Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie = Revue suisse de sociologie = Swiss journal of sociology

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie

Band: 35 (2009)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Stability, homogeneity, agency : cumulative dis-/advantage and problems of theory

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-815046

Stability, Homogeneity, Agency: Cumulative Dis-/Advantage and Problems of Theory[1]

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1 Introduction

Interest in the concept of cumulative dis/advantage in general (Dannefer, 2003; diPrete and Eirich, 2006) and its relation to life course, lifespan and age-related processes in particular (Baars, Dannefer, Phillipson and Walker, 2006; Crystal and Shea, 2002; Douthit and Dannefer, 2006; Ferraro, 2008; Kelley-Moore and Ferraro, 2005) has continued to expand in both the USA and Europe. Its appeal derives from a constellation of factors. It depicts an aspect of age-related change that has been until recently neglected, yet appears to be empirically robust across a range of phenomena and contexts (Crystal, 2002; Dannefer, 2003; Dannefer and Sell, 1988). It is, as Angela O'Rand (2009) has recently noted, an idea that is both simple and testable , and it is also generative opening up questions in a problem area that was previously not even recognized. It also resonates with commonsense experience and with folk wisdom ("success breeds success"; "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer").

As frequently happens with the rapid growth of an intuitively appealing idea, the enthusiasm for the general idea may outpace the development of a solidly grounded understanding of the concept, and of its appropriate conceptualization and use.

In this paper, I discuss three enduring axes of sociological theorizing, all of which have shown signs of becoming sites of ambiguity and confusion with regard to the application of the concept of cumulative dis/advantage to the life course: stability/change, homogeneity/variability, and structure/agency. My intention is that, by focusing more deliberately on the relation of CDA to these dimensions of theorizing, we can arrive at a clearer understanding of the possibilities and limits of the application of CDA to life course processes. Inevitably, a discussion of these points will also raise some basic questions of the relation of CDA to premises of the basic theoretical paradigms within sociology, and I will also address this question.

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1 Acknowledgment: I would like to thank Jan Baars, Jessica Kelley-Moore, Peter Uhlenberg and Claduine Burton-Jeangros and Eric Widmer for trenchant comments on an earlier draft. I also wish to thank Sherri Brown for research and bibliographic assistance.

In the interest of clarity, I begin by offering a brief definition and discussion of what is meant by the term, cumulative dis/advantage.

2 Defining Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage

Cumulative advantage/disadvantage (hereafter CDA) can be defined as "*the systemic tendency for interindividual divergence in a given characteristic (e.g., money, health, status) with the passage of time*" (Dannefer, 2003). As indicated by the term, "interindividual divergence", cumulative dis/advantage is a property *not of individuals*, but of *populations* or other defined collectivities (such as cohorts), for which an identifiable set of members can be ranked on one or more characteristics that indicate advantage or disadvantage.

Several independent studies of large-scale data sets have suggested the hypothesis that CDA is a general process that appears as a regular feature of cohort aging. Across these analyses, there is an impressively consistent pattern of increasing intracohort income inequality (Crystal and Shea, 1990; Crystal and Waehrer, 1996; Dannefer and Sell, 1998; Easterlin, Macunovich and Crimmins, 1993; O'Rand, 1996), and of increasing inequality in health outcomes based on education or other social class indicators (Farkas, 2002; Patterson, Falletta, Dannefer and Burant, 2007; Ross and Mirowsky, 1999.) Thus, the tendency for intracohort inequality to increase with age appears as quite a robust pattern, at least for the 20th century USA.

The consistency of this pattern leads to the contention that, if increasing inequality and increasing diversity are regular features of cohort aging, that can be seen in each succeeding cohort, it is misleading to describe aging in terms of central tendency characterizations or "normative" patterns. It is also misleading to think of age only as something that happens *within* the individual, rather than as something that occurs *between* people and can only be grasped in the context of cohort processes , and as a feature of social structure (Dannefer, 1987).

A second term in the above definition, "systemic tendency", serves to indicate that the conceptual apprehension of cumulative dis/advantage refers not only to the descriptive outcome of temporal patterns or trajectories diverging and increasingly unequal resources, but also the problem of process. In other words, not only the what, but also the why: What are the mechanisms that underlie the tendency for inequality to increase?

This general problem is especially clear in studies of aging. Given that both CDA and aging are irreducibly temporal processes, both are intimately bound up with the everyday activities and struggles of human beings, and both involve dynamics that occur constantly, the notion that each of these processes (CDA and aging) has implications for the other seems almost unavoidable. Yet it is only quite recently that we have begun to try to consider their mutual implications.

As systemic social processes, the processes underlying CDA operate at multiple levels of social reality, from the micro to the macro. Yet from an overall social systems point of view, they comprise one very specific subset of processes characterizing the dynamics of society as a whole. How do CDA processes relate to the broader array of continuously operating social processes, ranging from macro-processes of institutionalization and legitimation to reality construction in everyday life? How does one ascertain which aspects of the everyday operation of society pertain to CDA, and which do not? It is in an effort to address these questions that I will discuss how three enduring tensions in social and developmental theory – problems of stability/change, variability/normativity and structure/agency related to CDA – and I will also discuss the position of CDA in relation to the classical theoretical traditions of sociology.

3 CDA and the Social Change/Stability Tension

To consider the relation of CDA to social change, it will be helpful to begin by taking a step back to examine more generally the place of social change in discussions of the life course, aging and life-span development. Much of the field of life course studies has been slow to recognize the importance of socially organized stability as a constitutive factor in life course outcomes. Instead, research and theorizing in the sociology of age and the life course and in life-span development as well, has from the beginning placed great emphasis on social change. This is reflected in historical scholarship demonstrating that people aged differently in the past than now, and it received a powerful burst of support in the late 1960s, with the introduction of cohort analysis into the study of aging (Riley, Johnson and Foner, 1972; Ryder, 1965; Schaie, 1965), which brought with it the realization that cohort effects may create distinctive patterns of aging for those born at different times. This emphasis on change was, however, layered over the top of what had otherwise been a strongly individualized and organismically based approach to understanding aging. Although cohort analysis and related developments compelled a recognition that social change produces different patterns of aging and development, the acknowledgement of environmental effects tended to be limited to social change, allowing assumptions about age as a natural, intraindividual process to remain intact apart from, so it seemed, the occasional environmental "noise" of change (e.g., Baltes 1987; Riegel, 1976). Thus, it has often been implicitly assumed that social context is only relevant insofar as change is occurring, and that when no change is occurring, the environment is having no effect (Dannefer and Uhlenberg, 1999; Hagestad and Dannefer, 2001).

There can be little question that the tendency to equate the effects of social forces with episodes of social change has done a great deal to obscure the importance of socially organized stability in sustaining patterns of aging. However, it takes

only a moment of careful thought to recognize the absurdity of the tendency to equate social context with social change. Social processes are not "switched on" only when social change occurs; they are constantly operative, having effects at deeper levels of human structuration than is typically recognized, from the organization of temporality by socioculturally regulated practices and norms, to the dynamics of micro-interaction in everyday life (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979). Human beings are shaped and sustained in the socially organized micro-interaction of everyday life. Thus, social forces are no less powerful under stable social conditions than under conditions of change. It is understandable that social change has the effect of *making visible* the effects of social forces that normally go completely unnoticed in everyday life. When everyday life is characterized by habituated routines and institutionalized life transition, the force of social processes is often difficult to discern because most everyone, including behavioral and social scientists whose job it is to study such dynamics, are completely immersed in them (Dannefer, 2008) and naturalize their effects (Dannefer, 1999a; Dannefer and Daub, 2009).

CDA occupies what initially appears to be a paradoxical position in relation to change. On one hand, it is predicated on the occurrence of substantial change – specifically, change in the amount of variability or inequality within each cohort, a form of change that threatens to violate sacred assumptions of statistical testing, namely, normality and homoscedasticity, which is the assumption of equal variances across comparison groups or time periods (Kelley-Moore, Dannefer and Lin, 2009.) From the standpoint of traditional nomothetic approaches, such developments as heteroscedasticity and skewed distributions are harbingers of disorder in the phenomena under investigation that seem to threaten the assumption that there is an orderly subject matter about which a scientific understanding is possible. If science is seen as a matter of bringing order out of chaos, understanding out of mystery, then regularly finding what researchers have been trained to view only as increasing disorder, error terms and noise can be an unnerving prospect.

On the other hand, evidence suggests that the tendency toward increasing differentiation, stratification and inequality is a fundamental aspect of cohort aging, that recurs in each succeeding cohort. If it is a regular feature of cohort aging, it is a primary task of the empirical scientist to acknowledge this observed pattern and to seek to explain it. And, it can surely be said that the pattern of increasing intracohort inequality is a central element of the prevailing social order, at least in those societies for which data have been available.

The solution to the puzzle is actually quite straightforward, when distinctions concerning the levels of analysis involved are made explicit. When we are dealing with multiple system levels and multiple units of analysis, change at one system level may contribute to stability at another. In this case, systematic change over time in the intracohort distribution of rewards contributes to overall social-system stability. That is, systematic increases in intracohort inequality are a reflection of a

stable, age-graded labor market in which the highest levels of inequality have existed among workers in their 50s and 60s (Kaufman and Spilerman, 1982). Thus, the predictable pattern of change at the cohort level (that CDA represents) is actually part of the overall structure of stability of regimes of stratification and social reproduction, as the age-graded stratified system of roles that characterize any large and complex social system constantly is continuously entered and exited by discrete actors who are moving through their individual life course transitions. The structures of education, labor market, health care and other stratified systems of the welfare state are provided with a steady flow of role occupants transitioning in and out of them through *cohort flow* (Riley et al., 1972), and the age-graded roles available to cohort members are increasingly stratified as one moves through the life course (Dannefer, 1987: Kaufman and Spilerman, 1982; Rosenbaum, 1978; 1983). Of course, the extent to which any of these patterns still hold true in the postmillennial "elsewhere" society (Conley, 2008) is an interesting question for further research.

Thus far, this discussion of change has been confined to the social processes operating *within* each cohort as its members age, moving through time. A second point of ambiguity that derives from failing to distinguish different levels of analysis is found in the contradictory trends between intracohort processes and intercohort or historical changes. For example, a long-term historical trend toward a reduction in old-age poverty has been reported in many modern societies as a result of economic growth and the expansion of welfare state provisions (e.g., Williamson and Pampel, 1993), and there is some evidence supporting a similar trend of reduction in old-age inequality (Kildal and Kuhnle, 2008).

This sometimes seemed to *contradict* the idea of CDA, since it implies an amelioration of exclusionary practices and social resource flows that have historically put the aged at risk for poverty (e.g,. Rowntree, 1914) and produced inequality among the aged. On closer inspection, one can readily see that it does nothing to contradict the idea, but simply refers to a different level of analysis: the historical, *intercohort* trend in inequality among aged (based on comparing, at different time periods people of the same age) is independent of the systemic *intracohort* tendency for inequality to increase (based on the trajectory of change as each cohort ages over its collective life course). The first is based on a cross-time comparison of people of the same age, whereas the second is based on biographical changes within a cohort followed over time, and subject to the regular intracohort processes that relentlessly operate to produce and extend stratification among age peers. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which provides one example of how intracohort inequality can increase while intercohort inequality in some cases clearly decrease. This analysis, based on an analysis of U.S. census data conducted by Judith Treas, shows that while *intracohort* inequality in family income consistently increases within each cohort, *intercohort* comparisons (for example, between those born before 1903, those born

1913–1922, and those born 1923–32, indicate a historical trend toward reduction in inequality among those 55–64, a similar pattern is evident for those 65+.

Thus, it is amply clear that both of these types of processes – long-term historical (intercohort) trends and steadily repeated intracohort dynamics – are occurring simultaneously, and largely independently from each other. So long as this difference is kept clearly in view, the confusion of CDA processes with cohort effects or other historical change processes and trends can be avoided. The historical pattern can be interpreted to reflect long-term social changes that have altered the age-based distribution of resources . As is clear from Figure 1, such a trend does not mean that CDA has been eliminated. It does, however, mean that it is possible to mitigate or ameliorate its effects through implementing policies that regulate the allocation of resources, as was seen in the USA and many European countries across the 20th century (Pampel, 1981; Preston, 1984; Kildal and Kuhnle, 2008).

4 CDA, Diversity and Normativity

The claim has been made by some that the general argument and growing emphasis on cumulative dis/advantage has placed too much emphasis on diversity and inequality among the aged, and that it neglects important ways in which age has been and is a common and perhaps normative experience, with shared challenges, concerns and experiences. This emphasis on aging as a uniform process echoes a longstanding claim by leading gerontologists, that age itself remains the best predictor of a host of other characteristics throughout the life course. For example, in 1959 one of the venerated founders of American gerontology, James Birren, wrote that

> *Chronological age is one of the most useful single items of information about an individual if not the most useful. From this knowledge alone an amazingly large number of general statements of predictions can be made about his anatomy, physiology, psychology and social behavior.*
>
> (1959, p. 9).

Recently, it has been specifically suggested that a general emphasis on variability and inequality in the study of aging (including CDA) has led to perhaps too great an emphasis on diversity, eclipsing age-based commonalities. The idea of an experience of age as "normal", even if it is seen as a basis for commiseration, has some appeal. Thus, Settersten (2005:S175) suggests that

> The pendulum seems to have swung so far in the direction of variability that only rarely are there mentions of the things that old people have in common.

The first thing to be said about such assertions is that the degree of homogeneity or variability with respect to any characteristic in a given population is, most fundamentally, an empirical question. Indeed, it is a question that is to be welcomed, since it is still regularly overlooked in research, which instead simply presumes a normal distribution in which "error variation" is treated as uninteresting noise (Dannefer, 1984; Nelson and Dannefer, 1992; Dannefer, Kelley-Moore, and Lin, 2009). CDA researchers and others who emphasize diversity (e.g,. Bass et al., 1990; Daatland and Biggs, 2006; O'Rand, 2002)\ will agree that it is important to recognize when high levels of homogeneity are found, and when variability and inequality are in decline. This is no less interesting than finding the reverse.

Yet the desire to "rehomogenize" our characterization of aging and old age resonates with a tradition that positions age as a singular and privileged explanatory variable and, perhaps, with a slightly romanticized notion of age peers as sharing, in some respects, a common plight which can be a basis for solidarity. Powerful, uniform stereotypes of old age can be recognized as integral features of the modern worldview, and they remain seductive. Yet it must be recognized that such adumbration of intra-age homogeneity, which attempts to use age as an organizing or explanatory principle in old age and throughout the life course, ultimately constitutes *microfication*, because it implicitly invites a reliance on the chronological age as the independent variable and deflects attention from the social circumstances that organize the experience of aging.

Just as in the case of the stability/change dilemma, the proper resolution of this tension is also plainly visible. It is neither to adopt a prejudice against the possibility of homogeneity, nor to embrace the time-honored tradition of asserting age as a unitary and potent explanatory principle. Regardless of the relative degree of homogeneity or diversity, it is necessary to look behind the surface level of the phenomenon itself to its sources. What factors are responsible for the production of high levels of variability, or of homogeneity? For many characteristics, the answer can be seen in the operation of social processes – both basic social processes that are always operating in social life at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels, and often without awareness of the actors involved, and secondly those that are constructed thorugh deliberate initiatives of social policy or practice.

While the generation of inequality appears to be inherent in such general social processes, reductions in inequality and increases in homogeneity have been seen to result from deliberate policy initiatives. One such effect, discussed above, can be seen in the trend toward what might be called the "economic homogenization" of old-age experience – the reduction in old-age inequality – that has been a result of policy changes in societies that have developed effective old-age pension systems (See Dannefer and Sell, 1988; Kilal and Kuhnle, 2008). Such policies reduce the effects of CDA, but do not eliminate them.

A second and potent example of a high and increasing level of homogeneity is offered by the 20th century phenomenon of the institutionalization of the life course, reflected in the socially organized "three-box life" of schooling, work and retirement (Kohli, 1985; 1986). Accompanying the institutionalization of the life course, several lines of research in the USA and Europe have documented a clear historical trend toward increasing levels of precise age calibration of the transition to adulthood (e.g. Gillis, 1977; Hogan, 1981; Modell, Furstenberg and Hershberg, 1976). That is, ever-increasing proportions of cohort members went through the transition (defined by the three events of leaving school, getting a job and getting married) at increasingly similar ages. The historian Howard Chudacoff (1989) has shown clearly how age norms developed in the 19th and 20th centuries in the USA, creating keen awareness and social pressure for increasing age-based conformity; John Gillis (1977) has detailed the development of these trends for the early life course in Europe.

In the present context, there is no certainty that such trends will continue. Recent suggestions of a Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaege, 1995) that mark a trend toward greater diversity, uncertainty and instability in patterns of family and personal life appear to support the idea of a trend toward the deinstitutionalization of the life course (Bruckner and Mayer, 2004: Hughes and Waite, 2007), perhaps especially in the USA (Dannefer, 2003b). There are two broad interpretations that can be given to such trends. First, advocates of a "third age" view (Gilleard and Higgs, 2001, 2005) consider such developments to represent a new level of personal freedom and lifestyle choice. Second, those who see the Second Demographic Transition as representing greater (and often involuntary) detachments, of individuals from work and family systems, see it as portending increased inequality generally, and an acceleration of intracohort processes of cumulative disadvantage (Dannefer and Patterson, 2007; Hughes and Waite, 2007). It is conceivable that both of these interpretations could have some validity applied at different levels – the former is most plausible when applied to affluent subpopulations who will have the resources to implement their lifestyle preferences irrespective of economic and policy vicissitudes; the latter may describe the population of a society as a whole.

The fact that there is currently a debate about the continued strength of the institutionalized life course under conditions of late modernity simply underscores the general point, which is that high levels of age-based homogeneity may be generated by the strengthening of social institutions that use age as a principle of organization, and by cultural norms and expectations that legitimate and underscore the awareness of age and "age-appropriate" activities and aspirations. Thus, sociological analysis does not deny high amounts of age-based homogeneity but expects it, based on the historical emergence of age as a key basis of social organization.

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that one result of such powerful institutional and normative foundations for widespread homogeneity is that *the sources*

of homogeneity are not going to be popularly understood in social terms. Among the general population and even among social and behavioral scientists, individualizing assumptions obscure from view the social origins of age-homogeneity, returning the causal interpretation to the individual level. That is, the social sources of age-based homogeneities are recognized neither by the public at large, nor by many in the businesses of health care, policy analysis or academic research. Among all of these sectors, there is a strong impulse to *naturalize* the importance of age, accepting it as an unquestioned part of the natural order. In the hurried realities of everyday experience, that is surely the "default setting" for understanding age-grading in schools, for assumptions about appropriate ages for childbearing, for retirement, about the reasonableness of age-based laws and policies, and so on. When that happens, the general social and cultural framing is again a vehicle of microfication.

This discussion of age-based homogeneity and heterogeneity does lead to a further hypothesis concerning the fundamental nature of the mechanisms of diversity and inequality production. Specifically, I suggest that *age-based diversities and inequalities are actually more fundamental to the everyday processes of aging and social life, than are the tendencies toward age-based commonalities.* That is because the former are rooted in basic processes of social interaction that are presumably present in every society, regardless of size, scope or custom. Whether in a small rural community or in the discourse of a modern corporate boardroom, processes like labeling and altercasting occur, and perceived and real individual differences become the basis of power and resource differentials that accumulate over time. These tendencies are fundamental constants.

By contrast, age-based homogeneities are the historically recent and specific outcomes of the modern state, which has relied on age as an organizing principle for structuring social institutions. This is not to say there are no age-based commonalities. There are some, especially at the chronological extremes of birth and early development, and decline and death. But evidence from historical and comparative work strongly suggests that what happens in between is considerably less determined by biological aging, than is often assumed. Instead, social life is regulated and organized by the articulation of aging individuals with social institutions. As social, cultural and institutional change occurred in Western Europe and North America over the 19th and 20th centuries, age norms and age grading in schools, the workplace and other institutions occurred (Achenbaum, 1979; Chudacoff, 1989; Kett, 1977) and social policy increasingly relied upon age as an eligibility criterion and as a basis for social organization. The ascendance of the institutionalized life course was a concomitant of the demographic transition, the industrial revolution and then of postindustrial late modernity. As noted earlier, the advent of a Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaege, 1995) may mean that some of these long-term trends may now be reversing. And if the nature of these institutions continues to change, and if the impulses toward deinstitutionalization prevail, the extent of age-

patterned experience could shift again away from the commonalities nurtured by the institutionalized life course. In both cases, the meaning and organization of age is in substantial part hostage to large-scale social forces. Such forces created unprecedented age-based commonalities in the developed societies of the 20th century, and those commonalities that now may be poised to evaporate – lasting no longer than the social conditions that created them. Thus, the forces nurturing homogeneity are historically specific and social, while those generating diversity and inequality are endemic to social life. From this vantage point, what happens to individuals as they age is heavily dependent on the historical period they happen to inhabit.

5 CDA, Social Structure and Human Action

Like many such treatments, the foregoing discussion of CDA processes and the larger matrix of institutional dynamics in which they are embedded implies a strong role for social structure in the production of increasing inequality. Because of this, it is sometimes assumed that CDA is a structural account that omits or even denies the relevance of agency and human action. While it is true that analysis of CDA inherently involves recognizing the role of social structure, it does not follow that action is irrelevant to it. Indeed, human action is fundamental to the constitution of the everyday life processes through which CDA outcomes are produced.

To discuss the action-structure relationship in this context, it is important to clarify some basic features of the structure-action relationship in general terms. First, it must be acknowledged that all human action and agency are organized by social structure and institutions, beginning with language (the most fundamental social institution) (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Clark and Marshall, forth.; Dannefer, 1999b; Dannefer and Daub, forth.) Therefore, the common practice of counterposing action and structure as though they are independent, contending forces is misguided. Their relation must be understood as dialectically intertwined, not oppositional. Second, it is important to recognize that the relation between social structure and individual action is not a coequal relationship, as it has sometimes been characterized (e.g., Lerner and Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Riegel, 1976). From the beginning, it is *asymmetrical*, as early child development involves the acquisition of language and an entire complex of cultural practices that profoundly shape body and mind (Brice and Brice, 2008; Clark, 2009; Dannefer, 1999b, 2008). What this means is that what most human action accomplishes in everyday life is to contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of those systems.

With respect to CDA, evidence derived from the construction of inequality trajectories or other modes of analysis of large data sets, suggests that the *processes* that produce those outcomes are ultimately anchored in social interaction. Indeed, I contend that the most pervasive and enduring inequality-producing processes

are those found at the level of interpersonal interaction and the microdynamics of everyday life. Labelling, altercasting, the making of distinctions and invidious comparison, the rendering of judgment based on interpersonal conversation – all of these are ubiquitous elements inherent in the ongoing interactional dynamics of everyday life, and as they operate over time, they produce stratified assessments of others that begin to translate into differential advantage and dis/advantage. The fact that this occurs in small-scale, traditional societies can seen in the institution of the Potlatch (Paper, 2006; Webster, 1991). But in contemporary work settings (e.g., Kanter, 1977: Rosenbaum, 1983) no less than in small-scale traditional societies, it is possible to observe the enduring foundations of CDA processes in the face-to-face encounters and systems of micro-interaction that are part of everyday life.

For these reasons, I suggest that human action must be recognized as perhaps the most fundamental constitutive force at the core of CDA processes, even while it is itself socially organized. This can readily be seen in domains as diverse as consumption, work and family life, and retirement. For example, in analyses of consumption, which show clearly how putatively "voluntary" consumer behavior has come to be shaped by broadly imposed cultural preferences (e.g., Bourdieu, 1987) and specifically by advertising and marketing (e.g., Ewen, 1977) with extraordinary effectiveness, beginning very early in the life course (e.g., Schor, 2005). The shaping of agency by work demands has been dramatically shown in analyses of work that require the regulation of affect (and hence the appearance of authentic agency) as well as more standard work skills (e.g,.Hochschild, 1983). More generally the extrinsic and intrinsic demands of work organize the expression of agency in family life (e.g., Newman, 1999;2008). In countries such as the USA without a mandatory retirement age, the regulation of worker's decision-making is a standard corporate tactic in designing retirement packages and policies.

It should be noted that this is a more encompassing view of agency and action than that involved in some discussions in the life span and life course literatures, which define agency rather unproblematically and simplistically in terms of "choice" or "optimization". Such glib assertions run the risk of falling into a false consciousness about the magnitude of authentic self-determination and volition that individuals actually experience and express (Dannefer, 1999a).

6 Conclusion: Stability, Homogeneity and Human Action

Underlying the three axes of theoretical tension discussed above – stability/change, homogeneity/variability, and structure/action – is a common theme. Stability, no less than change, is governed by social processes; variability, no less than homogeneity, is governed by social processes; and human action and agency, as well as social structure, are governed by social processes. In every case, what can be seen is that

the effects of social structure are more profound and encompassing than is often recognized by theorists in the behavioral and social sciences, and that these effects are complex. The long-term societal changes involved in the expansion of pensions and health care provision and other social welfare policies have had beneficial effects in reducing old-age poverty and modulating life-course increases in inequality. However, they do not touch the basic inequality-generating processes that are pervasive in micro-interaction and that produce the intracohort tendencies toward increasing inequality. These relentless, enduring processes contribute to the reproduction and stability of society at the same time that they contribute to the intracohort stratification of life chances. Thus, long-term trends of change at the societal level are founded on a stable set of processes operating at the cohort level.

A concomitant of these historical processes of change is the social constitution of age-based homogeneity, notably through the *institutionalization of the life course.* The expansion of the institutionalized life course also represents a trend toward organizing, stabilizing and supporting individual "lives through time". The increasingly age-graded life course created a marked increase in homogeneity in life course transitions (e.g., Hogan, 1981; O'Rand and Henretta, 1999). While making individual lives more stable and predictable, the changes that have made the life course an institution of the welfare state have also produced what is often experienced as the stifling rigidity of the "three-box" life course (Kohli, 1985, 1986; Riley, Kahn and Foner, 1994) .

In the present historical moment, it appears that a reversal in these long-term trends of institutionalization may be underway. As noted earlier, there are divergent views about what this shift toward a destandardization of the life course and the expansion of a "third age" might mean for human well-being, and for understanding the relation between agency and structure. Some suggest that it marks an emancipation of individual agency from the constraints both of the institutionalized life course and of severe economic constraint and deprivation. As such, the Third Age is presented as a historical change that may neutralize CDA processes and herald a new epoch of choice and opportunity – an emancipation of agency from structure.

This perspective, which offers an optimistic view of agency, can be sustained only by ignoring several real-world realities and future projections. First it can be sustained only by ignoring the adverse economic, familial and likely health effects that are projected as consequences of the Second Demographic Transition, as outlined above. These effects make a growth of social exclusion and hardship in middle and later life seem more likely in the decades ahead. Second, even for those who would dispute those projections, one would have to ignore the degree to which "agentic" actions are themselves organized by imposed cultural preferences (Bourdieu 1987; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and corporate manipulation of personal life, from consumer behavior (e.g,.Ewen, 1977; Schor, 2005) to life course transitions (e.g, Clark ,1988).

As researchers become more attuned to the fruitfulness of examinations of cumulative dis/advantage cross-nationally and across time, these developments pose a host of new research questions about the obdurateness of CDA processes, the conditions under which they may be modified, and the points in the life course that may be most critical for their modulation and amelioration. Such comparative studies can reveal the extent to which CDA may take different forms under different cultural and societal conditions, and differential policy initiatives across the societies of late modernity may provide the basis for the design of "natural experiments" that could provide some indication of the impact of human efforts to intervene deliberately in the tendencies for advantage and disadvantage to cumulate over the life course.

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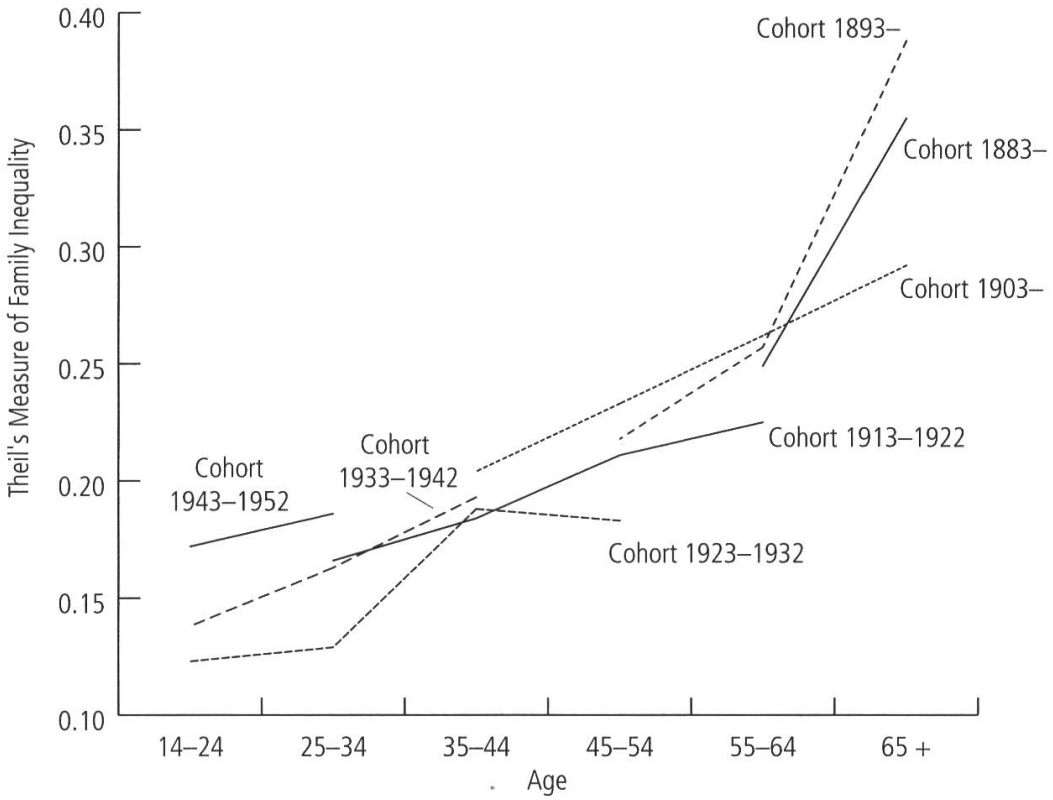
Appendix I:

Figure 1: U.S. Family Income Inequality (by age of head) in seven birth cohorts. (Observation periods1947, 1957, 1967, 1977)



Theil's Measure of Inequality, based on U.S. Census data. (Dannefer and Sell, 1988. Adapted from an analysis conducted by Judith Treas [n.d.])