SHORT DESCRIPTION

This module deals with issues of the life course and the interrelationship between external, social conditions and the free will in forming identity, with special emphasis on the vocational aspects. The construction of mastery and autonomy is discussed.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To know and understand some basic concepts in the discussion about social constraints, the free will and mastery.
2. To develop an understanding of the interplay between the social constraints in a person's life and the person’s possibilities to shape his or her own life, with special emphasis on the vocational career.
3. To be able to identify the interplay between social constraints and free will in an autobiography.

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1 Introduction

In human cultural tradition it has always been common to divide life into different stages and, based on the divisions, to divide people into different groups with different characteristics, and to have different expectations of people depending on which group they belong to. The life stages are constructed as part of the social order, but since they often coincide with biological changes in the individual, there may be an illusion that the life stages are part of the natural order, i.e. part of human natural development. What you can and should do at a certain age relates to age but is not a consequence of age. (Tuomi 2001, 13.)

Different metaphors have been used to describe the life course, for example, a circle, a bow or a line. Sometimes the life course has been described as a tree, a path or a river. Variations of the circle metaphor are a wheel and a van, and of the bow metaphor a bridge, an arch, a staircase, and a rainbow. From the 16th to the 19th century the life stages were often described as stairs rising on the left and descending on the right; in the bow metaphor the different life stages are not seen as equally important. From the 18th century on it has been common to think that society is continuously developing, and this analogy has been applied to the individual as well. Nowadays, the line metaphor is by far the strongest and the discussion is mainly about whether the line is continuously rising and hierarchical, or different for different individuals. (Tuomi 2001, 13-16.) Different philosophers have distinguished between three and twelve phases in the life course. The general way the life course is viewed may decide how people of different ages are treated in society; for example, old people may be considered less valuable than the young. (Tuomi 2001, 18-34.)

Lopata & Levy (2003, 4-5) have identified five central themes of the life course paradigm:

1) The interplay of human lives and historical times that give rise to "cohort effects" in which social change differentiates the life patterns of successive groups of people born within a socially defined and bounded period of years. Different generations can thus have very different life experiences.

2) The social meaning of age, age-norms, and age-graded roles and events. Different norms apply to people of a certain age at different periods of time.

3) The timing, sequencing, and duration of life events including scheduling of multiple trajectories and their synchrony or asynchrony. There are often expectations of what order certain life events should take place in. For example, you are usually expected to marry before having children. What is "the right age" for a life event is being discussed and may change. For instance, in western culture it is nowadays seldom seen as a catastrophe to have a child before getting married or without ever marrying at all.

4) The linking and interdependence of lives. Through social relationships our lives are linked to the lives of other people, for instance family, friends, neighbours etc. A divorced couple may find that, through their children, their lives are interlinked long after they have divorced.

5) The human agency in choice making. We plan our lives within the limits of the social and the physical world. For instance, some university students may plan to continue studies after a bachelor degree, while others plan to enter working life. Differences in plans may come from personal preferences or they may reflect differences in how the students view what is possible and available to them.
Life course theories are based on the assumption that people experience certain events, transitions and turning points in their life. Many of these transitions are set by the institutional system of society, which sets requirements of age for certain actions. There is a set age, or age expectations, for when you start school, get your driver's license, do your military service, vote, buy spirits, retire from work etc. But in reality people's lives seldom turn out like the "ideal" life. Many unexpected events may happen during the life course. (Lopata & Levy 2003, 5)

2 Social constraints

Everybody is born into a social context of some kind; certain social conditions determine the life opportunities of that particular group of people to which the person belongs. In a class society these opportunities are very strictly regulated, but also in less class-divided societies there are different kinds of social constraints inside of which people shape their lives. Our life is affected by the family we grow up in, the schools we attend, the friends we have, the economy of our parents and later of our own economy, our own and our family's health status and so on. Moreover, many kinds of unexpected events occur during the life course, both positive and negative. Some of the negative events can be neutralized, some not. Some of the unexpected events pertain to health and childhood experiences. Health problems may cause a need for vocational rehabilitation, and childhood experiences may affect the choice of vocation. Two concepts, which can serve as examples of social constraints in a person's life, are 'social determinants of health' and 'adverse childhood experiences'. These concepts will be described briefly.

The World Health Organisation describes social determinants of health (SDOH) in the following way: Even in the most affluent countries, people who are less well off have substantially shorter life expectancies and more illnesses than the rich. Not only are these differences in health an important social injustice, they have also drawn scientific attention to some of the most powerful determinants of health standards in modern societies. They have led in particular to a growing understanding of the remarkable sensitivity of health to the social environment and to what have become known as the social determinants of health. (Social Determinants of Health....2003, 5.)

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) are experiences of long-term abuse and dysfunction in the home that a child may experience while growing up, and which may have a harmful impact in adult life. These experiences have been studied among others by a group of American researchers who define adverse childhood experiences in the following way: Growing up (prior to age 18) in a household with: recurrent physical abuse, recurrent emotional abuse, sexual abuse, an alcohol or drug abuser, an incarcerated household member, someone who is chronically depressed, suicidal, institutionalized or mentally ill, mother being treated violently, one or no biological parents, emotional or physical neglect. (The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study 2003-2004.) Many studies (e.g. Dube et al 2003) suggest that childhood abuse can lead to negative health outcomes and health behaviour. Many, although not all, clients of social work have these kind of experiences, which may come up later in vocational rehabilitation.

3 Between social constraints and the free will

The relationship between the individual and society has been described in different ways depending on whether the focus is on the individual or on society. Thus there are different theories on the extent to which people can plan their own life, i.e. exercise their “free will”.
and to what degree they are victims of the social conditions they were born into and grew up in (social determinism).

‘Identity’ is often seen as a sociological concept that refers to how the individual builds up a story about him- or herself, where social and cultural factors have a great impact. Johansson (2002) uses the psychological concept ‘self’ to stress the importance of a persons inner experiences while at the same time emphasizing that analyses of self can and should be contextualized in a certain social and cultural environment. (Johansson 2002, 25-29.) He identifies four dimensions of self: the private self, the split self, the disciplined self, and the extended self. Research on the ‘private self’ focuses on the space of the individual to think and act freely in society. Researchers disagree on how large this space is, and whether the space for autonomy is growing or diminishing in society today. Another interesting question is how the private and the public sphere intertwine. The self was earlier seen as given and as being threatened by the surrounding environment. Nowadays the private and the public spheres are seen as intertwining and as forming each other. We talk about the reflexive individual in the postmodern society. In the constant flow of information people seek tools that can help them better understand themselves and the society they live in. People pick frames for understanding and perspectives wherever they can, anywhere from mass media to scientific knowledge. Not everybody is able to understand and use all this information. The well-educated and well-off have more opportunities and can use them to strengthen their own positions. (Ibid, 42-48.) The second dimension of self, the ‘split self’, has to do with the discussion about ontological insecurity, a true and a false self, the pathology of society etc. (ibid., 73). The ‘disciplined self’ again refers to the discussion about the individual being disciplined into a cultural being and the questioning of the idea of individuals as unique and acting subjects (ibid., 87). Finally, the ‘extended self’ refers to the changes of individuals and society which make it possible for a person to be in (virtual) contact with the whole world without having to go out of the house. The borders between self and the rest of the world dissolve. (Ibid., 91.) According to Johansson self should be studied at four levels: in relation to the structural changes in society (e.g. industrialization, postmodernization, information society), in relation to the positional changes in people's economic and material conditions (e.g. class, gender, ethnicity), in relation to the concrete social and cultural contexts people live in (personal networks, material circumstances, power relations), and in relation to the informal 'institutions' of everyday life (family, friendship, colleagues, work, media) (ibid., 106-107).

Work is still very important in our culture. A lot of identity work is done in the work sphere and at some point it may be difficult to separate paid work from the rest of everyday life. (Johansson 2002, 153.) Working life has changed a lot, but there is a difference between normative changes and real changes. A flexible, free and constructive way of relating to work is highly valued in society of today, but this is not possible for everyone. (Johansson 2002, 156.) Working life may be seen both as itself a social constraint and as the result of social constraints earlier in life.

A problem for social scientists in the study of sociological phenomena has been how to take into account both objective life conditions and subjective will and personal experience. In his theoretical construction of the habitus theory the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1980, 43) has tried to reconcile the differences between objectivism and subjectivism. A person’s habitus is abstractly defined as the system of internalised dispositions which link together social structures with practical activity. (Brubaker 1985, 758.) Habitus is a system of dispositions, which makes it possible for people to act, think and orient themselves in the social world (Broady 1990, 228). Habitus is formed by the social conditions in which the individual grows up, i.e. the individual is from earliest childhood imprinted by his or her social environment, in particular the family and the way in which social constraints manifest themselves in the life of the family. The dispositions are adapted to certain social
conditions, the same that prevailed when the dispositions were produced, and therefore they are also adapted to the possibilities and impossibilities, the freedoms and necessities that these conditions contain. This means that habitus gives people a certain freedom to act and to take a certain outlook, a kind of conditioned freedom where certain acts, thoughts and aspirations are perceived as impossible from the very start. But within a given spectre the individual has the possibility to think, perceive and act. By this Bourdieu wants to say that people’s behaviour is neither the result of a totally free will nor a mechanical reproduction of the original conditions in a deterministic sense. (Bourdieu 1980, 90-92.)

Bourdieu sees habitus as the explaining link between social conditions and the behaviour of individuals. He uses the terms ‘embodied’ or ‘incorporated’ instead of ‘internalised’ in order to show that habitus is not a question of directly transferring norms from society to the individual but that the dispositions have been engraved in people’s bodies by the social experiences they have had. (Broady 1990, 231-232.) The idea of embodiment can also be found in recent discussions on the embodiment of social class (see e.g. Krieger 2001 and Rose 2006).

Habitus is thus the product of an individuals’ whole biographical experience. Therefore there are as many different habituses as there are individuals. (Bourdieu 1985, 82.) The theory of habitus can help us understand why people do not necessarily act in a way that helps them to a better life or why changes happen so slowly. People do act out of an ‘interest’, but this interest is not always intentional and rational. Habitus is not unable to change, but the change is slow. In fact, habitus is constantly changing, but when habitus is unable to adapt quickly enough to changes in the environment, intentionality and rationality come into function. (Bourdieu 1988, 43-44). Habitus may help us understand why a person’s vocational career has developed in a certain way. The discussion about habitus can be viewed in relation to the new concept of ‘biographical work’, which is defined in module B.2.

4 Life course and vocational career

Participating in working life and having a vocational career is important to most people, although it may not be the only important content of a person’s life project. The working age in Finland is generally considered to be 15-64 years, but today this is no longer the case. At 15 years of age no more than 10% of the age group is working, at 20 only 40% and at 25 about 70%. Not until after 35 years of age does the proportion of the employed rise to more than 80% of the age group (according to statistics from 1999 of the Ministry of labour and the Ministry of social affairs and health). Compared to many other Western countries the actual retirement age is low, which is a general concern particularly with regards to the economy and maintaining the welfare society. When the large age groups retire, there will be a shortage of labour while, at the same time, the expected life span is increasing. (Ilmarinen 2001, 173; 188.) Steps to raise the age of retirement have been taken.

Young people get into the labour market later than before, because education lasts longer and because many young people are not able to find a job. Long-term unemployment has many negative consequences for the physical, mental and social health of a young person. Health behaviour in turn affects working capacity and employment opportunities. A strong sense of mastery in young age has been found to correlate with experienced good health, healthy living habits, low stress levels and a good economy and education as an adult. Working capacity has a great impact on a person’s life course. It is determined by health and functioning, education and know-how, values and attitudes as well as by motivation and work satisfaction. Both working capacity and work done will change during a persons’
vocational career. Adapting working capacity and work to each other is an ongoing process. (Ilmarinen 2001, 173-174.)

The health of employees generally changes during their vocational career. Health problems occur even among younger employees. More than 25% of people in Finland aged 25-34 have a chronic illness or a handicap. In the age group of 45-54 the figure is about 50% and in the age group of 55-64 about 70%. More important than the morbidity of different age groups is how individual experiences of illness affect working capacity. About 40-50% of the chronically ill say their illness has a negative effect on their working capacity. The discussion about how work could be better adapted to employees' health is very weak in Finland: Compared to other countries in the EU working life is very hard. In Finland, Austria and Germany almost one third of men over 45 feel that chronic illness has a negative effect on their working capacity. In Sweden and Denmark the figure is only 10%. (Ilmarinen 2001, 180-182.)

Entering working life is one of the biggest changes in a person's life, even if this nowadays seldom happens just once and permanently. The young person gains greater autonomy and there is a new life rhythm. Learning the job, getting new skills and cooperating in the world of adults, demands time and perseverance. It is estimated to take several years for a young person to become integrated and a full-bodied member of a workplace. Learning new things and succeeding in the job enhances self-confidence, disappontments and mistakes enhance self-knowledge. Research shows that there will be a great demand for young people in the labour market in the future. Young people in Finland are found to be strongly work-oriented and the content of the work is more important for them than the salary and relationships in the workplace. The future good position of the young in the labour market will make it easier for them to change between employments, but expectations on them will also grow. This may mean new opportunities but also considerable demands, which may be hard to manage. Young people cannot always judge their own strengths, but psycho-physiological limits pertain to them, too. The youngest 'burn-out' cases in Finland have been 28 years old, and the process has sometimes taken only six months. (Ilmarinen 2001, 175-176.)

When young people enter working life, their living habits and health behaviour change considerably. There may not be time for exercise, and physical condition may deteriorate quickly. Another big change, often occurring at the beginning of the vocational career, has to do with establishing a relationship and forming a family. The position in the labour market at this point is often still rather insecure. Just like older age groups, young employees, too, need greater flexibility in their work, although for different reasons. (Ilmarinen 2001, 176-178.)

Even for those who are what one would call 'integrated' into the labour market, working life is hardly calm and stable. Employments today are often linked to projects or in temporary, part-time or distance jobs etc., which makes the vocational career more fragmented. Work tasks are also changing, becoming more demanding and diversified with growing demands for efficiency and quality. Demands on organisations have also changed, and these changes affect the performance of employees. Values have changed: the new type of organisation stresses the resources of the individual, life skills, good mental health and working capacity as well as good communication skills. New production methods, new techniques and new work contents may offer interesting challenges, but on the other hand badly organized work and weak leadership may affect the health and the working capacity of employees. Uncertainty of employment and quick changes in working life may make employees feel a pressure to continuously improve their professional skills. Life-long learning has become not just a challenge but also a necessity. (Ilmarinen 2001, 178-180.)

One factor which improves with age is mental maturity. Many cognitive skills improve, such as strategic thinking, smartness, caution, wisdom, reflective and arguing skills, ability
to grasp complex systems, and mastering a multifaceted language. Older employees may also be strongly motivated for further studies, if they view them as useful for their work. Employees over 45 have been found to be absent from work less often than younger employees. Younger employees are less often absent because of sickness but more often for other reasons (e.g. sick children). Other factors that may favour older employees are a longer working experience and a better control of their daily life. In spite of this, after 45 years of age there is a polarisation of the labour force into those whose working capacity is weak and those whose working capacity is good. Older employees need more individual solutions in their work. (Ilmarinen 2001, 182-185.)

In leadership education there is now a growing understanding of life course issues. Employees of different ages and in different phases of life need different types of management in order to be able to use their working capacity in an optimal way. Leaders in general need more knowledge about aging and about supervising aging employees. (Ilmarinen 2001, 185.)

The need for vocational rehabilitation may become a fact for even larger groups of people as retirement age rises and the changes in working life become even more rapid.

Exercises

1. Read an autobiography or a biographical novel, or watch a film or a play telling about a person's life (fictive or real). Try to identify the interplay between social constraints and moments when the main character is exercising or trying to exercise his or her "free will".
2. Think of your own life: What made you choose to become a social worker (or your present vocation)? Was it your own choice? Did you have other options?
4. Draw a picture of your life (e.g. a life line) putting in the social context and ‘constraints’ during different periods.

References


