

## 〈研究会例会〉

## Changing life courses of young generations across cultures\*

The desire for change and challenge in Western and Asian societies

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## Introduction

According to Karl Ulrich Mayer (2001), one of today's key researchers in life course sociology, we have, by now, a well-described and stylized history of the developments of life courses in advanced societies. Opinions among life course sociologists converge, with most of these sociologists agreeing with the idea that during the last three decades life courses in late-modern societies have de-standardized (e.g., Fuchs, 1983; Held, 1986; Kohli, 1985; Mayer, 2000, 2001, 2004; Heinz & Marshall, 2003). Especially the traditional three-phased life course model of first a period of preparation and education, then a time of work and family life, and then, finally, years of rest and disassociation from society is believed to have lost ground in these societies. There is considerable debate on what the alternative for this three-phased model is or, in other words, how a de-standardized life course model looks exactly, how people make sense of it and what it means for them in their daily lives, and how it balances between 'outside' constraints and individual choice (the omnipresent structure and agency debate; see e.g. Furlong & Cartmel, 1997)<sup>1)</sup>. One could argue that the main features of a de-standardized life course might at least relate to the timing and order of changes people experience in the life course, or more precisely the timing and order of transitions in the life course, such as leaving the parental home, living with an intimate partner or having children. In terms of timing it is clear that some people postpone many transitions (e.g., having children) while they experience certain transitions earlier and earlier (e.g., having intimate relationships). The sequential order of transitions is changing as well, so it seems, for instance when we see people starting full-time study after having retired, having children before being married, or having a 'real' job before having finished full education. Moreover, transitions seem to have become 'reversible'. Choices people have made are revoked and replaced by other choices: e.g., after a short career, some 'realize' that becoming a student (again) might be more rewarding. The combined result is that contemporary people experience transitions at different moments in time and thus that at any given moment in time more people of similar ages are in very different life phases. Again, there is not a well-defined, let alone definite idea of what the basic elements of a de-standardized life course are, other than basically, a life course in which the timing and order of transitions in the life course have become less predictable.

There is less debate about what the most important drivers of the de-standardization of the life course

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1) See also Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, for an overview of sociological theories of agency and the balance with structure.

are. Classic demographic trends (such as the aging, graying and de-greening of society) and equally classic modernization indicators (individualization, secularization, the expansion of education, the transformation towards flexible 'Post-Fordist' modes of production, etc.) seem to form the guiding drivers of the process of de-standardization of the life course. The emergence and diffusion of de-standardized life courses, in turn, impact if not accelerate a number of these drivers. It is for example likely that with such life courses the norms on the importance of marriage and having children in society change, as a result of which more people postpone having children, which in turn gives impetus to a further relative graying or de-greening of society. More generally, it is plausible that the process of de-standardization of the life course widens the support for values and norms such as those in which having one's own distinctive path in life and having autonomy and self-control over one's own life course are expressed<sup>2)</sup>.

A few of the authors mentioned above display some sensitivity for the cross-cultural dimension of the phenomenon of de-standardization of life course. That is, some add that the phenomenon can particularly be found in Western societies. Arguments as to why the phenomenon is perhaps specifically Western and not non-Western are, however, not very clear<sup>3)</sup>. Of course, a wealth of studies shows how fundamentally different Western and non-Western societies are in terms of religious and political histories, in terms of social structure and institutional configurations, and, last but not least, in terms of culture. Given these fundamental differences, it is more than likely that the history of life course regimes in non-Western societies also follows a non-Western path. On the other hand, the debate on globalization or, perhaps better in this case, Westernization could underpin the belief that different Western phenomena, including the de-standardization of the life course and its impacts, somehow also find their way in non-Western societies. In short, looking at the history of life course developments in sociology we are faced with a white spot in our knowledge, which is the non-Western dimension. In this article I wish to bring some speculations to the fore on how life courses in Asia may differ when taking account of cultural diversities and cultural change. These attempts are preliminary illustrations, lacking robust and up-to-date data that measure the assumed contemporary life course foci around the globe. In this sense this article may at best serve the role of setting a future research agenda. In the following I address a few key consequences of the process of de-standardization of the life course in advanced societies, such as the rise of reflexivity competences and a change in people's life goals, especially among younger generations. I aim to infer from these consequences and from knowledge on cultural diversities and cultural change how these issues may evolve in non-Western societies, particularly in Asian societies.

### Life course developments in advanced societies

Life course regimes in advanced societies, an overview of Mayer (2001, see also Mayer, 2004) shows, have developed in three main stages: traditional, early and late industrial, and post-industrial. It was only recently, according to Mayer, during the late industrial or 'Fordist-welfare state phase' (from 1955 to around 1973), that life courses became standardized, with a male breadwinner, with a nuclear family and early marriage, with standardized transitions, with also distinct life phases of schooling, with (stable contract) employment and retirement, with covered risks (sickness, disability, old age), with a linear increase in wages and savings over the life course, and with, from a subjective point of view, a life course orientation directed at progression and accumulation and at conformity to a (gendered) division of roles both in the public and private sphere. Identities in this ideal type life course regime description were stable and well-

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2) See (in Dutch) the overview of life course study results by Kalmijn (2002) for this argument.

3) Mayer (2001) explicitly deals with cross-cultural validity of the changes in life course regimes by addressing what he sees as the paradox of life course studies: advanced societies that are all subject to the same global socio-economic developments and change in a similar manner versus the strong convictions that societies are different at the institutional, structural and cultural levels. His conclusion is that societies are that different, especially in terms of crucial institutional arrangements, that life course outcomes are different as well. Still, what these differences are in an empirical sense is unclear and, importantly, what the differences with non-Western societies are is unclear as well, as his analyses deal with Western advanced societies only.

defined or, perhaps better, one-dimensional, e.g. either private or public. The traditional and early industrial life course regimes differ mostly from this late industrial one in its unpredictability with circumstances of hardship such as poverty, disease, and conflict. The early industrial regime only seems to distinguish itself by a short period over the life course in which a industrial worker could rise above poverty when families were still small. In both regimes marriage was postponed until resources were accumulated and schooling was only very short or non-existent. Fatalism and religious complacency reigned, according to Mayer, and I would add, also a non-progressive time perception as well as a certain resignation to destiny. The post-industrial or post-Fordist life course regime is increasingly de-standardized, as already mentioned. Increasing differentiation and heterogeneity is at hand as transitions are delayed, prolonged and increased in age variance. Interruptions in education and work are normal, or even a part of the institutional framework in which periods of on-the-job learning, other types of a time-out (to give care at home or in the wider family or 'to travel the world'), and temporary job contracts are regulated. Work itself is not stable, not in terms of lifelong commitments to one type of job or employer and not in terms of guaranteed cumulative progressive growth (see also Ester & Vinken, 2000, 2001). Collective social provisions including the pension entitlements at a certain age are under threat. Typical winners and losers of this type of life course regime come to the fore with the losers being for instance women, young people, migrant workers, and the aged. The late-industrial clear-cut gender roles are, at least at the cultural level, contested. It is regarded a normal if not compulsory choice for women to work throughout their lives. Diverting from this working woman ideal (and 'just' playing the housewife) is a choice that is hard to uphold, combining an occupation with a family life in reality is even harder as the gender roles in many modern families and in government policies (only reluctantly investing in daycare facilities in some societies) are far from modern. Finally, we found that with the rise of ICT and the 24 hour society, distinctions between work and non-work time are blurred, of course influencing the very idea of a transition from non-working life to working life and again to non-working life (Ester & Vinken, 2000, 2001; Vinken & Ester, 2001). Some label the process of diverting from the linear and accumulative logic of life course transitions—stacking experiences as a necessary condition to be able to make and process new experiences in the life course—as the 'yoyo-ization' of the life course (Pais, 1995, Walther & Stauber, 2002) in which one combines and exchanges roles at a specific moment that once belonged uniquely to one or the other life course phase. Mayer (2001) draws a somewhat somber conclusion from these developments. At the subjective level, he argues, hedonistic individualism prevails "where all persons, even within one family, have their own life design and life project or, rather, follow egoistically the shifting material incentives and consumption idols from situation to situation". A perhaps less alarming interpretation may be that people are aware that in this life course regime they are on their own, that risks of failure but also chances for success have individualized, and that they and they alone must see to it that they have a life project to begin with and develop competences to deal with the risks in that life project by themselves. This comes close to the subject of the next section.

Before going there it is important to note that life courses and life course regimes are perhaps the most sociological of social constructions (Kalmijn, 2002). They are the 'bridging vehicles' of different social domains of life and the individual. Life course transitions refer to changes in people's social relationships. For instance, as Kalmijn (2002) argues, if there are life course effects on people's beliefs and attitudes or on their life chances this shows that changes on these domains are related to the people with whom they interact, in other words, to the social relationships they have, either strong or weak. It all centers around the basic idea of how people are influenced by others. This is also why in life course studies the issue of structure or agency is prominent, balancing between a hyper-individualistic stance towards agency and an over-socialized view leaning towards an all-determining structure. Life course studies are, however, likely to stress the pre-structured world in which people function. That is, the world of transition regimes (or cultural scripts, norms and rules on what an ideal life course model is as well as the issues of number, nature, and timing of transitions), of abstract institutions and concrete organizations that 'write' these scripts (such as the educational framework and the concrete school), of social categorizations (gender,

age, education, social status, etc.) that determine the options open to people in the life course, of 'endogenous structuring' or the previous steps in the life course that impact which possible next steps one can take (the so-called path-dependencies in the life course), and also interpersonal ties that show how the life course of one individual depends on the life course of others, especially those who are close to the individual (see also Diepstraten, forthcoming). There is a less well-developed eye in these studies for the extent to which individuals shape their life course and in doing so in turn impact the structures or change—however minor this change may be—the pre-structured world in which they function.

### Reflexivity and the real illusion of individual control

Especially in youth and socialization sociology the idea of changing life course regimes is taken as a starting point for a revitalization of some classic debates. Especially the German youth sociologist Jürgen Zinnecker (2000, 2002) has fuelled discussions between scholars who are convinced that postmodernists overestimate the individual's potencies and scholars who criticize the over-socialized visions of humankind (see also Vinken, 2004). The classic division between protagonists of structure versus defenders of agency was on the table again when Zinnecker, following Niklas Luhmann's provocative notion of the categorical independence between individuals and their social environment (Luhmann, 2002; see also Vanderstraeten, 2000), argued that the formal pedagogic environment of young people is irrelevant for young people in their process of growing to adulthood. Young people (if not all people) are productive reality-addressing subjects in their own right and to be so they do not need interactions with the formal, direct or wider social environment. This environment, this formal and more indirect social world of teachers, counselors, advisors, and representatives of any institution with a pedagogic agenda (ranging from political parties to the police) are not in touch with young people, are disconnected to modern-day young people and have, willingly or not, retreated from the world of young people much so in favor of the self and the peer group of age contemporaries. By themselves and with these peers they filter every socialization effort by those outside circles, including those with an official pedagogic assignment.

Zinnecker has long been known for his defense of the importance of youth cultures (Zinnecker, 1987) and youth cultural attitudes (including the so-called attitude of youth centrism; see Vinken, 1997) in young people's lives. Still, for many years the generally accepted idea of socialization was that youth cultures were just one, though an important one, of the informal and formal worlds that played a role in socialization. The others are the family, intimate friends (partners, spouses), formal educators, and, of course, the media. In interaction with these informal and formal circles people develop abilities to address reality productively, as a classic perception of socialization goes (Hurrelman, 1983, 2002). Moreover, the opinions seemed to converge on the aim of socialization, which is full integration into society, and resulting from this integration the development of a personal self and identity. This refers to the basic idea of human development of individuation through social integration. Zinnecker, however, states that contemporary socialization is purely self-directed and predominantly dealing with self-realization and can therefore be framed as a process of 'self-' instead of 'other-socialization'. Others, and if we follow Zinnecker precisely, especially others from formal circles with pedagogic agendas, are of no importance<sup>4</sup>.

Support for this subject-oriented viewpoint of socialization is provided by the emphasis another German social scientist Hermann Veith (2002) puts on the changing focus of socialization and on what he coins as the process of reflexive biographization of the life course<sup>5</sup>. Socialization, he argues, is no longer a matter of *Vergesellschaftung* or individuation through social integration. It is reversed and can only be understood as a process of subjective option-observation by individuals imagining their own path and self-directed

4) Even with Zinnecker there is some room for socialization not being purely self-directed, as particularly formal educators are absent (and are apparently playing the major role in 'other-socialization') and informal, intimate circles, if not also the media as an institution (especially new media, see Vinken, 2004) play a decisive role in 'self-socialization'.

5) Of course, there is an abundance of critique to the notion of Zinnecker: see Vinken, 2004 for a short overview and see for the full debate *Zeitschrift für Soziologie der Erziehung und Sozialisation*, 2002, Volume 22, Issue 2.

route to integrate in society and live the future-life they feel like living. In other words, the aim, nature, and meaning of socialization shifted from developing individuality by taking part in society to, regardless of 'real' participation, developing competences to imagine one's own future and to continuously make personal choices from the seemingly ever growing number of options to participate in society. Reasoning from the process of individualization this shift in socialization may seem plausible. For, in individualizing societies classic institutions and their representatives seem unable, or at least highly reluctant, again, at least on the surface in their communications towards younger people, to determine, direct and control the choices young people (should) make. The emphasis is put on first developing individuality, building self-esteem and personality, discovering one's true inner self, unraveling one's own unique motives, before making definite choices and especially before making those that pin people down on a certain irreversible trajectory. The point is not that this is only part of the story and that it denies that people are directed, determined and controlled by institutions (e.g. the school, church, family, neighborhood), undergo true-felt constraints from the real social categorizations they are part of (class, gender, education), and are dependent on previous choices they themselves and the ones they interact with have made (the previously mentioned 'path' and 'other'-dependencies in the life course), but that people, at least in individualizing societies, are increasingly less willing to acknowledge and value these types of outside control, direction, and determination. Interpreting and legitimizing one's choices with this outside dependency perspective is what runs against the culture of individualism (Elchardus, 1999).

Still, not explicitly acknowledging these points, Veith continues and argues that the consequence of the changing focus of socialization is that the life course undergoes what he terms a 'reflexive biographization'. People's biographies, or their individual paths through life, have become the central theme on which people focus their life course. Again, not participation in society per se, taking up different roles in life itself, is central, but the projection of one's future biography, one's plans for one's future, the options themselves that one may or may not explore, the consequences as well of choosing any of the multitude of options, these are the themes that take up the bulk of energy people spend today. To put it in modernist dichotomous terms: in modern, late-industrial, days people participated in society (found work, got married, had children, etc.) and by doing that learned to project their next steps in life, became aware of the plan of life that revealed itself before their own eyes, and were confronted with the consequences of choices they made or forgot to make. This way they learned what it is they want from life (and what they would rather have had from life) and what their own strong and weak points are or what their own individuality in life is. In late-modern, post-Fordist days people seem first to focus on who they are, or better, who they want to become, to focus on making a list first of both these weak and strong points, to try to predict the consequences of choices they want and they do not want to make, to have explored an overall plan of life, before even participating. Participation (work, marriage, children, etc.) itself is postponed, in other words, or, and I will get back to this later, participation is at best seen as a temporary 'challenge' as long as it of the type that keeps options open to again other, new, yet unimagined forms of participation. In such a case, for instance the classic question, 'what do you do for a living', has been replaced by a more (late-) modern one, 'what are your plans (plural!) in life'<sup>6)</sup>.

Developing competences to project, plan, and evaluate one's own biography in this type of life course are of focal concern. These competences could be framed as 'reflexivity competences': abilities and skills to project, plan, and evaluate one's own biography and of course to amend, adjust and redirect one's biography in the process. At this individual level, the key authors on reflexivity Giddens (1991) and Beck et al. (1994) more or less implicitly argue, that acquiring and maintaining these competences are crucial to

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6) The notions of the rising importance of reflexivity in the life course have been around for a while (e.g., Fuchs, 1983), but the relationship with participation and integration, or rather the postponement and perhaps even the refusal of participation, was not always clearly stated. More often it was argued that the absence of pre-described paths to the future yield a necessity to plan the future and to reflect on these plans and that this increasingly 'actualizes' the future (brings the future to the present; Fuchs, 1983), but not that this process may lead to postponement of participation as such or as an issue that is less prominent in people's life course agenda.

surviving late modernity<sup>7)</sup>. Basically it means that individuals are more intensely engaged in individually organizing their own life narrative, as these late modernity theorists would probably frame it, now that tradition and its institutions and social formations have lost much of their determining powers. People are condemned to individualization, as Beck (1994) argues, and this means that, whether one likes this or not, it is now compulsory to design one's own biography. To avoid misunderstanding, what is meant is not that tradition and institutions, or social categorizations and structure in general, are no longer influential in people's lives, but that these basic elements seems to have lost ground at a more cultural level: people do not seem to want to experience and even seem to deny the importance of, for instance, class or gender (or generation) cultures (Diepstraten, forthcoming). The consequences are real: people have (and highly value) the idea that their own actions determine their own successes or failures. I will return to this discussion, but important for now: one may conclude that regardless of real institutional and social powers, people are increasingly reluctant to acknowledge these and will arm themselves to be able to deal with their own lives. They will invest in developing reflexivity competences whether they are illusionary or not.

Reflexivity is not the same as reflection, particularly Beck (1994) warns. Reflection refers to increasing emphases on knowledge and scientization of institutions in the process of modernization. Reflexivity is first of all a process of self-confrontation with the unplanned, unmanageable, unintended and therefore seems to build much more on non-knowledge (what we don't know) than on knowledge (what we know). This differentiation is relevant for the idea of reflexivity competences. Investments in planning, organizing, evaluating and re-adjusting one's life course are likely to deal with just that part of one's history that is hardest to grasp in the first place: the unknown of one's future life course. Reflexivity competences, hence, not only include abilities or skills such as planning, evaluation or adjustment, but also the capacity to continuously monitor one's thoughts and actions, to test and retest how one is doing at any given moment and thus to look at and validate one's initial grounds and reasons for one's thoughts and actions again, to reformulate these and to change these if necessary given new information or changed circumstances. The need, urge and ability to stay constantly in touch with one's thoughts and actions results in a knowledge creating process, but more and more so under the well-recognized condition that one's knowledge horizon will always fall short in the acknowledgement that one's life course as well as one's competences will never be definitely finalized and fully developed. Moreover, probably as is the case at the meso- and macro-levels, the basic principle of reflexivity at the individual level is self-destruction. People therefore, one can argue, should be able or at least willing to abruptly part from a given route in their biography and take on a completely new one, leaving everything behind and taking nothing with them, more or less in the fashion of the much famed and feared scorched earth military policy. The late modern life narrative is therefore more like a set of seemingly unrelated short stories of unexpected and unplanned twists and turns into an unknown if not unknowable future, than it is an account of one chain of well-designed, well-planned, logically associated and neatly stacked life events.

Of course, this may not only increasingly apply to just young people, who of course objectively speaking have more future to anticipate, but perhaps even increasingly so to older people as well. Considering trends such as lifelong learning, employability at the workplace (see e.g. Ester & Vinken, 2003), and even individualization of social provisions in late-modern welfare states (e.g. saving for one's own retirement or sickness and disability risks) older people are also expected (if not forced) more and more to project, plan, and evaluate their own route through life<sup>8)</sup>. In other words, the trend towards reflexive

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7) Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994) concentrate much more on reflexivity at institutional and structural levels, recognize the same phenomenon at individual levels, but are more vague and much less explicit about the individual level consequences of and responses to these meso and macro reflexivity conditions and processes of late modernity.

8) There seems to be some argument in the self-destructiveness of these institutional calls for more individualization of responsibilities, as Beck predicts, e.g. the framework of pension, social security and labor markets based on (intergenerational) solidarity in many Western welfare states at first sight seems not on par with these calls and could well undermine the very future of the institutions within that framework, ranging from collective pension

biographization of the life course itself is a process resulting from forces of structure and agency<sup>9)</sup>. On the one hand, people, young or old, are increasingly forced to take their lives in their own hands, are thus led in the direction of a more biographized life course, and are more and more required to develop reflexive competences. On the other hand, people, of any age but perhaps young people more so, are seeking ways to control their own particular future by themselves, thus increasingly focusing on their own biography and investing in developing reflexive competences.

In line with this remark on the balance of structure and agency is the critique one can imagine on protagonists of the rise of 'choice biography' at the expense of the 'standard biography'. Reflexive biographization of the life course does not prevent people from developing a standard biography or making traditional choices in their biography. The choice biography concept suggests young people no longer make traditional life course choices and no longer follow structured paths to and through adulthood, etc. (see e.g. Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). In the case of biographization of the life course, the issue is not whether people can or will make traditional choices or not, but that increasing numbers of people are engaged in the projection, planning and evaluation of their own life course. This, of course, still allows people to make traditional choices, choices social scientists might place in a standard biography model. The dichotomy of a choice versus standard biography model is perhaps romanticizing if not plainly oversimplifying the reality of life course planning processes young (and older) people are engaged in. It is at least suggesting the existence of freedom of choice and in doing so, opening the possibility of neglecting structural constraints and institutional forces that impede these processes. As Furlong and Cartmel (1997: 109) say: "the paradox of modernity is that although the collective foundations of social life have become more obscure, they continue to provide powerful frameworks which constrain young people's experiences and life chances". As argued, the point is not that the individual is completely set free from constraints, but that, however illusory, being free from these constraints (being autonomous, experiencing no outside control, etc.) serves as an important guiding principle for late modern people. This is also how critiques are to be understood on what the Brussels sociologist Elchardus calls the contemporary 'self ideology'. (Elchardus, 1999, Elchardus & Glorieux, 2002). An ideology leading to an underestimation of social inequalities determining people's life chances and consequently to the transfer of responsibilities for overcoming life's difficulties to the individual, which, in turn, is relieving pedagogic institutions from their obligation to help those less capable to deal with their life course. Similar warnings are sketched in a series of future orientation studies in the Netherlands (Vinken et al., 2002, 2003), which clearly shows youths call for more investments of schools, governments, and corporate business to organize conditions (ranging from school time tables that fit their busy agenda's, investments in child day care provisions to flexibilization of work hours) that help them cope with their life course.

### The quarter life crisis and life goals of the 'Idols generation'

The biographization of the life course, including the phenomena of self-direction (the individual as the stage director of its own biography) and self-directedness (the pre-occupation with one's self, the focus on self-actualization), is not taking place in a social void. In particular, intimate circles and the media are believed to have an impact. This is also what was clearly established in a career orientation study among Dutch people aged 40 years and younger (Vinken et al., 2003; Vinken, 2004). It shows that Dutch young people (aged less than 30 and compared to those aged 30 to 40) are well aware of the wide range of life course options, possible transitions, and accompanying life course cultures (orientations and aspirations related to particular choices). Any type of career path, it was also found, seemed to have their support. In other words, other than for thirty-something people, there was not a single career path that these younger people preferred: every option was fine. What was clear, instead, was their choice for a 'dynamic life

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funds, state work disability insurance organizations to trade unions.

9) Lash (1994: 119-135) also reflects on the balance between agency and structure and seems to bend towards the concept of structures forcing agency to be free, e.g. the labor market forcing people to be flexible workers.

course model', a model which is directed not at progress (getting ahead) or self-development (broadening one's capabilities) per se, but directed at variation, change, and continuous challenges. At the same time, at least as far as their future career life within this dynamic life course model goes, their prime supporters are people, and only people from the direct social circle of intimates (partners and spouses, and to a lesser extent parents and peers)<sup>10)</sup>. Professional educators, teachers, career consultants and others with an explicit pedagogic agenda are absolutely absent in the career life course perceptions of young people. Only with their direct confidants do they evaluate, plan, negotiate, and project their life course, a life course aimed at dynamics as an end *an sich*, a type of life course, therefore in turn, promoting the continuous process of reflexivity with close associates. This is of course as Zinnecker, mentioned above, would have predicted, at least as far as the role of the pedagogically inclined outside world for young people goes. It is also a forceful indication of what was labeled as the reflexive biographization of the life course. That young people feel like pursuing any type of career path and are predominantly favoring a life course of variation, change, and challenges may serve as indications that they have a strong preference to keep as many options open as possible. Furthermore, they perceive their life course and participation in general more as some sort of an adventure consisting of temporary commitments, and, more importantly, of unplanned, unpredictable, and yet uncertain but probably exciting events. Of course, the rejection of outside control or even support is also in line with the reasonings related to the reflexive biographization of the life course. These young people claim to take control over their own life and believe themselves to be able to deal with the challenges (and the uncertainties and difficulties), again, not completely on their own, but with their intimates, and certainly not with society's pedagogically inspired representatives.

There is a positive but perhaps also a more negative side to these high spirits. The positive element is that these optimistic, flexible, and challenge-seeking life course attitudes and preferences are what institutions in late modernity call for (regardless of the consequences for these institutions themselves, e.g. pedagogic representatives who are kept outside the lives of their target groups) and what will probably help them survive in this late modernity. On the other hand, there are some related phenomena that, though up to this moment are only crudely investigated, seem less positive. The notion is that today there are too many options, so many that people withdraw from making choices and thus from participation at all. This is what is known as the 'option pitfall'. The result is that young people may feel highly frustrated and stressed about their inability to finalize a choice and feel constantly nervous about making the wrong choices, or at least about failing to have seen or have understood a fine opportunity among the multitude of opportunities<sup>11)</sup>. Akin is the phenomenon of the 'quarter life crisis', a phenomenon mainly addressed in the popular media so far, which indicates that people at a relatively young age (in their late twenties) experience a life crisis, something that in previous days was experienced only by people in their forties (known as the 'midlife crisis'). This crisis partly exists of a feeling of exhaustion of the multiple life course paths people have mapped-out and the sometimes dazzling number of paths they have already walked. This part of the quarter life crisis is perhaps most on par with the classic midlife crisis feeling of having tried out a certain life route for a long time but feeling that one is (still) not having what one was promising one's self at the outset. But mainly it is a feeling of frustration about all options that can be chosen, of the exiting things one could choose, the fully engaged person one could be and the challenging life one could lead, but which one is failing to get full sight of, to get under control, and to realize here and now. And here there is a difference with the classic midlife crisis, a difference related to the reflexive biographization of the life course. In that model it is expected that one is constantly involved in one's life

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10) The role of partners and spouses reminds us of the large impact of interpersonal tie dependencies of life courses, life courses that are directly dependent of the life courses of the most direct intimates in people's lives, as Mayer (2000, 2001) also argues.

11) Focusing on the life course consequences of the options pitfall and especially the illusionary beliefs also conveyed by late modernity's institutions, that one can and should pursue all opportunities is the multi-country (European) study 'Misleading trajectories' (Walther & Stauber, 2002) by the EGRIS-network (European Group of Integrated Social Research): see <http://www.iris-egris.de/egris/>.

course and in the choices one can make and not make, even before one really has experiences based on a longer term participation in society. In the classic midlife crisis people have tried, walked a path for a number of years and found out that the rewards they sought were not the expected ones (at least not the ones they at that moment had expected). In the quarter life crisis people do not have years of experience, what's more, they are likely to think experience itself is an overestimated phenomenon.

Experience is knowledge. In the reflexive biography the crucial element is not knowledge, but non-knowledge, the recognition that one must try everything but will always fall short, can never be prepared enough, and must accept incompleteness. Experience which builds up after a 'long march through the institutions' (having to grow in a position and organization, be it for a career or as a volunteer in e.g. political organizations) with all its negative side-effects (having to start at a low stage, to wait for a number of years to be regarded as a 'full' and serious partner, having to prove one's self), is not only unattractive, but also unimportant in the reflexive biography. This is also why in the media I have labeled the younger generation in the Netherlands the 'Idols generation', referring to an almost world-wide popular TV show in which young people (from 15 years old onwards) present themselves as future pop music Idols to an expert jury which selects the final Idol in a lengthy stepwise series of televised auditions<sup>12</sup>). Anyone who thought they could sing could enter the first round of auditions. Almost 99% of the competitors were, according to the jury, simply unable to sing one line even with the most modest of expectations. Still, many of them, and especially their accompanying parents were very disappointed that the jury did not recognize the brilliant pop musical future they so painfully aimed to advertise. It is the quest for an immediate reward, the reward of a well-deserved place under the spotlight, of a generation lacking experience—moreover, denouncing the very idea of experience—but not lacking an almost limitless confidence in their own abilities to get the most—whatever that is (cf. undefined career prospects but prospects for a dynamic path as a goal in itself)—out of their life and to at least have tried something they did not prepare for.

Of course, the 'Idols generation' is not alone in society. They are perhaps a new, unique generation reflecting changing contemporary society with which they have to deal and to which they must attribute meaning, but they are certainly also part of a society in which many other historic and genealogical generations exist<sup>13</sup>). Interestingly, many of the parents of the 'Idols generation' youth are members of the 'sixties generation' (or the babyboom generation, the '68-generation, the protest generation, or any other alternative label indicating those who were in their adolescent and post-adolescent years in the 1960s and early 1970s). This is of course the generation of which many of its members (some of whom fill the columns of the popular media) and the popular media looking back in nostalgia, claim that they have changed the face of advanced society turning it, among other things, towards more individual freedom and personal growth and towards less authoritarian power relationships. As argued, members of this generation, young people acknowledge, also have impact on their future prospects: our study (Vinken et al., 2003), and other studies (e.g., Du Bois-Reymond et al., 1994) show that parents form serious sparring partners in communications about these prospects. In other words, the phenomenon of the 'Idols generation' with its members believing in their omnipotence regardless of experience and valuing a dynamic, and above all, challenging life course, is not a phenomenon that emerged spontaneously or that is the by-product of some surprisingly unique psychological make-up of this generation (compare the media coverage on younger generations usually emphasizing psychological attributes underlying their actions and preferences), but is

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12) Quoted in *Elsevier* (Dutch weekly general opinion magazine), 60, 18, 1 May 2004: 20-24.

13) The concepts 'historic' and 'genealogical' refer to at least two different types of generations one may discern (see also Kohli & Szydlik, 2000): the latter refers to generations within families (e.g., grandparent, parent, child generation; and sometimes also first, second and third generation immigrants) and is popular in gerontological, intergenerational social support, and aging studies (e.g. Bengtson & Lowenstein, 2002), the former refers to particular ranges of age cohorts that share specific unique socio-historic experiences and on the basis of this share unique destinies in terms of life chances and life goals (see Diepstraten et al., 1999, Kohli, 2003). This concept is more *en vogue* among (cultural) sociologists and political scientists (see Dekker et al., 2003).

most probably a phenomenon that, to put it in abstract terms, has its causes in sociological configurations. More concretely: it is probably (also) a major outcome of specific intergenerational communication and interactions, in this case between the 1960s generation and its off-spring. The on average well-educated and today historically uniquely affluent 1960s generation members with their self-acclaimed cultural revolutionary identities and emphases on anti-authoritarian communication, personal growth and autonomy, I would hypothesize, seem to have an interesting if not historically atypical life course. With the unprecedented rise of welfare-regimes during their youth, from early adulthood onwards, any type of setback and irregular life course twists and turns forced upon them by societal forces are relatively scarce (when compared to generations before them who were young in the chaos and hardship of the WW-II and direct post WW-II era or compared to generations who in their youth years experienced the real impacts of the 1970s and 1980s economic crises, ecological disasters, and world-political threats). Having parted from their earlier political view of the 'engineer-ability' of society, they are likely to see no reason (or to have no experience) to part from the same belief as regards their own lives and, in turn, those of their off-spring.

Another consequence I would finally like to point out is the probable change the reflexive biographization of the life course brings to classic perceptions of what I frame here as 'life goals', such as well-being, embeddedness, self-realization or material growth, and including goals either directed at personal or at social life<sup>14</sup>). Of course, such goals are not static attributes in any given society or historical time, but reflections of structural forces and of cultural diversity and cultural change as well. Again, individual autonomy or self-direction in the life course as well as the pre-occupation with self-development are perhaps more than anything matters of culture, matters of preferred states of affairs in advanced societies, in which these ideals are regarded as more important than dependencies of collectivities and adaptation of choices to constraining circumstances. One may expect therefore that due to the de-standardization of the life course people will pursue these types of life goals or values such as autonomy, self-direction, and self-realization more than they did in times of standardized life course (i.e. in late-industrial society). But what do we expect from the specific development towards the reflexive biographization of the life course? With this development (young) people are focused on having variation and change in their life course, on having a challenging life here and now without the burdens of long-term participation or commitment, keeping options open and reversible to enable transitions into something even more exciting, at postponement of transitions that endanger the embarkation towards yet another future<sup>15</sup>). The life goals as we conceive them now may get an interpretation from another dimension, a dimension beyond traditional linear dichotomies, especially the dichotomy of material versus immaterial growth (popular concepts in political and work value studies; see Ester & Vinken, 2003). For example, what is important in a job under the reign of this life course model are goals not per se directed at accumulating capital, material or immaterial, but at the above mentioned goals of variation, change and challenge. For example, a rewarding job is a challenging job, providing one with a daily dosis of new experiences, with lots of variation at different levels, not a well-paid, promotion-likely, or self-growth-satisfying job. It is not important because it secures one's material future, nor is it important because one can broaden and deepen one's capacities and grow as a person (a very 1960s generation phrasing to start with), but because it is plainly challenging, exciting, providing the opportunity for new not yet known experiences. Another example: Lifelong learning, to use a popular contemporary concept, is probably not valued because it serves one's ability to get more out of a job either in a material or immaterial sense

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14) There is, of course, an abundance of studies dealing with these attributes, especially studies in the field of values, cultural diversity and cultural change. It is beyond the scope of this article to present an overview of these studies: see Vinken et al., 2004, for classic studies dealing with cultural dimensions based on these types of goals at the macro—or societal level.

15) Cultural sociologists no doubt have an association with Schulze's book on the 'Erlebnisgesellschaft', a late modern society (Germany in this case) in which people are hedonists, pursuing the joyful moment, looking for excitement, and only willing to engage in something if they have not experienced it yet (Schulze, 2000; see also Dekker et al., 2003 for some empirical evidence).

(and, as the key discourse goes, in the end to serve the 'knowledge-based society' as a whole—see numerous debates on the subject at European Commission levels), but because it opens up possibly interesting, though yet unknown alternative futures. Lifelong learning framed in the reflexive biography is learning to keep options open. Policies, yet another example, that are debated in many advanced societies and that aim to enable people to flexibly combine ambitions and demands both at work and at home (e. g., temporarily taking care of the family or taking a sabbatical leave for study reasons without risking later unemployment, demotion, gaps in pension payments, etc.) are also framed in personal and societal benefits that follow a linear logic: to at least not lose but better still to accumulate social, economic, and cultural capital in one's life course for the benefit of the individual and society as a whole. Seldom are the efforts legitimated because they may facilitate a perhaps more realistic contemporary ambition of what people on a day-to-day basis may really want, that is to play and excel at as many different fields of life as possible at the same time and while doing so, not to exclude any possible turn in life: the ambition to have an interesting work life, an exciting sex, social and family life, to experience leisure to the maximum (including consumption, travel, sports, and—as shown above—the performing arts), and finally perhaps to take part in further schooling or even in volunteering. These and probably many other social phenomena are weighted, valued, and interpreted from a dynamic instead of a linear logic. The logic, not of loss or accumulation, but of change and challenge. The logic is not linear in any sense, material or immaterial, but dynamic, aimed at change and challenge.

The indicators with which social scientists who are doing surveys are having to work are not really, as an understatement would go, tapping into the possibly changing logic of life goals. In the large-scale longitudinal, and cross-cultural comparative survey data, for instance, we are faced with indicators that mostly were developed in the early 1970s following the previously mentioned cultural revolution of the then upcoming generation of the 1960s<sup>16</sup>. For instance, well-being, a catch word and much-used container concept that in many survey studies includes goals ranging from being happy, being satisfied with life in general, having a say in decisions to non-material personal growth, is not operationalized in these studies in such a way to be able to tap a more dynamic interpretation. The influential dichotomy developed by the American political scientist Ronald Inglehart, for example, includes 'well-being' versus survival values (Inglehart, 1990; 1997)<sup>17</sup>. Prominent in this two-poled dimension with which Inglehart has compared numerous cultures around the world is the contrast between materialist and postmaterialist goals in the survival and well-being poles respectively. Materialist goals refer to physical, economic and socio-political security (from having food and shelter to law and order in society). Postmaterialist goals include people's emphases on self-realization and participation in society (e.g., having a say in decisions and personal growth). The dimensions stem from the early 1970s, entered the large-scale survey studies through the Eurobarometers and are, mostly abbreviated but basically unchanged now in almost every cross-cultural comparative study known around the world, including of course Inglehart's own project of the World Values Survey. Although the self-realization element in the postmaterialist pole is not explicitly framed in linear terms, it is frequently interpreted in this way. The fact that it opposes the material security focus issues in the materialist pole feeds the idea that the well-being/self-expression pole is also interpretable in these terms<sup>18</sup>. It is about either materialist or immaterialist (postmaterialist) growth. The issue at stake is, of

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16) For example the European Values Study (EVS), the World Values Survey (WVS), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the worldwide similar general social surveys, and even the recent European Social Survey (ESS), etc. As elsewhere also argued (Ester & Vincken, 2003), the fact that survey trend studies are not fully up-to-date with contemporary developments in societies is part of the logic of trend studies that aim to measure similar concepts over time in order to be able to depict trends in the first place.

17) Later Inglehart c.s. rephrased the 'well-being' pole of the dichotomy to 'self-expression' (see e.g. Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004). The indicators for this rephrased pole remained the same, yet even more strongly feeding the idea that personal growth contrasts with material growth

18) Interestingly, looking at the basic elements of materialism and postmaterialism indicators and the later added variables that aim to tap a broader survival versus well-being/self-expression dichotomy (such as life satisfaction,

course, whether or not a younger generation that, as may be hypothesized considering the reflexive biographization of the life course, is still framing well-being in either material or immaterial growth, both as issues to be secured for one's personal or for society's sake. Well-being for this generation may well have lost its meaning along these linear lines and should be framed along more dynamic lines. It is not a steep way up on the economic security ladder or the ever-increasing broadening and deepening of one's talents and capacities including personal growth, but being open to change, variation and challenges, again, both as an important goal in one's personal project and as something society should be able to offer to everyone<sup>19)</sup>. All in all, it is important in empirical studies, especially so in survey trend studies, not only to focus on the shifting emphases of different generations on one or more poles within a given set of dimensions developed in a specific historic time and place (the US), but also to look at the relevance of these poles for different generations, by e.g. verifying whether or not the structure of poles and dimensions is valid across generations and by learning from this exercise and opening up to new ways of interpreting old themes.

### Cultural diversity, cultural change and the Asian outlook

As stated at the outset of this article, most if not all of the above discussion about life course regimes and trends refer to Western societies. In many cases, the adjective 'advanced' is added if authors refer to societies in which the life course regimes are situated and the life course trends take place. This suggests that the issues can be detected not only in Western but also in non-Western advanced societies, many of which are part of the Asian world. The same goes for adjectives such as 'late modern', 'postmodern' or 'post-Fordist'. To my knowledge, however, there are no studies available that explicitly deal with Western-Asian diversities in life course regimes and trends, at least not in a broader theoretical or empirical sense. As argued, taking account of the wide range of diversities in the world between societies, it is worth considering, again theoretically and empirically, if and to what extent life course regimes and trends as described in and for the Western context apply to a non-Western, in this case, Asian context. It could, of course, reveal the specificity of the causes and consequences of life course developments in both contexts. As robust data and even basic theoretical frameworks to engage in such an enterprise are missing, this article cannot but serve the mere purpose of a preliminary first attempt to shed light on the issue and perhaps help to set an agenda for future studies in this field.

Societies differ in numerous respects. At the macro-level, comparing societies, one may focus at differences that are cultural, structural or institutional and examine life course diversities in distinctive domains. It is far from a wild speculation to argue that cultural diversities in contemporary social science are believed to be one of the most influential type of diversities (see the volume by Vinken et al., 2004). Culture refers to the preferred state of affairs as is expressed in values, norms, and also practices that distinguishes one collectivity, in this case society, from another. Defined this way culture maps the way for structural and institutional arrangements and routines, such as life course regimes, in a given society. Culture also impacts choices and actions of its members at the meso-and microlevel, both directly and indirectly through the structural and institutional arrangements and routines. Here it is opportune to, as a first step, concentrate on cultural diversities at the macro-level and see how Asian countries in their cultural make-up can be positioned relative to Western societies. The almost classic-status social scientists, such as Geert Hofstede, Ronald Inglehart, and Shalom Schwartz, who discern basic cultural dimensions with which to compare cultures at the national or macro-level, all claim to have a clear idea about what

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generalized social trust, views on homosexuality, etc.), these elements do not clearly refer to any type of self-conception. Still, the dichotomy is even recently explicitly interpreted in these terms (see again Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004).

19) There is a strong relationship of course to the issue of the sense of self and identity formation. For instance a more dynamic definition of well-being (and of the previously mentioned social phenomena) also may give rise to a decreasing importance of arriving at a stable sense of self and a well-defined unidimensional identity. Within the framework of this article it is not opportune to take this issue further here. See also Giddens, 1991.

the main distinctions between Asia and the West are (see their contributions in Vinken et al., 2004). Here we may focus on the dimension of individualism and collectivism; one of the key dimensions in cross-cultural social science and of course a dimension that closely relates to the issues raised here within the framework of modernization, also usually framed as the process of individualization, and the consequential individualization, de-standardization and reflexive biographization of the life course<sup>20</sup>.

In Hofstede's terms, Asian countries are all much more collectivist than Western countries (Hofstede, 2001). Still there are many differences within Asia as well as within Western societies. Looking at rank orders of nations on Hofstede's individualism/collectivism dimension (Hofstede, 2001: 500-502) we find that particularly China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia are very collectivist nations, followed at some distance by Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Finally, following at a relatively great distance is Japan, which is not only the most individualist among Asian countries, but is also only a moderately collectivist country and thus an equally moderately individualist country among the more than 50 societies in Hofstede's global comparison. Against popular belief, Japan is not the typical collectivist country it is assumed to be. It proves that Asia as such is a culturally diverse area. The same goes for the West, where countries such as Spain and Austria almost equal the average position of Japan, but where the English-speaking countries (including the USA and Australia) score very high on individualism (as does the Netherlands), with a more moderate position for the Nordic countries, Germany and France and an even more moderate if not an almost collectivist position for the Southern European countries.

Looking at Schwartz' embeddedness versus autonomy dimensions, according to some the key dimensions to compare with the individualism/collectivism dimension of Hofstede (see Schwartz, 2004, Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004) again Japan takes up a middle position between Northwestern European and English speaking countries emphasizing autonomy (affective and/or intellectual) and (in an increasing order of emphasis) Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and finally Singapore emphasizing embeddedness<sup>21</sup>.

Inglehart's survival versus well-being (self-expression) dimension—which shares large amounts of variance with both individualism/collectivism and embeddedness/autonomy—shows an almost similar, yet in terms of nation rankings in some cases crucially different, pattern. Japan can be found amidst some European nations such as Germany, Spain, and France in terms of emphasis on well-being, on which, however, the Netherlands, the Nordic and English speaking nations evidently score higher. Southern European countries and other Asian countries (such as China, South Korea, and Taiwan) emphasize survival values much more than Japan does.

Of course, the pattern of cultural diversity depicted above may align with a pattern of life course regimes along the lines of standardization and de-standardization and reflexive biographization. It also may not, of course, and Asian countries may have life course regimes and experience trends in these regimes that are unique to them only<sup>22</sup>. An elaborate theoretical framework or robust comparative data directly tapping

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20) There is long and still unresolved debate on whether individualism and collectivism are part of one two-poled dimension or whether each represents a separate dimension. The latter is important if one upholds the idea that both individualism and collectivism can be observed in one society depending on situations and domains of life (see e.g. Triandis, 2004 or an older source Gudykunst et al., 1996). The following about cultural diversities is therefore preliminary and might be relevantly different if we focus on different life course domains (e.g. work or marriage, having children, etc.).

21) Schwartz (2004) notes that Japan is an exception in the analyses of countries plotted against the background of all his cultural dimensions (not only the autonomy versus embeddedness dimension). Japan has a strong cultural emphasis on hierarchy and harmony, but not on embeddedness, according to Schwartz (2004: 59), and a strong emphasis on intellectual autonomy but not on the adjacent egalitarianism. It is hard to place Japanese culture in between the other countries, at least if Schwartz' framework is used, thus, Schwartz argues, that Japanese culture has developed differently from most others and/or is in a period of transition. A third possibility is of course that Schwartz' model does not clearly grasp the key cultural differences of a set of nations including Japan.

22) Of course here we touch upon the core issue in debates in comparative social science centered around attaining an etic (what is universal across cultures) or an emic (what is specific for a culture) approach.

into this subject are, as argued, not available<sup>23)</sup>. For the moment we accept the Western-style perspective on life course developments and therefore speculate that societies that culturally are profiled with high levels of individualism, autonomy and/or self-expression are the same societies that share life course regimes that are de-standardized and subject to reflexive biographization. This would especially go for the English-speaking countries, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries. Japan would, like many other European countries, take up a middle position and one would expect Japanese life course regimes to represent a mix of both standardized and de-standardized elements and of elements of the reflexive biographization of the life course (e.g., pre-occupation with self-development, orientation at variation, changes and challenges, at choosing transitions that keep options open, including the option to opt out) as well as more classic life course elements (pre-occupation with one's future social role in any larger collectivity, at having a clear, stable and low-burden future, choosing transitions that lead irreversibly to a series of next steps and transitions and perhaps to a more narrowly-defined specialized role, of course, with as much security as possible to not having to opt out). These latter elements may well be part of a life course model that is more transition-oriented<sup>24)</sup>. Other Asian countries, including the more affluent countries such as Taiwan and South Korea, could well be in the life course regime phase of standardized and transition-oriented life courses. An alternative and more detailed or domain-specific hypothesis would suggest that these countries, either Western or Asian, vary in the number of life domains in which de-standardization and reflexive biographization has progressed. In the highly individualized group of countries these processes affect life courses related to work, marriage, family life, housing, education, leisure, etc. In the moderate group this might only apply to a few domains. For instance, in the domains of work and marriage Japanese life course might well be subject to de-standardization and this is also the domain on which reflexive biographization has its strongest impacts, as opposed to the domain of education in which standard life course regimes and transition orientations are still strong and much alive<sup>25)</sup>. In the collectivist group of Asian countries mentioned here one could expect most life domains to be still subject to standardization and transition regimes<sup>26)</sup>.

Finally, culture is not explaining everything. As Mayer (2000) already noted historical and religious tradition and especially institutional arrangements differ widely across societies and each of these may lead to different life course outcomes. The life course ideals may be very much focused on de-standardization and reflexive biographization, but if arrangements related to income and social security, to schooling and the labor market or even to housing are build on standardized life courses and fixed transitions, the

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23) There is some data from studies on adjacent themes? the themes of future orientations, life course control strategies and personal life prognostications-however, that shows that adolescents in individualist countries as opposed to the age contemporaries in collectivist countries have a primary control strategy in which they aim to change the environment to attain their own goals and not to adapt their own goals to constraints and changing circumstances, as is the case in collectivist cultures (as well as among older cohorts in general regardless of culture, see e.g., Trommsdorff, 1994, 2000). The lack of data of a longitudinal and cross-cultural character ? if at all present usually restricted to comparing very specific groups in two or three countries ? is noted with much regret in these studies too (Trommsdorff, 2000).

24) See Diepstraten, forthcoming, for this concept.

25) However education reform in Japan could well mean that this domain is subject to change in terms of life course models as well. See for an analysis of the reform affected pupils' achievement orientations and life goals (college or job) the book chapter by Kariya and Rosenbaum (2003).

26) Further specification of these hypotheses might well be warranted. Particularly looking at gender and education seems important as in many countries, individualistic or not, women and lower-educated people are subject to forces and constraints that make them opt (willingly but certainly also unwillingly) for more classic life course models (see, e.g., Brinton, 2001, for Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea; see Vinken et al., 2002, 2003, for the Netherlands). Briton's edited volume, surprisingly, shows that more rigid working conditions in Japan and South Korea, among other things, make these societies less open for women's participation than does Taiwan (Brinton, 2001). In this case Taiwan is not as 'traditional' as the cultural analyses would predict, a fine example of how domain-specific life course outcomes can be.

opportunities to realize a de-standardized life course subject to reflexive biographization are very limited.

Of course, cultures change and the vehicle of cultural change is the phenomenon of generational replacement. Inglehart's theory, for instance, predicts that postwar historical events in advanced industrial societies, which can be characterized by unprecedented stability in socio-economic and political terms, have generated a gradual but pervasive shift towards postmaterialism as younger generations supporting these postmaterialist or well-being or, in the most recent phrasing, self-expression values replace older generations (Inglehart 1990, 1997)<sup>27)</sup>. The key issue at stake is whether the process of generation formation and replacement in each society can be equated to those in other societies, and therefore whether broad cultural trends such as the one towards postmaterialism or even towards individualism (the process of individualization, more in general) is taking place at the same pace. Consequently it can be questioned whether life course developments that depend much on these cultural processes are also in place in these societies to the same extent. More specifically, one could contest the basic assumption that in both non-Western societies and Western societies—for the sake of argument, we contrast the two worlds as two wholes which, as we just saw, they are not—the same generations with the same characteristics can be found at the same moments in time and, even if these conditions are met, that the replacement of generations is of the same nature and effect. For example, it could be hypothesized that in most Western societies a 'war' and a '1960s' generation may have surfaced, each with their typical cultures, the latter cultivating the self-named fame of having supported many still lingering cultural revolutions. The former and the latter differ according to the Inglehart perspective of materialists or security-seekers valuing survival and postmaterialists or well-being adepts indulging in self-expression respectively. In Asia, many societies have very different histories from this Western scenario. We only have to think about the severity and duration of war time in Southeast Asia after the Second World War or about the controversy the term 'cultural revolution', loosely used in the West, would cause in China. These examples point out that the categorization of generations as found in the West cannot be transferred outside this context. Of course, as theory goes, generations take form on the basis of younger cohorts' consciously shared experience of more or less severe discontinuous change (wars, economic crises, etc.) in a given context with the effect of these cohorts becoming aware of a distinct common history and a distinct common destiny (Mannheim, 1928/1929; see also Diepstraten et al., 1999). The formation of generations in East and West may be expected to be very different—of course also when comparing the different societies within these broad East versus West contexts. Furthermore it can be questioned whether or not generational replacement—with older cohorts dying and younger ones taking their place—is of equal importance in each society. Its importance may well depend on the relative impact of other configurations in these societies. An interesting example can be used from a study comparing generational support in the US and Japan (Hashimoto, 1996). The filial instead of conjugal bond in Japan appeared to be most important to explain support relationships. There is a serial order of giving directed at the older generation which successively takes its turn to depend on the younger generation. In the US, relationships between life-partners are much more important than generational ones, as the latter is interpreted from the perspective of generational equity directed at the younger generation, which will successively take its turn to seek independence. One may observe this different value-based logic also in the multi-generational coresidence households in Japan (as well as in other societies in Asia) versus the 'empty-nest' husband-wife households in the US (and many societies in the West). Intergenerational relationships therefore seem more relevant in Japan<sup>28)</sup>.

Perhaps one could hypothesize that generational replacement as a mechanism of cultural change may well be more important in more collectivist and seniority-and age-graded societies, such as Japan, than in highly individualist societies<sup>29)</sup>. In other words, it is important in life course studies to assess the specifics of

27) See Diepstraten et al., 1999, for a discussion on the use of the generation concept in social science.

28) Of course, this example centers on genealogical generations. But one could hypothesize that it may apply to historic generations by thinking about relationships and interactions between younger and older generations in society as such instead of relationships between these generations within one family.

29) Another almost similar example can be found in the study addressing the contemporary relatively higher

generation formation and generational replacement in each society at stake. It is likely that in one particular society at one moment in time there is a unique constellation of generations as well as a unique role which generations as such play in the process of cultural change. Consequently, the universalist assumption of younger generations carrying the torch of individualization, as one key development related to the modernization process, and thus further de-standardization and also reflexive biographization of the life course is highly questionable even when one just only focuses on the logic of generation formation and generational replacement. Hardly any further comments, considering the aforementioned, have to be given to the postmodernists' ideas that the world (not in the least place in a cultural respect) is unifying under globalization currents and this is especially so for the world in which young people are believed to reside (the 'McWorld' of popular culture; Berger & Huntington, 2002). Evidence is accumulating that the contrary trend is more likely and that societies under globalization absorb 'foreign' influences to produce a version in line with their own culture (e.g., the Japanese version of a sitcom on television) and even that the globalization process is accompanied by a revitalization of traditional cultures in these societies (return of traditional theater, e.g.; see again Berger & Huntington, 2002, for a multitude of examples also from Asian societies). Therefore, if we take this back to the life course issue, it is highly unlikely that globalization or Westernization implies that non-Western parts of the world will mimic Western-style life course regimes. At least for this moment, diversities, cultural or other, are strong and probably will remain strong.

All in all, if we focus on the de-standardization and reflexive biographization theses as well as on the addressed consequences for the interpretation of life goals (from a linear to a more dynamic interpretation), it can be argued that it is not easily imaginable that we will observe these phenomena in each advanced society, Western or non-Western. This conclusion is of course preliminary as we lack more elaborate theory directed at comparing these societies and empirical data for a wide range of these societies. One final remark should be made, regarding the high spirits of autonomy to shape one's own life course, spirits that go hand in hand with the loss of sense for the conditions and constraints that govern people's lives. Young generations in Asia, despite all forces that will lead to different life course regimes, may adopt the Western spirits, ambitions, and dreams of having autonomy, being independent and staging their own futures, and at the same time they will have deal with conditions in which life course transitions are more standardized and rigid than in some Western societies. These misleading Western ideals, being illusionary to some extent in the West as well, may cause an even more profound 'quarter life crisis' among Asian youths, a crisis that dwells on the gap that is experienced between the desire to live a changeable and challenging life and the real possibilities to map out such a life and to realize it here and now.

## Epilogue

For advanced societies theory predicts the rise of an individual who, in close interaction with its informal social circle, feels in full control of its own life course, and who is, though conscious of the limits of its own knowledge, focused at continuously monitoring its inner self, at exploring its assumed unique motives, and at testing and re-testing the choices it could make, before really making choices, particularly choices that are regarded as irreversible. It is aware of the multitude of choices that can be made and always ready to abruptly part from an envisioned path through life and to leave everything behind. It is ready to start (thinking about) choosing a new route through life at any moment. Being able to change and engage in new and challenging experiences are the driving forces, resulting in a life story—available before participation is at full speed—of unplanned twists and turns and lateral, unrelated movements in professional careers, family life, education, social relationships, and the leisure domain. This results as well in perceptions of life goals that have lost their linear logic aimed at growth and accumulation of material

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importance for mutual solidarity and exchange of 'personal communities' (relationships with intimates, friends and age contemporaries in particular) instead of within-family generations (Phillipson, 2003).

and immaterial benefits (respectively growing in income and growing as a person) and are more subject to a dynamic logic aimed at change and challenge as such. Working, learning, being well, having children, being a performing artist or even being a respected citizen contributing to society; all these life goals are interesting only if they deliver change and challenge on the spot or if they at least enable the individual to write a life story in which it did something challenging for a change.

In short that is what theory may predict and on which this article reflects. Of course, as also stated in this article, there are many warnings from sociologists that choices are not only up to the individual and its social circle but that society and its institutions determine much of this choice process. When even that is so, it is hard to deny that many institutions and their functionaries retreat wittingly from influencing the life course agenda of individuals. Moreover, the labor market, education, and social security regimes in many advanced societies, for instance, seem to uphold if not cultivate the ideal of the omnipotent individual who wants to and can take care of its own life course and who is, because of this self-determination, no longer interested in collective provisions and public services. There seems to be an undeniable trend towards structure, at least at the institutional level, retreating in favor of agency. What is perhaps more challenging in the structure and agency debate is the role of social categorizations, such as gender groups, social status categories, and—discussed in this article—generational affiliations. Life courses are profoundly sociological, as argued early on in this article. Especially intimate partners, family members and age contemporaries, it was found, impact life course ideals of the individual. From both a genealogic and historic generational perspective one may address the rise and diffusion of the life course ideals as depicted. Could it be that these ideals are specifically the result of interactions between members of generations that each have their own particular formative experiences? And, how 'generational' will these ideals be: or, will they persist throughout the life span of the members of the younger generations or will they fade away when these members grow older or (finally) make real life course transitions? The illustrative (underresearched) example used in this article shows that parents convey life course ideals to younger generations that may well reflect their membership in the baby boom generation, ideals which members of the younger generation, here labeled as the 'Idols generation', cultivate and materialize in ways that fit their own formative experiences.

Finally, this article argues that the life course issue is not only about structure or agency. It is perhaps more so about culture. Cultural diversity, it was argued, is very strong and perhaps even stronger in today's times of globalization. Concentrating on cultural diversity along the lines of individualism and collectivism one may speculate that countries both in the West (North American and Europe) and the East (Asia) vary greatly in their publics' support for individualism, autonomy and self-expression and thus in the value they will adhere to self-determination and self-realization as aspects of the contemporary life course ideal. Japan, for example, was clearly diverting from the Asian overall position and may well share many aspects of the depicted contemporary life course ideal as well as aspects of life course ideals that are more traditional. One may also raise a domain-specific hypothesis and argue that for instance in Japan, certain domains (such as work and family life) are subject to the new ideals and other domains (such as education) are not (yet). In most other Asian countries (as well as some European countries) the majority of domains, by contrast, may still be defined from the perspective of a more traditional ideal. What of course could also be the case is that Japan and other Asian countries may develop their own life course ideals and life course regimes, ideals and regimes that are highly different from the ones described here. If this article may convince researchers from Western and non-Western cultures to engage in adding their story to the stylized history of the developments of life course in advanced societies, this article has more than served its purpose.

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## Changing life courses of young generations across cultures

### The desire for change and challenge in Western and Asian societies

#### ABSTRACT

In advanced societies life courses have de-standardized. The timing and order of life course transitions are changing and life course transitions are increasing in age variance. There is a societal demand but also a desire among publics of advanced societies, this article argues, for people, to take the life course in their own hands. Especially for young generations it is furthermore noted that their life courses are subject to a process of reflexive biographization. Imagining one's individual path through life, before anything else, becomes the central theme on which young generations focus, as actual participation in society and learning from the experience was the central focus for older generations. Change and challenge are the keywords in the focus of the young 'Idols' generation as is the choice for a dynamic life course model. Basic life goals are being interpreted beyond traditional linear dichotomies, such as the dichotomy of material versus immaterial growth. Not growth, but variation or change and challenge are the new yardsticks. This article concludes that it is worth considering non-Western or, more precisely, Asian perspectives in the predominantly Western life course discussion. It attempts to shed some first light on this issue. In this sense this article aims to explore elements of a future agenda for investigating changing life courses in both Western and non-Western advanced societies.

**Key Words:** Life courses, cultural change, generations