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Conference – Keynote paper

Loosening chronology's collar: Playing with the tension between time and agelessness

Léonie Sugarman



This is an edited version of the Keynote Address given at the Annual Conference of the Division of Counselling Psychology – 'Resonances of Childhood: the makings of a person' – York, 19 May, 2007.

THE VERACITY OF this year's conference theme – that resonances from childhood experiences permeate our adult life – cannot be denied. Far from it. Nonetheless, I do believe that searching for explanations of human psychological functioning primarily in the history of the individual adopts an unduly restrictive perspective on time. By loosening the collar of chronology and playing with the tension between time and agelessness I believe we liberate our thinking in ways that can impact creatively and positively on work with clients.

This afternoon I will first of all be suggesting that we loosen chronology's collar by thinking of time as not necessarily either one-directional or linear. Then I will question the model of the life course as a sequence of ordered, cumulative and universal steps, directed towards a particular end; proposing, instead, that we focus more on the life course as a system of dynamic relationships. And, having done all that, I will then seek to reinstate the notion of life stage, lest we fall for the false equality offered by the concept of agelessness.

Loosening chronology's collar by thinking of time as neither one-directional nor linear challenges some very powerful theories of lifespan development, and I take up this challenge in full awareness that all theories are interpretive paradigms, and necessarily limit as much as they reveal. All

theories have their blindspots; and in psychological theories of lifespan development, one blindspot has often been to search for accounts of human development primarily in the form of sequential, cumulative and universal life stages. If you look in mainstream textbooks on lifespan development, you will find most of them to be organised chronologically, paying homage at the shrines of Freud, Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, and the like.

It is, however, worth noting how these theorists are frequently less dogmatic in their theorising than brief summaries generally imply. Thus, Erikson (1980) acknowledged the overlapping of stages and the ways a strength evolving at one stage may continue to develop throughout life. This was taken up by Michael Jacobs (1998) when, in the second edition of his book *The Presenting Past*, he depicted Erikson's theory as a spiral staircase rather than a step ladder – albeit before more or less abandoning stages altogether in favour of the themes of dependence, independence and interdependence.

Similarly, Levinson (1978, 1986), whose book *The Season's of a Man's Life*, became a best seller during the 1980s, emphasised through the use of his seasonal metaphor how one stage (or season) should not be seen as 'better' or 'more important' than another. Winter, for example, cannot be

considered of greater significance or value than, say, Spring. Each has its role, and its place in the yearly cycle. Nonetheless, visual representations of both Erikson's and Levinson's theory seem often to depict some sort of psychological stairway to heaven.

I do not wish to dismiss such theories out of hand. Throwing them out, like babies with the proverbial bathwater, would be arrogance indeed. But I do believe that, along with their undoubted strengths, they have been both a consequence of and a contributor to psychology's over-concern – one might say obsession – with prediction and, as a consequence of this, with searching in the past for explanations of the present.

I also believe that much theorising (particularly early theorising) about lifespan development frequently failed to acknowledge the gendered and culturally limited nature of the popular metaphor, which casts life as a solo heroic quest. Despite their claims to universality, many of the most well known theories of lifespan development are overwhelmingly based on the experience of wealthy, white, 20th century, and often North American, males. These theories have not been very good at dealing adequately with dimensions of difference other than age – for example, gender, class, race, culture or cohort.

I am far from unique in making this point. Much feminist research and theorising suggests that step-wise models of lifespan development fail adequately to describe women's experience. Studies have often shown women's development to be fragmented and improvisational rather than linear and fixed – a function of the contingencies of women's lives and the necessity of integrating the public and private spheres. But I would further suggest that the metaphor of the solo heroic quest was always a minority experience, and is increasingly out of synchrony with men's lives as well. Nonetheless, much psychological discourse continues to discuss, understand and explain human existence in fundamentally individualistic, sequential terms. It is for the benefit

of all that we invoke some alternative, instructive metaphors.

I believe that in the 21st century, when relationships are far less stable than in the past, there is a particular need for lifespan developmental psychology to embrace more fully the inter-subjective turn, and start from the assumption that:

We do not exist as individuals first and then come together with others to form relationships. Rather ... we exist with others first and only after that come to develop some notion of individuality and separateness (Mearns & Cooper, 2005).

I quote Mearns and Cooper here as major players in the counselling field, but they echo the words of many others.

I would like to join Ruth Ray and Susan McFadden (2001) – researchers in women's spiritual development – in replacing or, at the very least, supplementing the metaphor of the life course as a solo, heroic quest with one that is grounded more in relationships and connection than in autonomy and separation. Images that come to mind include the weaving of a web, the construction of a quilt, or the sewing of a tapestry.

All are suggestive of an intricate structure, made up of many strands, strong but flexible. A web, for example, can be extended indefinitely and, if damaged or disrupted, can be repaired. It emphasises complexity and interconnectedness, with individual threads becoming meaningful and comprehensible by virtue of their position in the overall pattern. Perhaps the most sophisticated and elaborate example in the world is the internet (world wide web) – built on a network of relations, all of them interdependent. Images such as this provide an alternative, relational model of development based on becoming a *part of* rather than *apart from*.

I took the phrase 'loosening chronology's collar' from a 2004 paper by Alex Pomson, a Canadian educational researcher investigating the career patterns of school teachers. Pomson found that when the teachers were asked to talk about their careers, only a minority produced linear, chronological

narratives with an obvious beginning, middle and end. Rather than focusing on a *life history*, or even a *career story*, most created a *portrait* – ‘an ethnographic sketch in which the person’s life is seen as an individually composed whole – a complex knot where past, present and future are bound together’ (Pomson, 2004).

Like the metaphor of the web, portraits emphasise an interconnected whole, with complexity taking precedence over temporality, sequentiality and the never ending progress from place to place. This figurative shift (from history to portrait, from change to complexity) invites the possibility of seeing development not as something that must move forever forward, but as a construct that is continually reworked, layered or deepened.

In searching for a grand theory to encompass this complexity I think we should look to dynamic (or developmental) systems theory (Smith & Thelan, 2003) as a meta-model of lifespan development. Dynamic systems theory proposes a non-linear dialectical system in which each element can both modify its predecessor and be modified by that which follows. Rather than endowing infants with genetically programmed and pre-existing mental structures trapped in an immature body, dynamic systems theory suggests that development be understood as the emergent product of many decentralised and local interactions leading to more adaptive levels of functioning. In other words, the developmental process is viewed as change within a complex dynamic system. What distinguishes this perspective is its assumption that systems can generate novelty through their own activity and its commitment to seeing individuals as self-organising, self-constructing open systems fused with their environments.

Here we have a perspective that honours the capacity of individuals to construct, create and reinterpret their own reality – a lynchpin, it seems to me, of the values underpinning counselling psychology. I do not propose dynamic systems theory as a

panacea, but as what Alvin Marher (2004) refers to as a ‘convenient fiction’ – and a plausible and morally sound one at that. But I do bear in mind my earlier caveat that all theories are interpretive paradigms, and necessarily limit as much as they reveal.

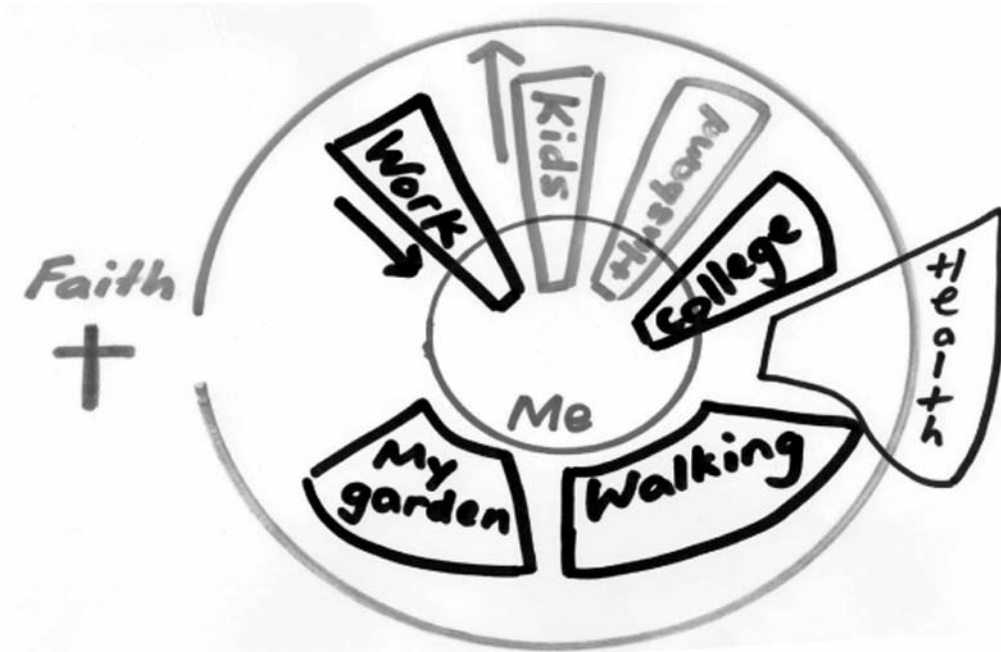
Nonetheless, I am suggesting that one way forward is to replace, or at least supplement, the concept of the self (so closely associated with the metaphor of the life course as a heroic and solo crusade) with that of the personal life space – a mental space that includes the person and the segment of the social, cultural, and material environment that is meaningful to them and with which they interact. The life space (Peavy, 2004), personal niche (Willi, 1999), or life structure (Levinson, 1978) is a multifaceted network of people, relationships, experiences, places, activities, ideas, and things, along with the meanings that the focal person attaches to them.

The personal life space, like webs and portraits, is better presented visually than through words. It is better presented as a snapshot or a map, with the relationships between its different elements indicating how a person makes meaning of their world. Figure 1 (overleaf) is an example.

Although superficially quite straightforward, on examination of this map a more complex picture emerges. There is a strong emphasis on relationships with people, but also with activities (walking), places (my garden) and organisations (college). The whole life space is embraced by a strong Christian faith, although even this is being challenged by some major health concerns that are making themselves felt.

One assumptive cage that the concept of the life space rattles is what might be termed the ‘nowness’ of the present. In Figure 1 movement and change are indicated by arrows alongside ‘kids’ and ‘work’. As children are growing up and becoming more independent, so career issues are moving centre stage. Standing alongside the self of the present are ghosts of selves past and ghosts of selves still to come.

Figure 1: Map of the personal life space.



This co-existence of present, past and future also occurs within the therapeutic space. The client who reconnects in therapy with their two-year-old self becomes in that moment their two-year-old self. They are not merely talking about that person. They are that person. At that moment childhood and adulthood are correlative and mutually defining.

The separation of the present from the past and the future that life space mapping disrupts is a distinctly cultural phenomenon, and, again, I am far from the first to challenge it. Not all cultures begin their folk tales 'Once upon a time ...'. 'It was, and it was not ...' is one evocative alternative. In many African languages the noun for 'being' includes both the living and the formerly living, depicting a world where ancestors live among their descendants, unseen but very much involved with the daily affairs of their families. Like Maori culture, a focus on the life space welcomes ancestors of the self into the fold.

Such loosening of chronology's collar also meshes with current theorising about the process of coping with loss – in particular bereavement. In twentieth century Western societies, disengagement from the past was frequently seen as the mark of successful grief resolution, with continued attachment to the deceased being labelled pathological, and interpreted as symptomatic of psychological problems. More recently, however, 'letting go' has been reconstrued as a renegotiation rather than a severance of ties. Attention has turned to the ways in which a dead person is lost and then refound, rather than clung onto before being ultimately relinquished (Walter, 1996).

Thus, Worden, in 1995, amended the last of his well-known list of the tasks of mourning. The first three remained the same: accepting the reality of the loss; working through the pain of grief; and adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing. But what had been fourth task – 'withdrawing emotional energy

from the deceased and reinvesting it in another relationship' – evolved into 'emotionally relocating the deceased and moving on with life'. The message here is that physical separation from another person, place or role, even if permanent, does not mean that we must inevitably leave them behind. This thread of continuing and re-negotiating rather than breaking bonds links together a person's life course experience into a more coherent whole. That which has been lost is integrated into a durable biography that has meaning for the person in the present. From this perspective development is a discursive and creative act as well as a psychological construct.

Another consequence of loosening chronology's collar is to complicate our concept of age – suggesting that we can be many ages simultaneously. A birthday card I recently received from my niece summed up this point, congratulating me on being 'Old enough to give advice ...' and '... young enough to set a bad example'. This use of humour challenges stereotypes of age, and acknowledges that the question of how old we are does not necessarily have a clear and ambiguous answer. Carl Rogers (1980), approaching his 80th year, made a similar point when he wrote in *'Growing old; or older and growing?'*:

As a boy, I was rather sickly, and my parents told me that it was predicted that I would die young. This prediction has proved completely wrong in one sense, but completely true in another sense. I think it is correct that I will never live to be old. So now I agree with the prediction, I believe I will die young.

As Bob Dylan (1964) plaintively sang, 'Ah, but I was so much older then. I'm younger than that now.'

Loosening chronology's collar is also consistent with the breaking down of normative order in the 21st century life course. Back in the 1960s Bernice Neugarten and colleagues asked a large sample of adult Americans about age norms. Questions included: What is the best age for a

man/woman to marry? What is the right time to finish education and go to work? What is the right time to become a grandparent? When is the prime of life for a man/woman? There were a good number of other questions as well – addressing issues such as career choice, responsibilities, accomplishments, and retirement.

In 1965 there was a high degree of consistency in people's responses, providing substantial evidence for the existence of culturally shared age norms. When the study was repeated in the 1980s, (Passuth *et al.*, 1987) there was still some, albeit less, consensus. However, I find that current generations of students find the questions silly, unanswerable and, on occasions, offensive.

We can conclude that for some time now, rigid timings in the organisation of the life course have been unfreezing. This, too, was picked up by Neugarten and her colleagues some 30 years ago. They noted how the sequence and rhythm of major life events has altered, with puberty coming earlier than before, and death later. They described how social timing is also changing, and how:

Increasing numbers of men and women marry, divorce, then remarry, care for children in two-parent, then one-parent, then two-parent households, enter and re-enter the labor force, change jobs, undertake new careers or return to school. All this adds up to what has been called the fluid life cycle, one marked by an increasing number of transitions, the disappearance of traditional timetables, and the lack of synchrony among age-related roles (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976).

Arguably, the extent of this fluidity and its speed of flow have both increased during the ensuing 30 years.

In other words, life stages identified by shared tasks and transitions are, most particularly in the years beyond puberty, somewhat illusory. They do not represent anybody's reality. We need to be wary of life stages, especially the labelling of them. That is something that should perhaps be left to the

marketing and advertising industries – with their WOOPies (well-off older people); DINKYs (double income, no kids yet); and the ubiquitous YUPPIes (young, upwardly mobile professionals).

If normative life stages are largely fictitious, does that mean that we live, as has been suggested, in an increasingly age-irrelevant society? The answer is yes and no.

The suggestion that we loosen chronology's collar could be seen as a clarion call for agelessness: 'Be yourself! Don't act your age!' This leads us into issues much debated by gerontologists. In her book *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life*, Sharon Kauffman (1986) writes:

I have heard many old people talk about themselves ... (and) I have observed that when they talk about who they are and how their lives have been, they do not speak of being old as meaningful in itself ... To the contrary, when old people talk about themselves, they express a sense of self that is ageless – an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with age ...

Being old *per se* is not a central feature of the self, nor is it a source of meaning.

Promulgating the idea of an 'ageless self' can, at first blush, be seen as a laudable anti-ageist stance, and as an appealing resistance to and challenging of negative stereotypes of late adulthood – with age (especially 'old age') consigned to being nothing more than a mask concealing the essential identity of the person beneath (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991).

However, it is not as simple as that. We cannot ignore age, even if we want to. Age is used, albeit inconsistently, as a benchmark for allocating rights and responsibilities throughout society and as a gatekeeper guarding access to services. Many services, including those offered by counselling psychologists, are defined directly or indirectly by clients' age or life stage.

It could, and indeed, it has been argued, that that the concept of the ageless self is itself ageist, denying the value of the experi-

ence with which our life time has been filled. Molly Andrews (1999), a strong advocate of this position, argues that we are not only as old as we feel, we're as old as we are. Andrews rails against the tyranny of agelessness:

While difference is celebrated in axes such as race, gender, religion and nationality, the same is not true for age ... (And yet) years are not empty containers: important things happen in that time. Why must these years be trivialised? They are the stuff of which people's lives are made.

For Andrews, age is an important diversity, with the concept of agelessness being a sleight of hand – a pretence that age is irrelevant. She suggests that, instead, we celebrate late adulthood as being ageful – as does Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1993) in *Women who Run with the Wolves* when she writes:

'How old are you?' people sometimes ask me. 'I am 17 battle scars old,' I say. Usually people don't flinch, and rather happily begin to count up their battle scar ages accordingly.

The concept of the ageless self can also be interpreted as expressing a potent societal script that overvalues the activities and achievements characteristic of the middle years, and sees the prolongation of midlife as a *leitmotif* of contemporary society. It may also reflect a deep seated unease on the part of the young and middle-aged; a personal revulsion to, and distaste for, growing old, for disease and disability; and a fear of powerlessness, uselessness, and death. This unease may reinforce the under-representation of older clients in many therapeutic practices, and the oft cited preference of therapists for working with YAVIS clients: those who are Young, Attractive, Verbal, Intelligent, and Successful.

So now we can see how age – and with it, the concept of time – occupies an anomalous and contradictory position in the consideration of later life. Loosening chronology's collar may bring risks as well as opportunities.

The pitfalls of ignoring age are perhaps even more apparent when we focus on the early years of the life course. The erosion of childhood periodically emerges as an issue of public concern. Ernesto Spinelli in 2002 raised concerns about how the denying of distinctions between child and adult ways of being, in particular with regard to sexuality, can encourage adult abusers of children to convince themselves that their wants and needs are of an equivalent kind and are shared by the children whose hold on a childhood they bring to a sudden and infelicitous end.

Similarly, the Director of the Play Association of Tower Hamlets, along with 19 other play-work professionals, wrote eloquently in a recent letter to *The Guardian* (Murray, 2006) of the need for the creation and protection of free time and space for children in which they can direct their own play without 'adulteration'.

These are all pleas to recognise the distinctiveness of different life stages and are consistent with Margaret Crompton's (1992) advocacy for 'childist' counselling, counselling that demands respect for the idea of childhood as well as for every individual child. It begins with the idea of seeing each child, of whatever age, as a complete person rather than an immature version the adult he or she will become:

An acorn is not an immature oak tree; an acorn is perfectly an acorn. It contains everything necessary for growth into an oak tree but neither acorn nor tree contains greater or lesser value and virtue.

Each is entire unto itself, both are of use to other forms of life (Crompton, 1992).

So here we have plea, not for the ageless self, but for acknowledging and celebrating the separate existence of distinct life stages.

So, what might a counselling psychology that loosens (but does not totally cast aside) chronology's collar look like?

First, I suggest that we remain mindful of and value the distinctiveness of different phases of the life course – whilst remembering that passage through these years need

be neither ordered nor predictable. We forget at our peril that childhood is not the same as adulthood, and that adulthood itself is not a homogenous, unchanging plateau. We must avoid also the chauvinistic assumption that midlife represents some sort of gold standard of functioning from which we inevitably fall as we move into later life.

Secondly, I suggest that we supplement the concept of the self with that of the personal life space, and think about life portraits as well as life histories. This ties in with a dynamic systems model of the person – with its crucial elements of emergence and agency – as an alternative to the organic, mechanistic or social constructionist meta-models. It is consistent with a relational view of the person (e.g. Mearns & Cooper, 2005), and with pleas (e.g. Soth, 2006) that we think of counselling as a relating rather than a talking cure.

Thirdly, I would suggest that we adopt a moral stand that values relationship and shared responsibility alongside autonomy and individual freedom. Relational theorising challenges the notion of separation and individuation as the *sine qua non* of development, and, I would suggest, is not only a more accurate but also a more ethical stance. At a time when relationships in couples, families, and the work place have become less stable, therapy might need to expand its focus away from the problems of autonomy and emancipation from social constraint, toward considering the more effective organisation of relationship processes. Changing times call for new therapeutic goals and models.

And finally, I would ask that in our thinking about these issues we retain a little playfulness. As counselling psychologists, I have no doubt that you engage with serious, life changing issues on a daily basis. This is an awesome responsibility, from which I believe it is important to take a break. It is not always essential to be 100 per cent serious and po-faced when talking about serious things. I would further suggest that a background in literature and the arts

is as important as an appreciation of statistics and RCTs in enabling us to engage with clients not as disembodied collections of symptoms, but as living, creative beings.

I promised in my abstract for this talk a touch of magical realism, but feel I have only implicitly acted on this promise. I want to suggest that the underlying notion of magical realism – that the real and the fantastical can co-exist – is an important mind set with which to approach work with clients.

The counselling space is a space of magical realism – a space in which we can, like Pi Patel in *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2002), share a small rowing boat with a fully grown Bengal tiger and where, as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Marquez, 1967), clouds can be made up of yellow flowers, and an iguana found in a woman's womb.

The contradictions in the life space – things like the co-existence of the magical and the realist and the knotting together of past, present and future – give the life space a potent energy that can fuel learning and change. It enables us to recognise and confront the anomalous nature of age. We all know that age tells only part of the story; and the part that it tells it may not tell clearly or accurately. And yet, it can be difficult to get a clear picture of a person if we do not know their age. Age hints at the social, economic, and political times a person has lived through. Knowing a person's age can tell us whether they were alive during the Second World War, and suggest whether they will remember where they were when President Kennedy was shot, when Princess Diana died, or when New York's Twin Towers collapsed. Age can tell us whether someone was a child of the Thatcher era, has only known life under Tony Blair's New Labour government, or is a baby boomer who grew up in the swinging sixties. Such experiences infiltrate our life space, making age, somewhat mercurially, crucially important as well as totally irrelevant.

Writing this paper has been an odyssey – and I am grateful for the opportunity it has provided to take this journey. That I don't

think I have reached my destination is consistent with the view of development that I am proposing here today – and, indeed, Carl Rogers talks not of *being* but of *becoming* a fully functioning person.

In this talk I have engaged in what I have been told is a postmodern troubling of the concept of time. I have frolicked amongst the contradiction between, on the one hand, the irrelevance and, on the other hand, the crucial importance of age and life stage. I have played with the tension between time and agelessness.

For my final quote I cite from Ford and Lerner's 1992 book on dynamic or, as they term it, developmental systems theory, where they define human development as:

A continuous and somewhat unpredictable journey throughout life, sailing from seas that have become familiar into oceans as yet uncharted toward destinations to be imagined, defined, and redefined as the voyage proceeds, with occasional, often unpredictable, transformations of ones vessel and sailing skills and the oceans on which one sails resulting from unforeseen circumstances.

Perhaps this afternoon I have both challenged and supported T.S. Eliot's (1944) claim – so resonant with the conference theme – that 'in my beginning is my end'. More prosaically, perhaps I have simply illustrated that what goes around comes around, or that, like Spike Milligan (1956) 'I'm Walking Backwards for Christmas'.

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