Social Work Practice and Life Course Development: transition and conformity?

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Abstract

Summary: The course of people lives is said to be marked by stages and periods of Transition, in effect a process of conforming, following a 'set of rules'. This is demonstrated in literature and in the work of life course theorist who move through predictable stages, with failure to progress satisfactorily through these 'stages' affecting well-being and success in later life. Explored through the lens of professional social work practice, the question is how can we define what is 'normal'?

Findings*:* Life course development and transition theories give us a framework for understanding some of the common themes which have affected people through the ages and which affect individuals through the stages of their life. However each individuals life course must be interpreted through their own narratives.

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."

The more things change, the more they are the same. (Karr, 1849)

The concept of 'Transition' is taken to mean movement from one state of being to another. In human life course terms, it can be used to signify a period of change between stages in a person's life as in Levinson's (1978, cited in Crawford and Walker, 2007: 98)) 'seasons of life' model, which states that adulthood involves distinct 'seasons'. For Levinson, "as long as life continues, no period marks the end of the opportunities, and the burdens of further development." (ibid: 76). Transition can mean one of the events or experiences a person moves through as they progress through life (Crawford and Walker, 2007: 5). In contrast, 'conformity' means adherence or compliance, usually with a specific and static set of rules: not moving. Yet it can be argued, in many ways, transition *is* conformity.

The apparent contradiction between 'transition' and 'conformity' is explored by Sugarman (2001). She compares the ordered-change approach, the stability orientation and the aleatory-change orientation perspectives, arguing that 'dynamic continuity' (a basic structure to a person's life which allows for a variety of changes to occur within that framework (ibid: 163)) can be extended into a narrative perspective. This allows life-span developments to be viewed as a coherent story given meaning and plot by the individual whose story it is, with clear parallels to literary conventions (ibid: 177-186). On a wider theoretical basis, it can be argued that, while there is wide-ranging variety of human circumstances, behaviour, characteristics and choices, there is sufficient conformity and continuity within and between individuals' lives for students

of social sciences to be able to formulate some general theories about life stages and transition through them, as one perspective in a multi-disciplinary attempt to understand the story of human life.

> *"When I was a child, I spake as a child. . . . but when I became a man, I put away childish things."* (St Paul: I Corinthians: 13, 1)

In considering how far transition – or transition theory – relies on conformity, it is useful to look at the traditionally-defined patterns of human life course development, for example as described in Shakespeare's (1599) 'seven ages of man' monologue in 'As You Like It'..

> *All the world's a stage,*
>
> *And all the men and women merely players;*
>
> *They have their exits and their entrances;*
>
> *And one man in his time plays many parts,*
>
> *His acts being seven ages.*
>
> *At first, the infant,*
>
> *Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms…*
>
> *Last scene of all,*
>
> *That ends this strange eventful history,*
>
> *Is second childishness and mere oblivion,*
>
> *Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything*.
>
> Jaques (Act II, Scene VII, lines 139-166)

This path from birth to death takes the individual through different stages in life, each consecutively associated with a specific age span, with its own characteristics, pre-occupations and roles. While theorists (and societies) may differ as to how many stages there are, and exactly when they begin and end, there is general agreement that this is the pattern to be expected in life.

Some life stages (the infant, the adolescent, extreme old age) are predominantly defined by biological parameters and characteristics; others such as Shakespeare's schoolboy:

> *And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel*
>
> *And shining morning face, creeping like snail*
>
> *Unwillingly to school."* (ibid)

and the justice:

> *And then the justice,*
>
> *In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,*
>
> *With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,*
>
> *Full of wise saws and modern instances;*
>
> *And so he plays his part.* (ibid)

are socially-determined roles. While there are some (usually early) theorists whose work falls squarely within one discipline – Marx, Darwin and Freud, for example, representing the social, physiological and psychological perspectives respectively (Crawford and Walker, 2007: 18-24) – most stage models of development, like Shakespeare's, recognise the multidimensional influences and developments that can

affect life course progression. They also assume that people move through each stage in sequence at certain ages; that their preoccupations, challenges and desired outcomes can be predicated by their stage of life course development; and that failure to progress satisfactorily through one stage will affect their well-being and success in later life.

None of these theories are proposed as universal laws, and it is recognised that the range of human development includes some exceptions to the general rules. However, these are usually seen as marginal and problematic: exceptions that prove the rules precisely because we have a normative range to compare them against. So, for example, early onset of puberty is seen as a medical 'problem' requiring 'treatment', despite the fact that medical guidance is based on a limited and outdated survey and that a study by 'The Institute of Child Health' (Warner, 2000) suggests as many as one in six girls are now entering puberty 'early', probably due to a specific social factor, better nutrition. In this case, conformity to an outdated theory is masking the new nature of this particular transition.

> *"You are old, Father William the young man said,*
>
> *And your hair has become very white;*
>
> *And yet you incessantly stand on your head*
>
> *Do you think, at your age, it is right?"* (Carroll, 1865)

Perhaps our expectations of what is normal require 'treatment' instead. Many of the assumptions underlying life stage theories are based on societal expectations of what

is normal for the different life stages. At one time older people, for example, were generally perceived as frail and non-productive – perceptions which Alcock (2003) dismisses as myths contributing to ageism. The argument that old age is nothing more than a social construct is in turn challenged by others who believe that "the current tendency towards 'agelessness' is itself a form of ageism, depriving the old of one of their most hard-earned resources: their age" (Andrews, 1999: 301). The existence of such conflicting perceptions illustrates just how far views on what is normal or desirable are influenced and validated by different personal, social and cultural factors.

What do you see nurse, what do you see?

What do you think when you are looking at me?

A crabby old woman, not very wise

Uncertain of habit with faraway eyes? …

I remember the joys

I remember the pain

And I'm loving and living life over again.

… look closer. See Me!

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health.

What do they think has happened, the old fools,

To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose

It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,

And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember

Who called this morning? Or that, if they only chose,

They could alter things back to when they danced all night,

Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September?... Why aren't they

screaming? Philip Larkin: The Old Fools.

Thompson's (2006: 26-30) analysis shows how values and attitudes develop within personal, cultural and structural influences (PCS). Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological development (1979, cited in Crawford and Walker, 2007: 19-20) analyses the influences of environmental factors on children, looking at not only at personal (microsystem), community (exosystem) and societal (macrosystem) factors but also how these interact with the individual and each other (mesosystem) and develop over time (chronosystem). Both theories can be applied in professional social work practice to explore the specific range of interacting influences, their relative importance, and their development over time, for an individual user of services. This information could usefully be gained through a narrative biographical approach which would take account of earlier developmental factors as well as the presenting situation, and which would reveal the unique viewpoint of the individual telling the story – although the worker listening and interpreting it needs to be aware of their own and society's values as possible barriers to the individual's voice (Thompson, 2006).

"So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old. . . .

The Child is father of the Man"

(Wordsworth, 1807)

The extent to which stage models and ecological models overlap is revealed by their shared perception of the crucial importance of early life influences on future developments – whether by nature or by nurture, it is the formative factors which can determine the direction of the path a child follows through life. Psychologists tend to look at this in terms of cognitive and emotional development: Erikson's (1968) concept of identity, for example, or Bowlby's attachment theory (cited in Howe, 2000: 25-27). Physiologists would look at genetic determinants and the impact of physical growth and illness. Sociologists consider the birth and early home circumstances, looking at economic, cultural and societal parameters: Murray's concept of the underclass (described in Marsland, 1996: 20), for example, sees class, poverty and welfare policy as inescapable conditions, perpetuated from one generation to the next, significantly affecting values and attitudes as well as having practical consequences.

Make me a grave where'er you will,

In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill;

Make it among earth's humblest graves,

But not in a land where men are slaves…

I ask no monument, proud and high,

To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;

All that my yearning spirit craves,

Is bury me not in a land of slaves.

(Frances E.W. Harper, 1845)

As Bee and Mitchell (1984:7) point out, "most of us are well aware . . . that our behaviour is the result of a mixture of forces, all working together". The crucial factor is the complicated interaction of these forces, including the individual's own responses and actions. Like Bronfenbrenner, they see development as "a process of mutual influence, with the end result more than merely the sum of the individual parts" (ibid: 10), and they posit that the personality and behavioural patterns which result give people unique and recognisable identities which shape the pattern of their lives – Sugarman's (2001) 'dynamic continuity'. Bee and Mitchells (ibid) example of a high school class meeting up and recognising each other at regular reunions is remarkably similar to the thrust of the "Seven Up!" (1964) and subsequent documentaries.

> *What would you do if you had lots of money, about, um, two pound?* (Susan)
>
> *If I could change the world, I'd turn it into a diamond.* (Nicholas)
>
> *When I get married I don't want to have any children because they're always doing naughty things and making the house untidy.* (Neil)

 The people we see at seven-year intervals up to the age of 49 years are for the most part facing and dealing with challenges and opportunities which conform to traditionally-constructed age-defined models, and are recognisable as older, wiser versions of their 7 and 14 year old selves, both in terms of personality and social circumstances. (Perhaps the notable exception to this rule is the impact of mental illness.) They have conformed to their own dynamic continuities throughout the transitions and challenges of their lives.

"The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (Shakespeare, 1601b)

Very few people sail through life without challenges to face and surmount; the question here is how far these conform to predictable patterns and whether people inevitably face specific challenges and opportunities as they progress through different stages of life? Staged theories of adult development, such as Erikson's eight stages of man and Havighurst's six life stages and related developmental tasks, are attempts to formulate general theory addressing these questions, but have been criticised (Crawford and Walker, 2007: 101-102) as being based on narrowly-researched, culturally-specific studies and failing to incorporate diversity; as being too fixed and deterministic; and as reinforcing socially constructed expectations.

"Crossing the dunes to the toba, I think of Guluband. He seems a part of my life that is long past. His going has taught me both the strength of my will and its limits. I know Dadi thinks my bent for freedom is dangerous, and I'm learning to save my spirit for when it can be useful" (Susanne Fisher Staples, 2003:85).

Whatever the outcome of this debate, there can be no doubt that these theories have already had a huge and self-perpetuating impact on social work practice in the UK – the very organisation of both formal and informal welfare services is predicated on the assumption that people face different challenges, and need different services, at different stages in their lives. In the interests of organisational efficiency, it does make sense to have resources (both budgets and staff expertise) clustered around and focussed on the issues of greatest need, but this can determine the approach taken

before any account is taken of presenting situations or personal circumstances. A person with a disability, for example, will receive significantly different treatment, expectations and services if they are under 65 years old (Physical Disability Team; unemployment benefits) or over (Older People, pension credit). These organisational divisions then reinforce society's perceptions of life stage developments, setting the pattern for how people are expected to behave and how they are expected to cope with their own events and transitions.

". . . he was a man of infinite-resource-and-sagacity" (Kipling, 1902)

However, it must be remembered that turning to social services is only one of the resources called on by people when coping with challenges and adapting to change. Golan (1981, cited in Sugarman, 2001: 194) identifies five potential sources of assistance: the self, the natural help system, the mutual help system, the 'non-professional' help system and the professional help system, and comments that rarely does a person rely on one source alone, but selects an intricate combination of the sources available to them personally and preferable to them personally. So, for example, a study of "high functioning elders" recovering from hip surgery found that "the actions elderly people take to create opportunities for mentally restorative experiences are related to past patterns of restorative activities, opportunities made available by the facility, special circumstances of their care, environmental limitations in the immediate care environment, and the degree to which external factors (such as family visits) are readily available" (Travis and McAuley, 1998: 977).

The support of family and friends is very important – particularly if they can bring experience and helpful advice to inform their support – however it is perhaps the individual's inner resources and ability to accept and adapt to change which is crucial.

> *"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so"*
> (Shakespeare, 1601a)

This was quoted by Tony Robinson in his 2006 film examining the lives of carers of people with dementia: it is how people perceive situations and stresses which is the determining factor, and people can better cope with challenges and change if they see the experience as positive or valuable.

> *In 100 years' time, people will look back at the way we look after the infirm, the elderly today with the same sense of disbelief that we look back on child labour.*
> (Tony Robinson, 2006.)

So why do social workers need to know about life-span developments, challenges and coping strategies? The profession is defined as intervening "at the points where people interact with their environments" (BASW, 2002: 1) and these points of crisis (which as Thompson explains can mean transition periods as well as emergencies: 2000: 79) are when people do approach the profession for assistance, though often only as a last resort when other sources of support are insufficient. An understanding of theories underpinning human development, and of societal influences affecting both ourselves and our service users, can help us assess the presenting situation, select the most

appropriate and effective approach, and maximise our service user's ability to deal with their crisis.

The extent to which there is conformity in transition through life, in the challenges of life, and how best to meet them is illustrated in human literature throughout the ages; the need to understand human life was understood long before the social work profession came into being. Social theory is just one of the perspectives which seeks to tell the eternal story. Lifespan development and transition theories give us a framework for understanding some of the common themes which have affected people through the ages and which affect individuals through the stages of their life.

However, they cannot be applied universally but have to be interpreted within each individual's personal narrative, because:

> *"It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."*
> (Rowling, 1998: 245)

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