existing patterns of social life. Although this is not necessarily an unhealthy state of affairs, it does make clear that a great majority of agentic acts performed by a person and by all the members of a cohort have the effect of simply reproducing and reinforcing the one's habitus, the existing world-taken-for-granted, the world of everyday life.

It is not an unhealthy state of affairs because, without such social organization of agency, individuals would lack the degree of social integration required for a foundation of mental health and a coherent sense of self, and for stable social relations and the relatively predictable modes of social relating. The feral human individual child who has no language is "free" of humanly produced social structure, but as a result lacks the basic enablement of symbolic engagement even to articulate or perhaps even to formulate an agentic plan of action (Dannefer, 2008; Lane, 1976; Perry & Svalavitz, 2007). This is why Giddens emphasized that "... structures must not be conceptualized as simply placing constraints on human agency, but as enabling ..." (Giddens, 1976:161; see also Dannefer, 1999, 2008; Marshall, 2005; Marshall & Clarke, 2010).

From this theoretically anchored vantage point, the lion's share of agentic activity results not in conduct that is individualized, resistant or innovative, but in the enactment and reproduction of "the normal"—or habituated and expectable social patterns, and hence in the reproduction of the institutionalized routines and social structures that govern everyday life. Most of every actor's everyday engagement involves activities that conform to the expectations of the prevailing social order, and indeed, it is the very force that sustains that order, or at least is entirely integral to sustaining it.

Thus, human action is no less intentional, when undertaken under conditions of great constraint (e.g., prisoners or slaves laboring under threat of punishment, or scratching

messages on their cell walls at night) than in the case of affluent vacationers seeking to maximize hedonic enjoyment on a tropical beach. In both cases, human activity and communication are directed by conscious intention and its externalization into action. Thus, it should be unmistakably clear that the intrinsic character of agency has nothing whatever to do with the features that have been repeatedly attributed to it in life-course writing, such as rational choice, volition, and decision making. Agency, rather, is the human constant of formulating intentions and externalizing them into human activity. There is variation, of course, both in *consciousness*—in the worldview assumptions that inform purposive action, and also in the *possibilities* of action that an individual has in formulating her intentions to act in a given moment.

Variation in the range of possibilities of action, and the prospects for action to affect one's circumstances and bring them more in line with what one desires, are not reducible to matters of agency. They represent a mix of the actor's interests, her formulation of intentions, the range of actions that can be expressed and the consequences of those actions in a given situation. Understanding the possibilities of action is something akin to what Amartya Sen has quite famously called the "capability approach" (e.g., Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2005) in which "capability" refers not merely to inherent individual attributes but to the potentials of action given both personal capacities and situational affordances and constrictions.

When agency is thus understood, it should be clear the role of social structure is not merely to constrain agency, thereby defining and limiting the options among which an otherwise "free" actor may choose. Rather, what social structure primarily does is to shape and define the individual's consciousness, within which intentions and purposes are formulated and externalized into agentic action. This is, of course, what occurs continuously beginning in very early life and continuing on through the life course, through the learning of language and culture (including, e.g., skills and aesthetic preferences) of one's habitus.

Thus conceived, agency does not exist as the error term, relegated to the caprice of free choice. Rather, it is recognized as it empirically exists—as an expression of consciousness that is constituted by and typically integrated into the habitus in which it operates (Baars, 1991). To reiterate, the operation of agentic expression in everyday life also serves to create the social relationships that sustain the world (Dannefer, 1999, 2008). The task for life-course scholars as for other sociologists includes the need to understand how agency is shaped and directed by the field of interaction within which the individual resides.

Anchoring Agency in Social Theory: Three Positive Implications

These critical points do not exist as mere arcane abstractions or efforts at "politically correct" theorizing; they have

substantive implications for conceptualizing life-course problems, designing research, and extrapolating real-life implications. They have implications for how realistically and responsibly we as life-course scholars are willing to confront the broader, yet empirically accessible, realities within which the individuals we study constitute their own lives. We suggest three positive implications of a reformulation of agency in its proper place: (1) the integrity of its scientific moorings, (2) a recognition of the significance of *collective* agency in the life course, and (3) an elucidation of the *ideological* significance of agency in relation to inequality.

Scientific Moorings of the Concept

We acknowledge that the formulation of agency as the externalization of intent into action, while empirically accurate, does not lend itself to easy empirical access nor to quantitative precision in measurement. However, measurement follows concept. Being content with measures that fail to take seriously the full scope and nature of the concept being studied calls forth memories of the drunk who lost his keys in a dark alley, but looked for them under the streetlight—since the light made searching easier. If the first task of the scientific enterprise is to respect its subject matter (Blumer, 1969:46), science provides no warrant for altering the conceptualization of an empirical phenomenon for the sake of making measurement easier.

Individual Versus Collective Agency

As we have seen, agency is a matter of self-expression that is never enacted in a vacuum, but is irreducibly informed by multiple, internalized dimensions of social context. Often, agency in self-societal relations is described as bidirectional or mutually reinforcing. Such formulations may not be entirely inaccurate, yet they are simplified and misleading when they fail (as is generally the case) to acknowledge the power imbalance that is virtually always present in self-context relations, an imbalance that has been termed *agentic asymmetry* (Dannefer, 1999:111; see also Bandura, 2001:18).

Yet even when analyzing agency as a form of exchange relationship, it is typically enacted interactively, and with a degree of cooperation. Sometimes, this interactive cooperativity can be directed to collectively shared objectives, a phenomenon that has been called *collective agency*. The exercise of collective agency has, of course, historically produced phenomena of central relevance to macrolevel social change, such as the rise and impact of trade unions and many consequential social movements, whether the fascist and other political movements in Europe in the early 20th century or the progressive social movements launched in the 1960s and 70s. In addition to the so-called "youth movement"; it is noteworthy that these movements

included at least one organization, the Gray Panthers, specifically focused on the interests of older people.

In terms of the prospects for collective agency in everyday life, collective agency has, perhaps ironically, received more notice from psychologists than sociologists. For example, Bandura recognizes *collective* agency as occurring when "... people work together to produce the benefits they seek" (1997:32; see also Bandura, 2001). Stetsenko (2008, 2015) has applied principles of Vygotskian psychology in developing a "transformative activist stance" that envisions collective agency as a deliberate force for social change in social systems through an intention-guided process of coconstruction—"collectivindual dynamics", in her terminology (2013). Focusing on a subpopulation for whom the transition to adulthood remains a matter of central concern, students at a community college. Stetsenko and colleagues describe a project involving a collective effort undertaken jointly by students and faculty, to implement curricular and policy change in the community college institution (Vianna, Hougaard, & Stetsenko, 2014). The aim, which was both studied and facilitated by the researchers using a methodology similar to participatory action research, was to enhance intellectual rigor in the curriculum and critical self-reflection in both pedagogy and organizational practice, and to reduce the commodifying aspects of the content and process of community college education.

A few efforts of elders to exercise collective agency have been noted in the gerontological literature. While detailed scrutiny of such reports is beyond the scope of this article, we call attention to a few notable efforts. Baars and Thomese (1994:348) have analyzed the development of "elder communes" in the Netherlands, which were first established and proliferated in the 1980s, as a collective response to the premature exclusion of healthy retirees from an engaged social life. They write:

".... elderly people are finding new perspectives and filling the void themselves. One interesting example of this is elderly involvement in the founding of communes, which indeed demands an active and creative stance."

An example of a recent and systemic effort to organize agency on behalf of which includes, but is not limited to, elder concerns is represented by grassroots efforts to develop *social economies*. The social economy has been defined as a collective strategy and

"...pathway of social empowerment in which voluntary associations in civil society directly organize various aspects of economic activity that is distinct from capitalist market production, state organized production, and household production. Its hallmark is production organized by collectivities directly to satisfy human needs not subject to the discipline of profit maximization nor state-technocratic rationality" (Wright, 2010:140–141).

In the United States, *the Villages* and the *Village-to-Village Network* (http://www.vtvnetwork.org/content.aspx?page_id=0&club_id=691012) provides flourishing examples of the exercise of collective agency by older people who have worked to establish a social economy:

Villages are a ... consumer-directed model that brings together older adults in a neighborhood or community who have a mutual interest in aging in place. These membership organizations are often developed and governed by older adults themselves. Though there can be great variation in structure and service provision ... the primary goal Is to promote members' independence and prevent undesired relocations (Graham, Scharlach, Nicholson, & O'Brien, 2017:3).

From its start in Beacon Hill in 2002, the Village movement proliferated rapidly, growing to a national network of more than 150 villages by 2016.

A range of examples of the application of collective agency in establishing social economies can readily be identified, and may apply to specific segments of the life course. One community with a long tradition of political engagement in Barcelona, where a sense of collective efficacy can be seen in the strong participatory involvement of local communities in the process of schooling. Describing the situation in Barcelona, Wright (2010:143) reports that "...some public schools have been turned into what are called 'learning communities' in which ... governance ... is substantially shifted to parents, teachers and members of the community, and the function of the school shifts from narrowly teaching children to providing a broader range of learning activities for the community as a whole".

Another example of a strong culture of engaged social participation is in Quebec, where a lively social economy proactively supports the expansion of noncapitalist forms of economic activity that proceed with their own plans, parallel to and without any formal linkage with either the private sector or the state (Mendell & Neamton, 2010; see also Wright, 2010:141–143).

These examples raise the question of whether the dis-course of age and the life course might have developed differently, had the daily experience of life-course researchers occurred in a context that included a strong social economy.

Obviously, social economy initiatives and other such efforts are peripheral, constituting a very small sliver of the economic pie even in those settings where they are most advanced. Nevertheless, such experiences should not be considered marginal societal phenomena consigned to the category of curious aberrations. There are too many growing and flourishing examples to discount them, and more importantly, to do so would obscure precisely those instances when agency engages traditional societal powers—economic, political, cultural—and therefore may be most potent. To restrict such efforts from consideration is

to participate in protecting the hegemony of established structures of power. This concern serves to introduce our third point, which concerns the ideological relevance of the concept of agency as often conceived.

Agency, Inequality, and Ideology

Related to some of the issues discussed earlier, Walter Heinz points to some pragmatic consequences of the frequently glib use of the concept of agency:

“Transition studies that celebrate young people’s agency and choice without bringing social inequality, institutions, and changing opportunities back in will produce misleading conclusions: first they make the acquisition of job skills the young adults’ responsibility, and second, they can be used for blaming the ones who do not take initiative to make themselves employable at any cost” (Heinz, 2009:402).

This apt observation points to the relation between the life-course discourse on “agency” and life-course awareness of inequality. In this relationship, it is clear that agency is positioned to serve as an ideological function by obscuring the role of structure. In doing so, it is a reflection of the functional-developmental nexus, a paradigmatic approach that supports established structures of social practice and power by rendering invisible forms of social structure that shape the parameters of the life course and predefine its possibilities (Dannefer, 2011; Dannefer et al., 2016). Within this paradigm, there is scant opportunity to consider problems of power, inequality or the interaction of life-course processes with the precarity. It renders the state as not only benign, but invisible. It offers a prime example of microfication, the “action” of analytical interest is seen as occurring at the individual or at most microinteractional level.

We suggest that the mobilization of the concept of agency into researchers’ discussions of or efforts to explain life-course patterns and outcomes should only occur if a careful analysis of both context and consciousness are provided. What are the defining features of the social life within which the agentic line of action is being formulated? Are the goals toward which agentic action directed best pursued individually? Under what conditions might a collective approach—collective efficacy—be advantageous as a life-course strategy? And why have such questions have not typically been part of the calculus of paradigmatic interpretation of life-course dynamics?

Conclusion

In this article, we have focused on the transition to adulthood from the vantage point of two major and paradigmatically distinct concepts, inequality and agency. Agency has long been a favored interpretive term in studies of age

and the life course, use to indicate individual discretion and voluntaristic action. Inequality, long neglected in aging studies generally, has become harder to ignore in studies of young adulthood because of the impact of its rapid growth, a by-product of growing uncertainty for many young people. We have argued this usage of agency is logically untenable and empirically problematic. It is fundamentally at variance with the way the concept of agency is understood in established theoretical traditions of sociology, where it is linked most fundamentally to the formulation of intentions and their externalization into action. Without such a grounding, agency may help eclipse awareness of the kind of structural challenges in the life course that inequality represents. A sociologically grounded approach to agency will (1) define the phenomenon of agency in an empirically appropriate way, (2) invite analysis of the dynamics of collective as well as individual-level forms of agency, and (3) enable an analysis of the ideological potentials of agency.

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Conflict of Interest

None reported.

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