

Editorial

Life Course Justice and Learning

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Abstract

There is a paradox: While life courses are de facto pluralising, the pull to conform to an imagined standard is strong. In this thematic issue, we unpack the question: To whose standards do people cohere over the course of their lives? We seek the answers through the idea of life course justice, by which we mean a critical inquiry into how wealth, opportunities, and privilege are distributed and constrained in certain life stages and situations, and geographically. The dual focus of this thematic issue is thus on how people forge new ways to learn and work and how they try to resolve life course differences.

Keywords

inclusion; justice; learning; life course; life transitions

Issue

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1. Introduction

The philosophical basis for this thematic issue lies in social justice and issues of fairness concerning one’s life course. “Who gets what, where, and how” (Smith, 1987, p. 10) is a time-proven formula for studying inequalities and justice. It is illuminating when we apply this lens to a life course and learn about actually existing differences. So, how do justice and learning matter in life courses? They matter because formal and informal learning is ubiquitous throughout life (Biesta et al., 2011). The market approach usually focuses on what skills people lack and need to be trained to fit into the labour market or active ageing. Today the approach includes new digital practices to meet changing digital requirements in the 21st century (van Laar et al., 2017). This thematic issue departs from instrumentalist views on learning. Instead, we draw on Goodson (2012, p. 8), who argues that learning, in a broad sense, happens “where there are substantial shifts of self,” and Williams (2007), who states that all migrants learn due to their mobility across cultural environments. People always learn from border crossing (Goodson & Petrucci-Rosa, 2020), be those political borders, generational borders, or how people express themselves.

Inherently transdisciplinary, life course approaches are grounded in interlocking principles of lifespan, human agency, time and place, timing, and linked lives (Elder et al., 2003). In its most accepted definition, “life course” is “an age-graded sequence of socially defined roles and events that are enacted over historical time and place” (Elder et al., 2003, p. 15). Characteristically, life course approaches have three main views of what people do in life course stages. Youth is a time of “becoming” (Worth, 2009), with an emphasis on learning; midlife is about working and caring for others, for one’s relationships; and old age is, traditionally, about that time of life post-work.

Standard life course transitions are theoretically considered to take place in sequence, moving through education, learning job skills, embarking on a stable career, and establishing a home. This view originates from the relatively short period of the Fordist economy (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2020). However, it profoundly influences knowledge production so that scientific language about standard life course transitions remains hegemonic. This thematic issue examines precisely the experiences of people whose life courses are deemed “non-standard” from national or capitalist market perspectives.

2. Beyond Standard Life Courses

Whether migrants or “locals,” people face inclusion challenges regarding their access to learning at different life stages; however, for migrants, the challenges are more remarkable as they move from one society and education system to another. The recent literature on life course transitions demonstrates increasingly greater diversity across life courses (de Jong & de Valk, 2020; Erlinghagen, 2021; Kley, 2011). However, people with so-called non-standard, unconventional, and non-linear life course transitions face distinct barriers and opportunities to follow an education, obtain jobs, and establish meaningful careers. Class, ethnicity, generation, gender, and other intersections determine who can access opportunities to study and subsequently develop decent careers; for some, all the channels are open, while for others the barriers are insurmountable or surmountable only with great effort.

To move beyond the impasse of the hegemonic role of the “standard life course,” we need to expose whose standards these are and how they affect people’s life chances in different places and times. How and which institutional powers constrain chances to study, work, and establish “homes”? Importantly, how does human agency play a role in overcoming such constraints? We, therefore, bring together two debates—that of justice and of learning in life course. Our task is to examine how geographical contingency affects the synchronisation and divergence of life courses (Bailey, 2009). We pave a way forward to unpack such life courses, caught between standardisation and plural lives. Hence, this thematic issue plays into, but goes significantly beyond, now long-standing debates about non-standard life course transitions. It examines human agency as relational and interdependent intergenerationally (Holloway et al., 2019), contingent in time and space, and against the backdrop of structural barriers.

We hope that researchers and policymakers alike will expand their social imagination of diverse life courses and their “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 287) for more fairness and equity in life opportunities. According to Appadurai (2013, p. 287), “to aspire is a navigational capacity,” meaning it is differently distributed along the lines of social difference, especially ethnicity, migrant status, class and gender, as well as age. Nevertheless, we argue that this capacity can also be learned and improved through learning individually and collectively.

3. Contributions

This thematic issue addresses the practical action of life course justice and learning. We look at what people and institutions do (Smith, 1987, p. 10) or fail to do to increase social inclusion of diverse life courses. Cara (2022), who studied Latvian children’s school performance in England, demonstrates that the geographic

location of schools and the administrative organisation of local authorities create inequalities that may contribute to the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage. Ie and Ursin (2022) argue that broader structural and sociocultural factors influence Roma youth transitions to adulthood. However, the authors challenge the existing homogenisation of Roma lives in Portugal and show how their linked lives play a significant role in tackling injustices. Anghel and Fosztó (2022) further argue that in the context of return migration to Romania, young Roma increasingly tend to demand equality and decent treatment, initiating a process of ethnic change. Grønning and Kriesi (2022) address inequalities in vocational education and training programmes. They convincingly show that general skills, as opposed to narrow practical skills, are decisive for long-term upward mobility. Osei et al. (2022) explore how youth in Ghana adapt to decision-making when they realise the misalignment between their migration aspirations and capabilities.

When it comes to adult life courses, Schroot (2022) emphasises the role of re-invention and skills acquisition in adulthood, while Haasler and Hokema (2022) demonstrate how female solo self-employment is functional as an individual strategy for action, allowing doing justice to their mid-life courses and needs to pursue both professional work and opportunities to choose when and how to work. Puzo (2022) deploys the concept of mobility justice and investigates the contingencies and non-linearities embedded in the transnational movements of contemporary precarious academic workers. Hepburn (2022) reveals that later life learning among Latin Americans in Canada should pay more nuanced attention to learning in and about a place, while Nguyen et al. (2022) contribute to a better understanding of digital citizenship and its role in supporting migrant grandparents’ adaptation to connected and mobile lives.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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About the Author



Aija Lulle is a senior researcher at the University of Eastern Finland. Her main interests are related to geography and life course, lived experiences of youth and ageing intergenerationally, and imagination of ageing futures.