The life course is typically viewed as the patterned progression of individual experience through time (Clausen 1986). Conventional social scientific approaches take for granted the objective existence of age-related experiential trajectories and the distinctive phases or stages of development that constitute the life course. These approaches emphasize the varied personal and social experiences that accompany sequential change. Symbolic interactionism and related perspectives, in contrast, are more concerned with how individuals actively assign meaning and significance to experience over time, within the context of group life and social interaction.

In their cogent statement of the symbolic interactionist approach, Clair, Karp, and Yoels explain that symbolic interactionists examine "how persons occupying different locations in social space interpret and respond to repeated social messages about the meanings of age" (1993: vii). They list the sorts of questions that interactionists might ask about the life course:

What does it mean to grow old? What . . . do we mean when we speak of childhood, adolescence, teenagers, early adulthood, the middle years old age, and the old-old? How do age-related expectations emerge, govern behaviors, and change over time? What is the relationship between persons' age and the status, prestige, and power accorded them? . . . The task . . . is to clarify how the predictable patterned biological life changes we all experience intersect with the specific cultural milieu in which persons live their daily lives. (1993: 4-5)

Although no single analytic paradigm or program of studies can comprehensively fix the limits of, or precisely elucidate, interactionist interests in the life course, a characteristic perspective has coalesced around the active, meaning-making contours of such questions.
THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

The symbolic interactionist approach builds on foundations laid by George Herbert Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969). Clair, Karp, and Yoels (1993), for example, have specifically adapted Blumer’s (1969: 2) three central premises for life course studies. They suggest that (1) age and life stages, like any temporal categories, can carry multiple meanings; (2) those meanings emerge from social interaction; and (3) the meanings of age and the course of life are refined and reinterpreted in light of the prevailing social definitions of situations that bear on experience through time.

Following Mead (1934), symbolic interactionism posits a social self as the anchor of the process by which meaning is assigned to the life course. This self is conceived as an entity that constantly searches and tests the interpersonal environment for direction. Individuals actively seek others’ interpretations of their actions. Through symbolically mediated interaction, the individual learns to take the attitudes, values, and emotions that are appropriate to the social circumstances he or she encounters. Similarly, the reflected evaluations of others provide the basis for formulating assessments of one’s own behavior and serve to organize courses of action.

Definitions of self typically implicate notions of age and life stages. Individuals glean the meaning of experience with reference to the temporal dimensions of others’ definitions. If a person senses others treating him or her as an “adult,” then he or she is likely to assume an adult identity. If, however, one is constantly and consistently portrayed as immature, then immaturity permeates one’s self-definition. As Clair, Karp, and Yoels argue, in this context “you are as young or old as others allow you to feel” (1993: 17).

Symbolic interactionism often views the expression of self or identity in relation to role enactment (Zurcher 1983). Roles associated with the self supply guiding principles and expectations that shape behavior, informing how individuals act in different situations. These roles may be formal or informal. Roles are not so much viewed as social directives as they are guides for the performance of individual conduct (see Goffman 1959, 1961). Although roles specify normative behavior, they do not dictate conduct from within. Individuals have multiple roles, so they must manage their role repertoires according to situational demands, audiences, and personal preferences. Those that are highest in the preferential hierarchy are the most central to the self-concept (Zurcher 1983).

From this point of view, an individual’s life course is made up of the roles he or she may occupy through time. By participating in a set of roles, one’s experience is shaped so as to provide a particular outlook located in a distinctive social world that is shared by those interacting in similar or complementary roles. By receiving particular kinds of social feedback, one comes to see one’s self in terms of distinctive life stages or age categories. Recognizable life changes become a matter of patterned role changes.
Rose (1965a, 1965b) has expanded the notion of patterned role changes, suggesting that people arrange themselves into distinctive age "subcultures"—separate and distinct ways of living within the wider cultural context. Youth gangs, for example, may shape experience at one end of the aging spectrum (Berger 1991), while "social worlds of the aged" (Unruh 1983) characterize life at the opposite end. Rose suggests that the social meaning of aging may be tied to the changing age subcultures or configurations of roles that people enter as they grow older. The life course amounts to a series of lifelong adjustments in roles and self—definitions that proceed with age. For most people, this results in discernibly patterned experience through time.

While roles, subcultures, and interpersonal feedback give the symbolic interactionist approach a decidedly social tinge, the process of self-construction and role enactment is complex and subject to individual discretion and autonomy (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000b). Because the self is both actively assembled and socially formulated, it produces a multifaceted awareness of the meanings of action as it moves from one role to another. In one role, the self may be mirrored as a particular kind of entity, while in another it may reflect something strikingly different.

Still, some social spheres are more socially salient or more structured than others. Entry into some roles or career lines may entail a rigidly specified progression of experiences over and above the results of participation in other spheres. This may be most evident in careers within bureaucratic institutions. Academic careers, for example, require advancement from bachelor's degree to the doctorate, into a faculty position where one climbs a career ladder through the various ranks of professorship. Changes in role performance and lifestyle typically accompany this career advancement.

Strauss (1959) uses the metaphor of "coaching" to describe the interpersonal influences that accompany changes from one life phase to another. In the process of building a career, he argues, a person submits to a variety of agents—individuals or teams—who coach or guide the person into socially appropriate attitudes and responses. Coaches' expectations move the novice along a career trajectory, allowing for the reasonable mistakes of a beginner, while encouraging the backslider to live up to accepted standards. Still, coaching treads a fine line between the autonomy of the person being socialized, on the one side, and social definition, on the other. Life change emerges out of socially situated and mediated learning experiences in which both the teacher and the learner are active participants.

Inasmuch as symbolic interactionism stresses activeness and reflectiveness, it eschews the vision of a strictly deterministic shaping of the meaning of experience through time. Rather, it suggests that factors such as the following be considered as influences on how individuals come to experience aging and the life course:

- Cultural definitions attached to the aging process;
- Contextual variability of definitions of chronological age categories;
"Structural" factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, occupation, social class, and marital status; and

The historical variability of conceptions of aging and the life course. (Clair, Karp, and Yoels 1993: 18)

Life phases and stages, in other words, are consensual realities built up from shared understandings, role enactments, and role transitions, experienced through the dynamic processes of social interaction, against a background of broader social changes.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST LIFE COURSE STUDIES

Symbolic interactionists have carved the life course into the variety of life stages for research purposes. Clair, Karp, and Yoels (1993), for instance, highlight five contemporary age categories: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, and old age. Other schemas might add infancy, preadolescence, maturity, or "old-old" to the mix. The possibilities are nearly unlimited. Fascinating and informative accounts of life stage experience have been formulated around such concepts as "adolescent subcultures" (Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1985), adult occupational roles (Zurcher 1983), and a "community of grandmothers" (Hochschild 1973).

There are important interactionist studies of the early stages of the life course, for example, which show how socially shaped and actively assembled—not developmentally determined—these stages and their identities are in practice (see, e.g., Cahill 1986; Corsaro 1997; Eder 1995; Fine 1987; Fine and Sandstrom 1988; Thorne 1993). Taken together, these studies indicate that what we commonly refer to as "childhood" and "adolescence" are not experientially fixed in their social and personal consequences but derive from the context-sensitive, temporal work that enters into their production. Studies illustrate how time-framed identities such as "teenager" are realized in and through the localized, symbolically defining actions of participants, all of which are subject to the influences of gender, class, race, and culture, among other mediations of everyday life.

Thorne's (1993) study of gender identity construction among girls and boys in elementary school is exemplary. Thorne draws on daily observations in the classroom, the lunchroom, the playground, and the children's neighborhoods to show how malleable the meaning of gender is at this stage of life. Children aren't simply becoming young boys and young girls, as if these were stages of life that one automatically passes into and through in growing up. Nor are gender distinctions constant in their impact on children's everyday lives. Rather, according to Thorne, being a boy or a girl at school is the result of extensive "border work," talk and activity which, in their continuous application in the school context, mark differences that create gender lines.
What it means to be a boy or a girl on the playground, for example, is established through activities that highlight difference. Familiar childhood designations of identity such as having “cooties,” “sissy,” and being a “big boy” or a “big girl” are used by the children to categorize who they are, along gender lines and in relation to developmental time. This produces borders that separate the children into younger and older boys and girls. These identities have strong interactional consequences. They contribute to the formulation of distinct worlds and territories of boyhood and girlhood whose social boundaries themselves signal gender identity. To be found sitting or playing in a “girl’s” area of the school grounds, for example, can momentarily put a boy’s gender identity at grave risk.

Oddly enough, Thorne points out, this border work is not uniformly important or salient in all places where the children live their lives, especially outside the context of the school. In the home, for example, the borders are often relaxed; household spaces can find boys and girls—brothers and sisters, friends of different genders—actively at play as if gender hardly mattered in designating who and what they are. The contrast highlights the active meaning-making that socially constructs boyhood and girlhood in certain places and disassembles them in others.

There are similarly important interactionist studies of later phases of the life course (e.g., Becker and Geer 1958; Becker et al. 1961; Haas and Shaffir 1991; Handel 2000; Karp 1988; Lopata 1973a, 1973b; Matthews 1979, 1986; Unruh 1983). Even the very end stages of life, where illness, death, and dying gain prominence, have been examined for the ways social interaction articulates and assembles identity into distinct worlds of experience or, as the case might be, blurs the ostensible boundary between being younger and able-bodied and being old, sick, and dependent (see Charmaz 1980; Glaser and Strauss 1965, 1968; Lofland 1978; Marshall 1980).

Charmaz’s (1991) exploration of chronic illness in later life is exemplary in documenting the experiential alternations of “good days” and “bad days.” Just as Thorne shows how boys and girls in school actively assemble their identities as children with distinct genders, Charmaz draws from her extended interviews with people who have serious chronic illnesses (such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, lupus, multiple sclerosis, and arthritis) to describe the everyday designations of personal change and competence in adult life.

From her interviews, Charmaz learns that chronicity implicates the self in a way that acute illness does not. The data suggest that this is a difference in kind, not degree. Assuming that one recovers from an acute illness, the illness runs its course fairly quickly and those affected return to their lives, taking up where they left off. In contrast, those suffering from serious chronic illness live in relation to their illnesses for long periods of time. This, of course, profoundly shapes the very meaning of these lives. The result is a process of alternating life reconstruction that shifts in relation to the daily pains and inconveniences posed by the illness.
Charmaz orients to her research subjects as actively responding to the effects of their illness, not as long-term passive sufferers. This reveals the different ways that these individuals construct their illnesses. Their sense of the past and the future is affected by their place in the trajectory of the illness as well as by the problems of daily living posed by specific symptoms. The same individual may at times construct his or her illness as merely intrusive to his or her life and, at other times, construct his or her life as completely immersed in the illness. On “bad days,” one can become engrossed in one’s illness, with the resulting pathological implications for one’s identity. At such times, life may be viewed as “completely over.” On “good days,” in contrast, illness can may experienced as merely bothersome; the individual can engage the normal rhythms of daily living, with the prospect of a full future ahead. The result is that subjects not only actively construct the meaning of chronic illness but do so in relation to their illnesses’ shifting symptomatology. These aren’t experiential “dopes,” adjusting wholesale to their illness. Rather, they take account of the changing experiential contours of chronic illness in discerning the meaning of their lives, and who and what they are as sufferers.

Chronicity accordingly implicates the self and the life course. As Charmaz explains, “Each way of experiencing and defining illness has different implications for self and for meanings of time” (1991.ix). Repeatedly, her respondents couple their statements about the daily travails of their illness with thoughts about who and what they have become, how their lives have changed, and what this means to them in the immediate scheme of things. Serious chronic illness and its daily vicissitudes are not just another series of passing events of daily living, as successful recovery from surgery or a bout of the flu might be. Instead, long-term afflictions set off complex and continuing changes in the sense of who one is as a person through time. Chronic illnesses are more than sicknesses; their fluctuations serve to continually redesign the lives and the identities of those involved.

EXPANDING THE FOCUS

Although symbolic interactionists have assiduously attended to the meaning of experience at different locations in the life course, their focus has typically centered on more-or-less discrete stages or phases of life along an age continuum. “The life course” has been a handy shorthand for the totality of assembled stages, but the life course itself, as an interpretive entity or social form, has seldom been a topic of interest in its own right. Although some authors, like Clair, Karp, and Yoels (1993), have addressed the myriad facets of the social psychology of experience through time, their approach employs “the life course” as a second order analytic construct (Schutz 1970), using it to understand different classes of experience from early to later life.
Recently, as symbolic interactionist insights have blended with other interactionist approaches, the life course has been brought into a new kind of focus. In their distinctive ways, ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984; Pollner 1987), social phenomenology (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Schutz 1967, 1970), and varieties of social constructionism (K. Gergen 1980, 1985; Gergen and Davis 1985; Gergen 1994; Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2000a; Holstein and Gubrium 1994, 2000a, 2000b; Miller 1997; Potter 1996) have given analytic depth, texture, and nuance to symbolic interactionist insights, while also suggesting new directions for analysis that emphasize how people assemble, give form to, and use images of the entire life course to make sense of their lives and experiences not only through, but at various moments of, time.

Expanding symbolic interactionist themes, constructionist and ethnomethodological sensibilities especially have sparked an interest in the life course as members' practical concern in the course of experience through time—a way of indigenously describing or theorizing whole lives as well as discrete stages (Holstein and Gubrium 2000a). From this stance, analysts are concerned with more than what is subjectively experienced; they are equally interested in how the life course is interpretively constructed and used by persons to make sense of experience (Gubrium and Holstein 1997).

With this emphasis, interaction does not merely convey meaning but simultaneously discursively produces meaningful realities, virtually formulating the social world under consideration. Language-use is accent as much as meaning-making. The orderly and recognizable features of social circumstances are viewed as interactionally constructed. Descriptions are not mere representations of, or disembodied commentaries on, ostensibly real states of affairs. Rather, they are constructive actions, applications of categories and assignments of meaning that are consequential within specific situations and interactional contexts. In this respect, the life course may be viewed as a "reality project" that organizes experience over time.

Instead of viewing life stages and developmental sequences as objective features of life change or as subjectively experienced facets of social life over time, phases and stages are figured as categories that people employ to give temporal order to their lives. This expanded approach focuses on the ways in which categories and their associated vocabularies are deployed to make sense of life events through time. It treats the life course and its related vocabulary as narrative resources—as a configuration of ways of interpreting, representing, and structuring experience.

Interpretive practice—which we take to be the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood, and conveyed in everyday life—is at the heart of life course construction; it involves both the hows and whats of the production of everyday reality (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2000a; Holstein and Gubrium 1994, 2000b). To study interpretive practice means to investigate how social realities such as life courses are constructed, as
well as to ask questions regarding what those realities are like, what they are composed from, and what social factors condition their production.

People engage in interpretive practice in all areas of daily life; everyone is involved in constructing aspects of the life course from time to time. Whether it’s medical or psychiatric professionals determining the onset of senile dementia or ordinary parents deciding if their children are old enough to view a particular movie, individuals constantly conjure up images of progress through time as guidelines for understanding or as standards of comparison. Is a daughter at the appropriate stage of development to start dating? Is a son “mature” enough to be allowed to go on overnight trips without adult supervision? Has the next door neighbor, who has just purchased an enormous new sports utility vehicle, lost his mind, or is he experiencing a mid-life crisis? Does Grandpa need professional attention, or is he just getting a bit forgetful, like most older people? These questions and their answers discursively apply the vocabulary of the life course to figure immediate issues of everyday living.

As inventive as these uses might be, however, life course constructions are not built from the ground up with each application. As Karl Marx (1885 [1963]) taught us, people make their own histories, but they don’t simply do it as they please. The social worlds that we construct are generally familiar in the sense that they are assembled in terms of commonsense categories and ideas. Although they are themselves socially constructed, the categories and ideas take on lives of their own as resources for interpreting matters at hand and constructing situated meaning. Both natural and social objects are interpretively constituted and updated through our constantly evolving stocks of knowledge (Schutz 1967, 1970), which are the interpretive frameworks we use for making sense of experience.

Although interpretive practice employs socially shared resources and is sensitive to larger social, cultural, and historical contexts, these are applied in highly localized, “artful” ways (Garfinkel 1967). What we use to characterize our worlds and experience reflects the interpretive orientations, goals, and contingencies at hand, as they are employed to meet the practical demands of the situation. Life change, for example, is interpreted with reference to circumstantially available and acceptable images. We may have knowledge of many ways of conveying and construing life change, but situations inform us of how to select from, and apply, what we know. Applicable stocks of knowledge—in other words, not everything we know—afford us the resources we use to make sense of our lives.

Consequently, the life course as an object of experience may have as many practical realities as there are applicable vocabularies, categories, and circumstances for giving it shape and substance. In everyday life, our sense of life change and the life course is situationally and organizationally embedded, grounded in the diverse descriptive domains in which change and the life course are addressed (Gubrium and Holstein 1990). This is not to say that cir-
cumstance dictates interpretation. Instead, social contexts provide distinctive discourses and structures of normative accountability to which members orient as they produce locally adequate accounts and descriptions. We take it that individuals draw from these resources but never completely yield authorship for the realities they construct.

BIOGRAPHICAL WORK

Biographical work is the form of interpretive practice that produces pattern in the progression of individual experience through time (Gubrium and Holstein 1995a). The metaphor of work is important, since it stresses that representations of the life course are purposefully and conscientiously assembled, sustained, and transformed. Biographical work is distinctive in that it renders interpretations of lives and experience in relation to the passage of time. Yet like other forms of interpretive practice—such as social problems work (Holstein and Miller 1993) and identity work (e.g., Snow and Anderson 1987; Gubrium and Holstein 2001)—biographical work constructs lives that both are interpretively fluid and dynamic and reflect the circumstantial exigencies of their production.

Biographical Fluidity

As the life course derives its shape and trajectory from the assignment of patterned progression to biographical particulars, pattern does not inhere in individual experience. It doesn’t have a natural or normative chronological “flow.” Rather, it is interpretively accomplished in light of the interpretive and practical tasks at hand. Past, present, and future may all be incorporated into images of lives-in-progress that are fashioned to locate and understand the individuals and circumstances under consideration.

Trajectory, flow, cycling, development, progress, stagnation, regression, or any other characterizations of movement or progression through time are interpretively and contingently specified by way of biographical work. Decisions in human service settings, for instance, constantly reference experiential and developmental trajectories as the basis for assessment and intervention. In the case of emotionally disturbed children in a residential treatment facility (Gubrium and Holstein 1995d), for example, staff members construct circumstantially relevant “histories” or “biographies” of the children as a way of understanding the children’s current emotional states within the context of their lives as a whole.

But life history is not consistent; the biographical work that constructs an individual’s life course may differentially highlight or omit experiential particulars in constituting the biography at hand. Features of the lives under consideration can be linked together in a myriad ways and read against numerous interpretive horizons. A life history might be constructed in a different way from
one biographical or autobiographical occasion (Zussman 1996) to another, providing alternate bases for meaningfully addressing the relation between what a person was like, how he or she is currently behaving, and what this might mean for the future. Addressing the present in terms of both the occasioned past and the occasioned future, biographical work renders *histories-in-use* that are employed to interpret lives-in-progress, justifying decisions made about those lives.

Biographical work has practical consequences, which are themselves interpretively influential. For example, an emotionally disturbed child's records may be presented as a history of incorrigibility to explain to the child's parents why a treatment program has failed to change the child for the better. The same history of troubles, framed and highlighted differently, might also be offered as an account for why the child should be admitted to a new and different treatment program. In the former instance, the accent is on the past; the latter account projects to the future. Biographical work produces different horizons of meanings, expectations, and possibilities that constitute the life in question differently in light of immediate practical demands.

As a form of interpretive practice, biographical work *reflexively* produces and draws on particular dimensions or domains of experience, as well as discrete biographical particulars, to render the patterned progression of lives. As in a gestalt design, the parts of a potential figure must be assimilated to a schematic whole to be recognized as constituent components of the figure in question. Similarly, in biographical work, biographical particulars from individual lives can be assembled into coherent biographies or life courses, but the end product is not the necessary or inevitable assemblage of its constituent parts. Childhood conflicts with authority figures and intransigence in the face of institutional demands, for example, can be assembled into a history of incorrigibility that supports a decision that a child is, in fact, "delinquent" and in need of intervention by the juvenile justice system. However, the "same" biographical particulars—the conflicts and intransigencies—are transformed into a different figure, as it were, if they are assimilated to a diagnosis of "attention deficit disorder" or "hyperkinesis" (see Emerson 1969). What are taken as moral transgressions in the former scenario can be recast as medical or organic "symptoms" in the latter. In a sense, the "diagnosis" specifies what the symptoms will be at the same time that the "symptoms" inform the diagnosis. The parts determine the whole, which, in turn specifies the meaning, importance, and role of the parts.

Biographical work thus reflexively specifies both the important details of lived experience through time and what those details amount to. Biographical particulars are selected and made meaningful as they are incorporated into coherent life courses. The interpretive linkages (Gubrium 1993) between part and whole assemble the lives and biographies that are produced in the process. It is these linkages, and the interpretive work done to specify and structure connections between life events, that provide the coherence of the life course (Gubrium and Holstein 1998, Linde 1993).
Contingencies of Biographical Work

As a product of biographical work, the life course is interpretively malleable (Gubrium and Holstein 1995c). Malleability, however, is not simply the upshot of artful and inventive interpretation. It is equally tied to interpretive circumstances and their contingencies, which are themselves manifold and sometimes difficult to anticipate. Situational, organizational, institutional, historical, and cultural environments all shape biographical work so that individuals are never the sole authors of their biographies (see, e.g., Vinitzky-Seroussi 1998).

One notable contingency is the availability of particular conceptualizations of the shape or trajectory of a life course. The ways that lives may be recognizably and accountably represented are limited, for example, by cultural and historical understandings, organizational schemas, and professional doctrines. Contemporary American culture, for instance, is thoroughly infused with stage-like, developmental images of lives through time. Although there is wide variability in what stages compose the life course, or how lives progress through stages, the language and imagery of life stages is ubiquitous and familiar. Life course constructions assembled in this vernacular are readily understood, even if their ultimate descriptive legitimacy might be contested.

To speak of the progression of lives over time in alternate terms virtually invites confusion, if not disbelief. In the American cultural context, to attempt to characterize a life without pattern or development, or to depict a life that cycles outside the parameters of birth and death—as may be common in other times, places, or cultures (see Gubrium and Holstein 2000b; Holstein and Gubrium 2000a)—will incite resistance if not rejection. Such depictions are culturally "out of place;" such life courses are not accountable to our prevailing cultural understandings.

But culture and its discourses are never all-encompassing or determinant in practice. Interpretive contingencies are always encountered locally, even if they are proximate manifestations of broader interpretive conditions (Geertz 1983; Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Indeed, one way to conceive of life course construction is in terms of the situated discourses that specify locally accountable biographies (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Borrowing from Durkheim (1961), we can think of locally delimited images of the life course as situated collective representations that are diversely and artfully articulated with, and attached to, lived experience to produce circumstantially comprehensible versions of lives through time.

From this perspective, culture is not a set of prescriptions or rules for interpretation and action; rather, it is a constellation of more or less regularized, localized ways of understanding and representing things and actions, of assigning meaning to lives. It provides familiar standards of accountability to which cultural members orient as they engage in biographical work. Some of these amount to highly formalized, official vocabularies for depicting experience. For
example, we find psychiatric and psychological treatment programs, therapy facilities, and support groups that offer specific professionally developed resources for designating the patterned progression of experience.

These may differ vastly from the resources and orientations that characterize less formal settings that might also be concerned with life change, but in less focused ways. Household gatherings, for instance, often encourage family members to express interest and concern for one another's everyday experience, well-being, and development in locally particular terms. Or consider how the occasion of a high school reunion might distinctively shape—and reshape—the construction of lives, both past and in-progress (Vinitzky-Seroussi 1998). The contingencies of biographical work need not be professional or institutional to be strikingly consequential.

Nevertheless, the local salience of resources for, and constraints on, biographical work are always somewhat indeterminate; those engaged in acts of interpretation must elaborate locally serviceable discourses in relation to the circumstances at hand. Life course imagery does not simply stand as a reproducible collection of interpretive building blocks, to be selected for application based on some standard of experiential correspondence or appropriateness. What we might now appropriately call "local culture" is not so much a repository of standard meanings as it is a dynamic, yet delimited, assemblage of interpretive possibilities.

Above all, local culture is not a monolithic set of injunctions or absolute directives for biographical work (see Abu–Lughod 1991). Like Foucault's (1975, 1979) notion of the institutional gaze, local culture may incite particular interpretations and supply the vocabulary for their articulation, but, as a matter of practice, it neither dictates nor determines how biographical work proceeds. Local culture is always a resource for local use; it is not automatically invoked. The ways that culture is used—the fashion in which cultural categories are applied—is always variable and contingent. Although distinct models of the life course may be situationally available for representing experience through time, the visible patterned progression of lives that typically emerge will be shaped by concern for what, under the circumstances, is arguably appropriate or otherwise accountable.

THE DEPRIVATIZATION OF THE LIFE COURSE

Configurations of interpretive resources, orientations, and concerns may coalesce in and around any enduring group, setting, or institution, from the most formally organized and restrictive, such as prisons or the army, to less encompassing organizational settings like therapy agencies, businesses, and class reunions, to the most casual social arrangements, like friendship groups. Today especially, institutional environments of all sorts can provide highly significant
parameters for life course constructions. As important as social situations are in mediating interpretive practice, we must be careful not to focus too narrowly on strictly situational influences. The contemporary social landscape is widely and diversely populated by groups and organizations that are more or less explicitly involved in the production of life courses. This panorama of going concerns provides a highly variegated and discernible context for interpreting experience through time.

We borrow the term going concerns from Hughes (1984) as a way of characterizing relatively stable, routinized, ongoing patterns of action and interaction. This is another way of referring to social institutions but underscores the sense in which institutions are dynamic and social in their structuring activities. Hughes noted that going concerns could be as massive and formally structured as government bureaucracies or as modest and loosely organized as a group of friends who get together for coffee breaks at work. Large or small, formal or informal, each represents an ongoing commitment to a particular way of understanding and representing experience in relation to the immediate scheme of things. Of course, Hughes was careful not to reify going concerns; he didn't view them as static social entities. Rather, he oriented to them as patterns of ongoing activity; there is as much "going" in social institutions as there is "concerns."

Today, institutions of all kinds populate our lives. Professionalization and bureaucratization are the virtual hallmarks of contemporary society. Our lives are organized more and more in relation to specialized disciplinary practices (Ahrne 1990; Drucker 1993; Foucault 1979; Giddens 1992; Presthus 1978). Life is more intertwined with both formal and informal organizations than ever before. From the myriad formal organizations in which we work, study, pray, play, recover, and make life-changing decisions, to the countless informal associations and networks in which we participate, to our affiliations with cultural, ethnic, racial, and gendered groupings, we are continually engaged in a panoply of going concerns that, in their various ways, specify senses of our lives through time.

Life course constructions are increasingly products of institutional engagement (Gubrium and Holstein 2000b). Many of these going concerns are explicitly in the business of structuring or reconfiguring personal lives and their histories. All varieties of human service agencies, for example, construct and reconstitute personal biographies to ameliorate client troubles. Self-help organizations seem to be everywhere; self-help literature crowds the book spindles of most supermarkets and shelves of every bookstore. "Advice" in the public media, radio and TV talk shows, and Internet chat rooms constantly prompts us to formulate (or reformulate) who and what we are, are, and will be. The lives and histories that are produced are thus deprivatized—constructed and interpreted under the auspices of decidedly public going concerns (see Gubrium and Holstein 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1996d, 1997, 2000b, 2001; Holstein and Gubrium 2000a, 2000b).
Where experience in relation to the passage of time is concerned, institutions and organizations of all types and sizes touch virtually every aspect of our lives, from the reading readiness of children and the emotional control of adolescents, to the mid-life crises of adults and the instability of marriages, to the aging and decline of parents and grandparents. The most personal of matters are considered in organized public circumstances. Organizations and their agents literally make it their business to interpret the ebb and flow of our innermost thoughts and feelings so that they can address and ameliorate the troubles that beset clients. Because the troubled, or those responsible for them, often can’t fully outline and identify the nature of their troubles, these organizations and their agents are given license to define or reframe the lives presented to them. Organizations are becoming more and more prevalent sources of meaning for interpreting experience through time, giving public voice to the existence of what is commonly taken to be the most private matters. This is what we mean by saying that the life course is increasingly deprivatized; the term refers to the increasing tendency to formulate and articulate the life course in organized public settings, in light of decidedly practical concerns.

Deprivatization also signals the proliferation of institutionalized formulas for producing biographies (see Loseke 2001). These formulas are very general and loosely structured, to be sure, but they do reflect local predilections for how the life course might be depicted or narrated. An example from a widely recognized going concern illustrates this point. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is certainly the best known of the myriad recovery programs that seek to help those troubled by drinking. The organization is devoted to giving tortured lives new direction, new function. AA virtually prescribes how the recovering alcoholic should be viewed and represented, at least within the confines of the AA program. It is a cultural system whose vocabulary of experience is part of a widely recognized discourse for depicting troubled identities (see Gubrium and Holstein 2000b, 2001; Holstein and Gubrium 2000b; Pollner and Stein 2001). AA offers a highly structured interpretive scheme in which alcoholism and other substance abuses are viewed as claiming a power over the afflicted, who, in turn, must resist by progressing through stages of recovery (see Denzin 1987b).

There’s no doubt that in the context of AA, the self becomes alcoholic. Denzin (1987a) portrays the process as a series of dramatic realizations, with discernible acts and scenes. The drama unfolds around stories of “before” one has surrendered to the fact that he or she is alcoholic, and “after” one has given oneself over to AA. The turning point in the life of an alcoholic, according to AA, is the experience of “hitting bottom.” It is only after alcoholics “hit bottom” that they typically struggle to take AA’s so-called first step. Only then can they move along a new course of living.

Although the themes and the course of progress are formulaic, there is considerable narrative variation in individual applications of the AA discourse of the alcoholic. AA members diversely construct and reconstruct their lives and
how they hit "bottom," taking into account biographical particulars, even while their lives invariably display a recognizable overall trajectory. Consider the way one AA member, a thirty-seven-year-old graduate student, uses the metaphor of an elevator ride to describe what it means to hit bottom. The imagery may be his own, but the trajectory is definitely AA's:

[My life] is like an elevator that keeps going down to lower levels and lower floors until it hits bottom. I have stopped drinking, surrendered, come to AA and worked the Steps, but each time before it was at a level that still allowed me to drop lower. I started at too high a level. It took me a long time to hit the lowest level. I have finally hit what I hope is the bottom floor for me. But I don't know. I thought this before, too. There's always a new bottom for me to hit. Last time it was a DUI ["driving under the influence" of alcohol]. But I've had those before too. It has taken me a long time, a long time, to learn this program. I just pray that I have it today. (Denzin 1987a: 171)

When an upward trajectory is described, we again see the distinctive AA life course being constructed. The following testimony shows how the path to recovery advances through stages—AA style. Here, a recovering alcoholic begins his story from the point where he had hit bottom, having been hospitalized for intoxication for the eighth time in six months. Although he also makes use of distinctive biographical particulars such as his hospitalization and wasted abilities, he assembles them to accord with the AA scheme of things:

I lay there on that hospital bed and went back over and reviewed my life. I thought of what liquor had done to me, the opportunities that I had discarded, the abilities that had been given me and how I had wasted them. . . . I was willing to admit to myself that I had hit bottom, that I had gotten hold of something that I didn't know how to handle by myself. So, after reviewing these things and realizing what liquor had cost me, I went to this Higher Power which to me, was God, without any reservation, and admitted that I was completely powerless over alcohol, and that I was willing to do anything in the world to get rid of the problem. In fact, I admitted that from now on I was willing to let God take over, instead of me. Each day I would try to find out what His will was, and try to follow that, rather than trying to get Him to always agree that the things I thought of myself were the things best for me. (Alcoholics Anonymous 1976: 186–187)

Despite individual differences, life is characterized by plunges to the depths of depravity, giving one's self over to God or a higher power, and beginning the long trek to sobriety, "one day at a time."

Biographical work here produces narrative patterning characteristic of the life course—according-to-AA, but not necessarily of the lives of other alcoholics. The experience of the alcoholic is quite differently constructed under the auspices of a Secular Sobriety Group (SSG), for example, where individuals assemble lives
through time from a completely different set of interpretive resources and in relation to quite different organizational orientations (see Christopher 1988). Most notably, the SSG interpretation of lives, troubles, and solutions has a less spiritual tone than AA accounts typically do. Whereas AA members live are cast in terms of moral descent and redemption, the experience of SSG members is articulated without such dramatic turning points. These lives are framed as mundane encounters with "reality," not the dramatic surrender to both alcoholism and a higher power that distinguishes the course of AA members' lives. In either case, the life courses constructed belong as much to their narrative auspices as to those whose experiences they represent through time.

THE POSTMODERN LIFE COURSE

Deprivatization turns what have conventionally been considered private lives into decidedly public concerns. The meaning of experience through time is not intrinsically found in personal, firsthand encounters with life events. Instead, it emerges out of social interpretations of what is taken to be personal (see Mills 1959). Consequently the life course is not merely an identifiable path that an individual follows; it is a pattern that is superimposed on experience to make a coherent life sequence apparent. In deconstructing depictions of the life course into the diverse social practices, circumstances, and discourses through which they are constructed, it becomes apparent just how public the temporal production of our private lives actually can be.

This is a postmodern life course, one increasingly configured and given meaning in the context of socially organized circumstances and institutions. In some sense, these organizations and institutions create the very lives, biographies, and life courses they need to do their work. Some commentators, like Lasch (1979, 1985), decry this tendency, warning us about the extent to which public institutions have negatively invaded the private side of contemporary life. This raises the more general issue of the pervasive bureaucratization of experience, which, of course, resonates with Weber's (1958, 1968) concern for rationalization. In his view, institutions seem to think and speak for their participants, as Douglas (1986) puts it, shaping the very worlds that the participants occupy. Individuals cease to think and act as their own agents as they defer to organizational conventions. In Weber's terms, life becomes "disenchanted," leaving no space for spontaneous thought and action.

The interactionist view of the life course is not as morally pessimistic, allowing us to consider the construction of lives as being continually open to new formulations, resisting determinacy. If we temper Weber's "totalized" characterization of how organizations shape experience, we can offer a less pessimistic view of the deprivatization of the life course. When different organizations and professionals assess the features and events of a particular life, their separate dis-
courses and diverse interpretive resources cast that life in ways that are distinctive to their auspices. The life course as a social form can then be written in many ways, for example, "the-life-course-according-to-this-professional," "the-life-course-from-that-organizational-standpoint," or "the-life-course-on-this particular-biographical-occasion." Each hyphenated representation is authentic to the extent that it conscientiously reflects a recognizable course of experience. At the same time, each life can be variously yet authentically reconstructed as it passes through other interpretive domains.

Although this relativizes the life course, its "hyphenations" are nonetheless simultaneous evidence that personal experience is not totally subject to the hegemony of particular rationalizations. Hyphenated life courses are organizationally embedded and thus are never conclusively structured. Organizational preferences are neither monolithic nor totalizing. Instead, in a postmodern environment, life courses are locally enacted, relying on delimited interpretive cultures that are diversely and artfully articulated with, and attached to, individuals' experiences.

The moral imperatives can be as refreshing as they are formulaic. Going concerns may have familiar, conventional ways of representing experience through time, but conventions do not prevail in all circumstances. It is always some voice that engages organizational discourse; this is not Weber's universalized iron cage. If we deconstruct the voicings of life change, we detect multiple structures and forms of inventiveness. We reveal how interpretation responds to the multiple settings, organizations, and orientations in which persons participate in the course of everyday life. This detotalizes rationalization. Whereas lives described in a particular organization or setting may take on the general orientation to experience that is locally promoted, other descriptions reflect the variety of different settings, organizations, and circumstances that constitute contemporary experience.

Because interpretation will always be of something, we must remember that what is selected for application to experience is always problematic in practice. What is made of it is always locally accountable. Organizational auspices may guide the selection and definitional process, but individual inventiveness and serendipity also play their roles. The life course construction process repeatedly and reflexively turns back on itself, as substance, structure, circumstance, and practical contingencies blend in interpretive practice. If persons engaged in biographical work and life course constructions are provided with institutionally formulated scripts, they still must enact them. Life course constructions remain open to the multiple and competing sources of input found in a postmodern world.

REFERENCES


