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Concept forum

'Self-actualisation' and the ageing process from an inter-generational lifecourse perspective

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ABSTRACT
Lifecourse perspectives on ageing need to consider more seriously the meaning of 'self-actualisation', as it is currently used by the burgeoning industries that service the needs of those in the middle years. The prevalent meaning derives largely from an existentialist ontology, which is radically individualistic and cannot adequately account for the inter-connectedness of generations; that is, the need for one generation to provide for the needs of the next. Nor can an existentialist ontology adequately prepare mid-lifers for their older age and the life crises that accompany later life. This paper uses Giddens's notion of 'life trajectory', a very influential theory of the self in high modernity, to highlight this problem. The existentialist ontology that informs Giddens's notion reflects those values of youth that the new social movements have brought to the political agenda as 'life-politics'. These values may well be challenged as the youth of the 1960s reach middle age and begin to confront their mortality. The paper argues that Erikson's notion of 'generativity' might provide a more useful ontology for lifecourse politics, and is more attuned to an inter-generational perspective.

KEY WORDS – ageing, third age, inter-generational, generativity, self-actualisation, lifecourse.

Introduction

The discovery of the third age by the health, education and leisure industries is giving substance to Peter Laslett's (1989) idea that mid-life might be conceptualised as a period of self-fulfilment. With less need to work full time, mid-lifers have time on their hands that these industries aim to fill. The activities on offer may well enhance a sense of self-actualisation in mid-lifers

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that was unattainable as long as work requirements dictated their everyday life. Self-actualisation, as interpreted by these industries, appears to be an individual endeavour, of benefit primarily to the individuals concerned. The offered activities tend to be personal projects, activities chosen for their interest on an individual basis (Jansen and Wildemeersch 1998).

This paper considers the possibility of meanings in the notion of 'self-actualisation' which might benefit the wider community. It raises the question of whether self-actualisation projects are likely from the middle to the late years to shift from a 'self-ish' to a 'self-with the community' orientation.[1] Organising personal growth projects around individual self interest extends the meaning of self-actualisation held by young people into mid-life. Mid-lifers, however, may begin to shift away from the values and goals of their youth as they confront the realities of late life. Radical life changes, such as retirement and widowhood, may cause them to reassess their goals and moral framework, in order to strengthen and deepen their relationships with others and the next generation. Projects of self-actualisation may need to take a more communitarian turn to accommodate this shift.

Communitarianism places more emphasis on shared 'core values' than on individual freedom and personal growth. The 'baby boomer' cohort, those born in the two decades following the Second World War, are now facing their fifties and are renowned for their desire for liberty rather than community. This generation was influenced in their impressionable youth by the liberation agendas of the new social movements of the 1960s. While these movements provided the western world with a rich political vocabulary – as used by the civil rights movement, feminism and gay liberation, for example – the popular perception is that this generation lives in a moral vacuum. It is commonly referred to in the English-language popular press, particularly in north America, as 'the ME generation', a self-absorbed cohort lacking any clear moral framework (Mackay 1997: 64). Politics today is seen by many as reflecting this moral void.

In the last decade, a new, socially-conservative communitarianism has arisen in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia which explicitly aims to fill the moral void left by these movements. The main exponent of this movement is Amitae Etzioni (1996: xvii), who argues that the liberation movements of the 1960s promoted 'excessive liberty', and that there is now an urgent need to inject 'core community values' back into politics.

The moral void in politics is also alluded to by the influential sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1991). He claims that while the new social movements opened up a 'life politics' that placed projects derived from the goal

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of self-actualisation on the political agenda, these projects deliberately eschewed external moral referents. He believes, however, that a 're-moralising' of politics will inevitably take place as institutions challenged by the demand for greater personal liberation are refigured (1991: 224). The question is, can a life politics arising from projects of self-actualisation also address the concerns of those arguing for a greater sense of community?

The discourses of self-actualisation and the new communitarianism would seem at first glance to be incommensurate. The discourses of self-actualisation used by the personal liberation movements of the 1960s challenged the institutionalisation of any substantial moral content that might provide the basis for a set of shared, community values. They are deliberately 'non-judgmental' with respect to any individual's personal belief system.

In this paper I argue that there is room within the concept of self-actualisation for significant moral content that can be shared in a socially inclusive way – but that this will require a fundamental re-assessment of the meaning of self-actualisation. Self-actualisation is not achieved by isolated, self-absorbed individuals. It has largely been considered an individual project, because so many of those advocating certain pathways towards self-actualisation have been influenced by the radically individualistic ontology of existentialism. This ontology, or way of thinking about the self, has had great difficulty accommodating the ageing process because it idealises the values of youth as the high point of human development. 'Authenticity' is the sole moral claim that can be made by this self – a claim that is not sufficient *in itself* to nurture and sustain this same self throughout other phases of life. I will argue in this paper that this ontology can be re-thought from within a lifecourse perspective, in a way that links the needs of the authentic self to all other life stages, as well as to succeeding generations. The project of self-actualisation necessarily involves *all* of life's stages, including that of 'generativity', which requires a shift away from the values of youth to meet the needs of the next generation.

The intention of the paper is, then, to draw out the limitations of the ontology of existentialism that exercised such great intellectual influence on the politics of the new social movements. The sociological features of this ontology were illuminated by Giddens (1991) in his theory of the self in late modernity. His central notion of the 'trajectory of the self' will be compared with Erik Erikson's (1978; 1984) notion of 'generativity' – a whole of life, inter-generational perspective which, I think, provides substantial moral content for a political vocabulary which can be more easily linked to a politics of community while retaining the goal of self-actualisation.

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The project of the self as a 'life trajectory' and in 'life politics'

Giddens's (1991: 75) concept of self is existentialist in its core assumptions: it has no essence. 'We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves', and in this we have no option. The self of high modernity that Giddens describes has been lifted out of the confines of tradition and confronts a diverse array of life choices. Meaning is made and self-identity formed as individuals negotiate these decisions. This is a process of self-actualisation in that individuals are actively or self-consciously involved in the process of self-creation, which involves 'letting go' past emotional constraints on action – those defences that inhibit personal development. Actively to create the self, the individual must look to the future and take calculated risks, overcoming the fear of insecurity by balancing these risks against new opportunities (1991: 78).

The 'moral thread' for this process of self-actualisation, as for the existentialist hero, is authenticity, based on 'being true to oneself' (Giddens 1991: 78). The idea of the 'true self' can provide a critical standpoint in the sense given by R. D. Laing (1960). Individuals may need to question the accepted standards of society in order to live an authentic life, but the moral referent for these decisions cannot be derived from universal moral criteria external to the individual; rather, individual decisions are made entirely by using internal referents – what will make the individual feel a greater sense of self-worth (Giddens 1991: 79).

This is a liberating way of thinking about the development of the self because it endows individuals with the potential to create their own meaning through their own decision-making efforts and their own projects – although their options are pre-structured by their social position and 'life chances'. Individuals can build and re-build a coherent and rewarding sense of identity through the exercise of consciousness and through the exercise of personal responsibility – taking charge of their own life. Giddens (1991: 77) highlights this liberating potential by describing the self of late modernity as evolving within a narrative structure that can be written and re-written by the individual. The narrative emerges as individuals engage in a 'dialogue with time'. This is a reflexive project, involving conscious deliberation and decision-making by the individual who reaches back into the past in order to plan the future. This selective re-writing of the past can have therapeutic benefits – as past events can be re-interpreted with the benefit of contemporary therapeutic discourses.

Giddens's ontology connects with his sociology and the idea of 'life politics' through the notion of 'institutional reflexivity', best explained in his later work, *Reflexive Modernization* (1997). In this book he describes reflexivity as a characteristic feature of the reproduction of modern social

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institutions, not just an attribute of individuals. Institutions become 'disembedded' from traditional contexts with globalisation and technological advances which overcome the constraints of time and space. Freed from the clutches of local traditions, they are now open to diverse universalising, expert discourses. They must engage with this expertise as they reproduce themselves. The very diversity of the discourses ensures that some healthy scepticism is maintained, and that claims to truth are left open and revisable through public argument. Individuals must actively engage with these arguments as they make their life choices. Trust is therefore also 'active': it is no longer grounded in mindless routine, or in what worked well in the past. Experts have to prove themselves through their technical competence – which is questionable and revisable (1997: 89). The notion of institutional reflexivity helps to explain how personal decisions become structured by social institutions which offer more options than institutions embedded in traditional contexts. It also helps to explain how personal matters become the object of public debate.

The picture that Giddens paints of 'high modernity' is one of increasing potential for individual freedom, so long as the reactionary forces of tradition can be held at bay. But in what sort of community do these liberated individuals live? Is it inclusive, concerned with the needs of all its members and of the next generation? In her essay, *The Existentialist Political Myth*, Iris Murdoch (1999) asked whether an ethics expressing collective concerns – such as that of social democracy – could be derived from an existentialist foundation. She argued (1999: 140) that it could not; that the ethics of social democracy and liberal individualism preached by Sartre could not be derived from his existentialism, since meaning cannot be conferred on an individual's action from outside that individual's own frame of reference. While Sartre and de Beauvoir argued that people *should* exercise responsibility for others through their freely adopted projects, they could not explain *why* they should. Sartre had to move outside existentialism to do this. According to Murdoch (1999: 138) he adopted Kantian ethics to fill the gap: 'I cannot choose something as good for myself unless I choose it as good for all'. Here, one's values appear as transcendent, a feature of human nature, rather than a socially constructed moral code.

Simone de Beauvoir also had difficulty with this dilemma. As Murdoch (1999: 139) remarked, the existentialist hero of her novel, *Le Sang des Autres*, is both infinitely free and also infinitely responsible – but why? – de Beauvoir wanted the freely acting individual to struggle for a kingdom of freedom for all, but the only virtue possessed by her hero is sincerity – the exercise of one's own freedom and a respect for and defence of that of others. Such a virtue is an attribute of the lonely self-justifying individual whose sense of

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responsibility for others and the motivation to act out of concern for others is inexplicable within existentialism itself.

Iris Murdoch (1999: 139–40) believed that this dilemma helped to explain why the politics of existentialism was sometimes likened to the 'politics of adolescence'. In its early manifestations, it was associated with the politics of resistance movements. The desire for freedom, to fight against bonds of oppression, fits perfectly both with the idea of an individual consciousness struggling for authenticity against the social order, and with the ethos of a resistance movement. The pure moment of resistance captures the spirit of the individual conscience striving to be free. There is a relationship, then, between the psychology of youth rebellion and politics as resistance. The existentialist hero is at his or her best when rebelling – breaking through social constraints – not when attempting to create a new social order. How, then, can this rebellious self provide us with a vocabulary to create community?

Giddens (1991: 214) suggested that it could, by arguing that the emancipatory politics of the new social movements orientated towards personal liberation had opened up a 'life politics' that put projects of self-actualisation onto the political agenda. What becomes politicised in life politics are those constraints on decisions affecting self-actualisation – those remnants from a time when nature and the body had clear limits and set well-defined boundaries, when some idea of a human essence was retained as the source of the self. Late modernity has seen, however, all boundaries challenged, even those set by nature and the body. More radical extensions to the individuation process are likely to flow as these boundaries are contested. One example is advances in technology such as *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF), which do more than affect personal projects, for they make possible forms of social organisation not previously imagined – for example, gay families. New social forms must then be instituted involving the 're-moralisation of social life', which inevitably will return moral issues to the political agenda (1991: 224).

According to Giddens, although life politics appears devoid of a moral framework, contesting the boundaries of the old social order will hasten the re-moralising of social life, and moral questions will reappear on the political agenda. But what guarantee do we have that any new moral framework will maintain the gains made by the personal liberation movements of the 1960s? What will prevent this re-moralising becoming reactionary rather than progressive? In his support of 'third way' politics, Giddens (1998: 81) makes much of the values espoused by local community groups that have been influenced by the personal liberation rhetoric of the new social movements – but these community groups now have little voice in the politics of community which is currently re-shaping the social order (Everingham 2001).

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The new social order draws on the moral framework of the new communitarianism to fill the gap in morality left by the personal liberation politics of the new social movements. The new communitarianism is reactive, not progressive, for its major exponent, Etzioni (1993; 1996), has argued that the 1960s liberation movements went too far on questions of individual rights. He nostalgically recalls 1950s American society as one in which 'divisiveness was low' and 'a sense of shared bonds, of community was relatively high' (1996: 62). He argued (1996: 101) that the appeal to a set of shared values must play a much greater role in politics than the appeal to reason; but where are these values to come from, and how will they ensure a fully inclusive society? One suspects that the values Etzioni favours are those of 1950s middle America, just those that were soundly criticised by the personal liberation movements for not being fully inclusive.

There is therefore a considerable gap between the life politics that derive from the project of self-actualisation described by Giddens and the reactionary politics of community that are dominant today. Life politics, as described by Giddens, is limited by the same dilemma that faced Sartre and de-Beauvoir. What is going to motivate individuals who are seeking personal liberation and are guided only by their sincerity to act out of concern for others?

I think that the dilemma arises because existentialism lacks a lifecourse, inter-generational perspective. The goal of self-actualisation seems unconnected to the developmental needs of other life phases and to the kind of community that might sustain what is, in fact, a developmental stage of youth. It may also be the case that self-actualisation takes on new meanings when applied to late life. I will explore this argument by examining more closely the basic temporal assumptions of existentialist ontology, as used by Giddens.

The temporality of Giddens's self

For Giddens, self-actualisation is a project for the entire lifecourse. The vantage point for this self is, however, the future. In modern societies, the future is 'open' and has infinite possibilities. Individuals manage this open future through strategic planning. They set themselves goals – which are connected to selected events in their past. The life trajectory therefore appears as a linear movement that connects the past with possible futures. The one guiding principle for this self is sincerity or authenticity, plus a healthy respect for the autonomy of others to do likewise. Live and let live, so to speak, or do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

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Picture this self for a moment: an isolated individual facing an open future, one with infinite possibilities that extend to an apparently endless future horizon. There are no age barriers placed on this self – it undergoes no transformation of a temporal nature as it ages and confronts the fact of its mortality. Facing death, according to Giddens (1991: 74), is best prepared for in the same way as other life decisions, by looking strategically towards the future. Place the options out before you: imagine you have a set time to live, decide how you want to spend this time, and where and when you want to live it.

The problem is that this being-for-itself is only for-itself so long as it *has* expectations for the future. Meaning is only given through the anticipation of what is to come, what the self is going to be. That's why de Beauvoir (1972) painted such a dark picture of the ageing process. Existentialism works best for the young seeking autonomy – who are looking forward to endless time. It is living in the *expectation* of such an open future that gives meaning to life's actions now because these actions have a *purpose* that can be realised some time in the future. But the future never comes – for the young at least! As the individual ages, however, the distance between the future and the present shrinks. For the existentialist, squeezing the future horizon into the here and now spells the end of self-growth. There is nothing for this self but decline. The existentialist self must, therefore, *inevitably* decline as mortality is confronted and the future horizon shrinks. What is going to give the actions of this isolated self meaning when there is no longer any prospect of realising future goals? How can the isolated self live meaningfully in the here-and-now?

Erikson's 'generativity': self-actualisation from an inter-generational perspective

Giddens's self is youthful and one who confronts the need to achieve autonomy. This is indeed a very important stage of life, but one strongly directed by a 'turning inwards', an inner search for authenticity. Erikson's scheme of personal growth, on the other hand, proposes a 'whole of life' approach that links this stage of self-actualisation to all other stages in the individual's life, and to the self-actualisation of future generations. The temporality of this scheme is spiral rather than linear, as personal growth or 'ego integrity', can only be realised through *reconciliation* with the choices made at all other life stages. The aim is not to *master* the future through strategic planning but to realise a sense of completeness or wholeness – to face one's mortality in a state of peace in the here-and-now.

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This state of peaceful harmony cannot be achieved without working through the residual tensions that are carried forward from other life stages – and that do not cease at adulthood. Erikson (1978; 1984) divided the life-course into eight psycho-sexual stages, each of which depicts a struggle between contrary human attributes and produces a crisis which, if the stronger and more productive attributes win out, enables certain human virtues to emerge. Erikson (1984: 247, note 3) argues that these virtues are essential for *any* human culture, since they provide the capacity for individuals to have faith in *any* system of belief. Without these virtues, all human value systems lose their meaning and their relevance to the individual.

The virtues essential for faith in any value system are grounded in the first phase of the lifecourse – during which the infant struggles with basic trust and mistrust. The achievement of trust results in the virtue of hope, 'the enduring belief in the attainability of primal wishes, in spite of the dark urges and rages which mark the beginning of existence and leave a lasting residue of threatening estrangement' (1978: 26). It is hope that drives all other stages. Most significantly, it is here that we see Erikson's inter-generational perspective most clearly. Trust cannot win out in the infant's struggle without an adult carer who has made a successful shift away from the self-absorption of youth. This occurs in the stage of 'generativity' in the adult, a very productive and creative life phase which requires an outward shift in orientation, from a focus on the surveillance of the inner self to a focus on the needs of others.

The basic attitude required by this phase of generativity is a concern to establish and guide the next generation. Erikson has the broader community in mind here, not just one's own offspring. During this phase, there needs to be recognition that a commitment to others is enriching for the individual self. This produces tensions that have to be reconciled, particularly for men whose ego identity has become over-defined by their occupation and civic roles – a state that creates the tendency to retreat from intimacy and that inhibits the development of the virtue of love (1978: 28). The virtue of love is a necessary pre-requisite for the emergence of the virtue of care, and it requires an ability to commit to relationships.

The shift in orientation from self-absorption to that of care and concern for others comes from the libidinal investment in what one generates 'by love, necessity or accident' (1978: 28). The guiding principle is not simply to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, 'live and let live'. This moral rule is incomplete and cannot accommodate the need for one generation to consider and meet the needs of the next. The ethical rule of adulthood is 'to do to others what will *help them* grow, even as it helps you to grow' (1978: 11). Assuming an attitude of care for others is the basis of future personal growth for the adult – which is therefore outward, towards 'other'

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in the broadest possible sense, rather than inward. Erikson's scheme is therefore inter-generational in its approach to self-actualisation and personal growth. It remains existentialist in its desire for individual authenticity – but authenticity is not finally achieved by an isolated, autonomous self, but rather by a self that realises its connection with others.

Conclusions

Giddens proposes that 'life politics' occurs as an outcome of projects of self actualisation. Self-actualisation, as Giddens defines it, is existentialist in its ontological assumptions. It provides no moral content other than the demand for autonomy. Over the last decade, there has been a reaction against the rights-based politics derived from this content. A new communitarianism is now influencing the political agenda, and is attempting to inject a healthy dose of 'community values' into societies suffering from social fragmentation and upheaval. But it remains to be seen whether the generation, that in *their* youth benefited most from the personal liberation strategies of the new social movements, can fill the revealed moral gaps without reverting to the social conservatism that accompanies the new communitarianism.

Certain lifecourse events in middle life suggest that, as people age, they seek a greater sense of community and search for spiritual guidance. Human mortality is made manifest by life events such as retirement and by life crises such as widowhood and the news of a friend's cancer. What the current generation approaching old age needs is a vocabulary with which to talk about their anxieties and needs and their responses to these needs, and which is not simply reactionary – or contrary to the demand for personal liberation. Perhaps the vocabulary can draw on Erikson's virtues for its moral content. So equipped, the ageing 'baby boomers' can begin to consider more seriously how social institutions can best be organised to nurture and sustain them.

NOTE

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