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The inseparability of human agency and linked lives

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ABSTRACT

The notion that people make choices and take actions that determine the outcomes of their lives – human agency – is a central principle of the life course paradigm. Unfortunately, conceptualizations of agency, like larger developmental and sociological theories, often assume that agency is limited to individuals who are "developmentally normal." We draw upon the thought of social scientists and disability scholars, as well as the life history of a woman with intellectual disability, to address the logical, ethical, and empirical flaws of this assumption. To rectify these problems, life course theory and research should pay greater attention to how agency is interwoven with another central principle of the life course paradigm: linked lives. This principle is that an individual's life cannot be understood in isolation of their interdependencies with other persons. Although human agency and linked lives are discussed as separate principles of the life course, they are not separate in lived experience. We demonstrate that, for all people and at all times in life, human agency is dependent upon interpersonal relationships. It is therefore imperative to examine intersections of agency and linked lives in order to more fully and accurately understand life course dynamics in diverse populations. Human agency is profoundly affected by interpersonal relationships and other social factors. Because agency and linked lives are inseparable, agency cannot be conceptualized as an individual characteristic of 'independent' actors. We conclude by discussing how life course research can more fully attend to the relationship between agency and linked lives.

1. The inseparability of human agency and linked lives

The concept of human agency is pivotal, albeit contested, in sociology generally and in life course theory particularly. Contemporary conceptualizations of agency frequently prioritize the ability of an individual to act intentionally and in a manner that directly or indirectly influences current and/or future outcomes. This was not always the case. Largely influenced by structural functionalism, prior to the 1960s agency was routinely conceptualized as a characteristic of the social structure, not of individuals (Sztompka, 1994). During the 1960s and 1970s, sociological theory shifted from a primary focus on macro level social structures to more robust attempts to integrate macro and micro perspectives (Ritzer & Gindoff, 1994). Central to the effort to bridge the macro/micro divide was a renewed focus on agency (Alexander, 1993; Giddens, 1984). By the 1980s, many sociological theorists had embraced a micro level focus and accepted Giddens' attempt to relocate agency within individual humans (Sztompka, 1994). As a result, since the 1980s, sociological theory has often been informed by Giddens' (1984, p. 9) conceptualization of agency as the "capability" of humans to act and be the "perpetrator" of events, meaning "the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened."

The life course paradigm incubated and developed in the midst of this larger historical shift in sociological theory. First discussed in an essay by Cain (1964), then further developed by authors in an edited volume by Riley, Johnson, and Foner (1972), scholars over time developed two distinct approaches to the life course (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010). The "institutional" model, typified in the work of scholars like Mayer (e.g., 2004) or Kohli (e.g., 2007), focuses on how larger social institutions shape and determine age related life stages for individuals and society. The "personological" model, typified in the work of a scholar like Elder (e.g., Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004), focuses on how early life experiences and choices of individuals influence later outcomes.

Because human agency is most often conceptualized as an individual characteristic, we focus our attention on the more personological strand of life course scholarship. We appreciate the increased

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attention afforded to individual lives within sociology as the concept of agency is emphasized. But we contend that life course theory inherited a deficient view of human agency from larger sociological theory. Specifically, we argue that approaches to agency that exclude those who are considered 'developmentally abnormal' and 'dependent' belie the internal logic of a life course conceptualization of agency. We probe this fault-line, and the problems it brings, within life course research and reveal a larger conceptual and empirical reality: that agency is intimately *dependent* upon interpersonal relationships – a hallmark of the human condition at all times in the life course, even for those who are "developmentally normal."

Drawing from sociological and disability theories, we offer a corrective to these incomplete conceptualizations of agency by emphasizing the prominence of its relational aspects. In doing so, we move beyond merely recognizing that agency may be influenced by social relationships. Instead, we specify that any notion of agency cannot assume individuals to be free and independent actors; it must presuppose the reality that individual lives are heavily conditioned by ties to other people at all times. Agency and interpersonal dependence coexist. Thus, any conceptualization of agency demands attention to the ways in which it is created, fostered, diminished, or eliminated in the context of interpersonal relationships. And yet, this has not occurred in life course literature, which often repeats but leaves in the abstract the principle of linked lives and, more importantly, fails to recognize its entanglements with the principle of human agency. We ascertain why linked lives has been viewed as an optional instead of inherent component of agency, and we illustrate that agency cannot come into being outside of an individual's preceding or current relationships and, indeed, that agency is conceived, nourished and continually sustained – or not – by interpersonal relationships. In other words, although conceptually distinct, agency and linked lives are inseparable in the lived experiences of all people.

2. A life course understanding of human agency

Although Elder's pioneering research on the life course emerged in the early 1970s, and drew upon distinct traditions of scholarship related to the study of lives, he did not formally include human agency in his paradigm until 1994 (Elder, 1994). His eventual incorporation of agency was based upon a belief that sociological research prior to and during the 1950s had "stagnated to a certain degree," remaining focused on macro level abstractions and not readily exploring life experiences at a micro level (Elder et al., 2004, p. 5). Revealing the direct influence of the larger pendulum swing in sociological theory from a macro to a micro level focus, Elder (2003) specifically acknowledges Giddens' ideas as shaping his view that historic time and place are central to understanding the life course. The influence of Giddens' thought on Elder's notion of agency, however, was not as clearly articulated until his more recent work with Hitlin (Hitlin & Elder, 2007a, 2007b), which provides deeper attention to the concept of agency.

Consistent with Elder's earlier work (1994, 1995), Hitlin and Elder locate agency in the individual, defining agency as an "individual-level construct" (2007b, p. 172) with its "origin" in the human "actor" (2007b, p. 175) and, as such, an "individual-level variable" (2007b, p. 37). Revealing the direct influence of Giddens, they clarify that "[W]e view agentic action as those actions whose ostensible origin begins within the actor, in the sense that, as Giddens (1984) maintains, the actor might have done otherwise" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b, p. 175). To move beyond general appeals to agency, they suggest a four part typology of existential, pragmatic, identity, and life course agency (2007b). Within their typology, existential agency serves as the foundation for the other three types of agency, and is described as a "universal human potentiality" (2007b, p. 177). Closely aligned with concepts of human freedom, existential agency is a "universal attribute" present in all human action, thus "all actors possess agentic capabilities" (2007b, p. 37).

Despite viewing agency as universal, Hitlin and Elder see human agency as highly influenced by larger social structures and individual differences. All humans possess the *capability* to engage in agentic actions (2007a, p. 37). Yet, referencing the work of Evans (2002) on bounded agency, Hitlin and Elder recognize that the larger social structure influences the degree to which individuals can engage in agentic action. For some, a more privileged place in the social structure affords greater opportunities to act freely or make agentic choices that determine the trajectories and outcomes of their lives. For others, a less privileged place in the social structure translates into fewer opportunities to do so. Thus, they argue that the degree to which individuals engage in agentic action is largely determined by the "external social structure that shapes the socialization that constrains (and enables) people's choices" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007a, p. 37).

Hitlin and Elder also renew Elder's earlier contention that there are individual differences in human agency. Reconnecting with Clausen's work, Hitlin and Elder (2007a, p. 37) maintain that there are individual differences in "social psychological capacities for self-efficacy or planfulness," and that these differences translate into variation in the "agentic potential" between individuals. Thus, an individual's ability to engage in agentic action is influenced not only by the external social structure, but also by the degree to which the individual is planful, which Clausen defined as "self-confident," "intellectually invested," and "dependable" (1991, 1993). Despite being a universal "potentiality" of all individuals, Hitlin and Elder (2007b, p. 183) contend that, due to individual differences in planful capacity, some individuals are able to engage in agentic action "with more facility" than others.

Up to this point, and at this level of abstraction, the primary principles of Hitlin and Elder's understanding of agency are largely complementary. Variation may occur in the levels of agency among individuals due to external opportunities or differences in internal capacities, but this does not contravene the reality that, at a foundational level, all humans to some degree possess agency. Thus, Hitlin and Elder can logically maintain support for viewing agency as a universal but varying individual-level characteristic.

3. An exclusion on human agency

It is at this point that their view is compromised by an assumption of modernist rational thought. In defining existential agency (the type of agency they characterize as a "universal attribute"), Hitlin and Elder argue that it is "the capacity of *developmentally normal beings* [italics added] to act freely in a fundamental manner" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007a, p. 37). They do not clarify what they mean when they restrict agency to "developmentally normal beings." But it appears to indicate that, while some individuals are "developmentally normal" and have an ability to engage in agentic action, other individuals are 'developmentally abnormal' and do not. In a similar statement from another paper, they explain that agency is "a universal capacity of *socially competent individuals* [italics added]" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b, p. 186). It is unclear whether these general and abstract claims about 'normalness' and 'competence' stem from things that are inherent in individuals, or from things that are learned or socially constructed. We suppose that this is highly dependent on the specific types of non-normality or incompetence that the authors have in mind. But their two phrases suggest that they do, in fact, view 'developmental normalness' and 'social competence' as requisite characteristics for agency – and therefore that agency is not, in the end, universal to all human beings.

This exclusionary line of thinking is not unusual within historical conceptualizations of agency. In their critique of traditional social constructions of agency, Meyer and Jepperson (2000, p. 107) explain that, within sociological theory, "[t]he proper modern agentic individual, for instance, manages a life, carrying a responsibility not only to reflect self-interest but also the wider rationalized rules conferring agency. Helplessness, ignorance, and passivity may be very natural human properties, but they are not the properties of the proper effective

agent." The construction of agency as something exclusive to 'developmentally normal' or 'socially competent' people who possess a full complement of rational/intellectual capacity is also common among the progenitors of Hitlin's and Elder's thought. For example, Giddens (1984, pp. 6, 341) indicates that agency is a characteristic of "competent actors," states that individuals who repeatedly make agentic mistakes should be viewed as "incompetent," and delineates that competence is determined by the ability to rationalize, or provide reasoned explanation for one's action (Giddens, 1979, p. 57) Similarly, Clausen's (1991) notion of "planful competence," described earlier, is dependent upon "intellectual investment," which he later interchanges with "intellectual interests," "intellectual efficiency," and "intellectual capacity" (Clausen, 1986, p. 5; Clausen & Jones, 1998, p. 74). Hence, there is a longer tradition of sociological and life course research that conceptualizes agency, implicitly or explicitly, as exclusive to those who are 'developmentally normal' and 'socially competent,' and which calls out intellectual capacity as foundational to it.

Although Hitlin and Elder do not explicitly connect their exclusions of the 'developmentally abnormal' or 'socially incompetent' to *intellectual* capacity per se, the scholarship that informs their thought does. It inherits and approbates the tradition of excluding those with 'abnormal' or 'incompetent' levels of intellectual capacity from human agency. This legacy is most apparent in Hitlin's and Elder's work in a passage immediately prior to their description of agency as "the capacity of developmentally normal beings to act freely in a fundamental manner" (2007a, p. 37). To support this conceptualization of agency, they evoke the work of Marshall in reference to individual variation in levels of agency. In the cited text, Marshall (2005, p. 11) explains that agency is a "fundamental aspect of human nature" that involves the "cognitive capacities" to recognize and process life decisions and the ability "to make informed, rational decisions." This he views as a "developmental capacity of (*virtually*) all humans" (p. 11). In a footnote, Marshall expounds on this parenthetical exclusion, explaining that "I limit the statement as this is not the place to consider whether persons born with limited or no cognitive capacity are fully human" (p. 19). Beyond unnecessarily restricting agency to those with a requisite amount of cognitive capacity, this statement also begs the questions of what the minimum threshold of intellectual capacity necessary to qualify as a human might be, and, recognizing that measurement of intellectual capacity is highly socially constructed (Rapley, 2004), how it might be accurately defined and measured.

In conceptualizing agency in these ways, Hitlin and Elder, like others before them and contemporaries who seem to assume the same, travel a road that is fraught with logical and ethical danger. On one hand, agency is taken to be a universal attribute of all humans; on the other hand, agency is understood to be restricted to persons who are 'developmentally normal' or 'competent.' These two premises are now in logical opposition, as a universal attribute by definition must apply to all entities being described. The only way to logically maintain that agency is a universal human attribute, and at the same time insist that it is reserved for those who are 'developmentally normal' and 'socially competent,' is to imply, or assert as Marshall does, that having "limited or no cognitive capacity" sets those persons apart from that universal group – in this case, human.

This is a disturbing argument – and again, one that is not new. The advent and development of modernity was built upon a socially constructed view of human beings that presupposes formal rationality as the essence of human experience (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Radford, 1994). A basic premise is that agentic capacity is an essentialist attribute possessed only by rational individuals, not by those deemed to have subpar rationality – in other words, persons with cognitive limitations (Jenkins, 1999; Rapley, 2004). Disability scholars point out that social theory has consistently assumed that individuals with lower levels of intelligence are not rational and, therefore, not fully human (Carey, 2010; Kittay, 2005; Radford, 1994; Rapley, 2004; Trent, 1994). Furthermore, modern thought assumes that rational capacity is static, which is not only a problematic assumption but also contrary to the pervasive and longstanding proposition among human development scholars from many disciplines, including Elder himself, that human development is lifelong and characterized by dynamics related to both growth and decline. This includes gains and losses in distinct types of cognitive capacity across the life span, even among the 'developmentally normal' (e.g. Anderson & Craik, 2017). But in the scenario at hand, an adult who does not currently possess a sufficient level of rational or intellectual capacity necessary for agency will presumably never develop the capacity for it. A clear expression of this perspective is offered by Cowden, who states that non-rational groups, whom she identifies as "the mentally disabled and animals," "lack latent capacities because their capacities are static" (2016, p. 50), meaning that they are "static in their incompetence" (2012, p. 370).

The adverse implication of this perspective is that due to their presumed lack of rationality, and concomitant lack of agency, those who are 'developmentally abnormal' fall outside of the pale of human being. In turn, they are viewed and treated as either less than those with full rational capacity, or non-human (McMahan, 2002; Singer, 1993). Rapley (2004, p. 202) provides the strongest critique of this assumption when he explains that the problem is the "dogged insistence on treating capacities to act as if they were fixed, internal, mental attributes, of which people may sensibly be said to have quanta: and that not only are these quanta deterministic, they are context-independent." Instead, it is imperative to realize that conceptualizations of agency are highly dependent upon accepted rational systems and cultural contexts (Jenkins, 1999; Rapley, 2004; Settersten & Gannon, 2005).

Given its focus on human agency, life course research, especially that which is slanted toward social psychology, intentionally or unintentionally risks reinforcing culturally constructed ideas and systems that severely marginalize persons with limitations of many kinds, not just cognitive. This is evident in the fact that life course research more generally relegates to the periphery the lives of populations with a range of disabilities and the absence or loss of 'normal' functioning or those who deviate from 'normal' statuses. Marginalization of these populations seems to reflect a deeper issue: that life course research reifies the cultural premium on independence – whether in gaining it as hallmark of a successful transition into adulthood, in having it as the hallmark of a good adult worker and citizen, or in maintaining it as long as possible as hallmark of successful aging (Grenier, Griffin, & McGrath, 2016, p. 12). This can have dire results. As Edgerton (1993, pp. 183–184) explains, in societies that hold rationality and independence as the essence of human experience, being labelled as either non-rational or as having limited rationality qualifies as the "ultimate horror" as individuals so labelled are perpetually regarded as incompetent and a drain on a society's resources.

Beyond these foundational philosophical and ethical concerns, the most disconcerting shortcoming of this line of thought is the assumption that individuals who are often classified as 'developmentally abnormal,' 'incompetent', or 'non-rational' do not engage in agentic, self-determined action. A case in point would be individuals with intellectual disability, which is characterized by limitations in intellectual functioning, as well as conceptual, social, and adaptive skills that originated before age 18 (Schalock et al., 2010). Persons with intellectual disability have historically been described as 'feeble-minded,' 'imbeciles,' 'mentally retarded,' and with other lamentable terms indicating societal designation as 'developmentally abnormal' or 'socially incompetent' (Carey, 2010; Noll & Trent, 2004; Radford, 1994; Rapley, 2004; Trent, 1994). And yet, empirical evidence demonstrates that persons with intellectual disability often do engage in agentic, self-determined action (Dukes & McGuire, 2009; Gill, 2015; Kelm, 2009; Leiter, 2012; Wehmeyer, 2005; Wehmeyer & Mithaug, 2006) – but would be dismissed by many life course scholars as not having this potential. Fortunately, there is a way out of this conceptual quagmire.

4. Linked lives and its relationship with human agency

Contrary to the substantialist tendency in modern sociology to accept individuals as independent agentic beings capable of making free and rational choices, recent work within sociology and psychology advances the idea that social relationships are a fundamental component of human agency (Bandura, 2006; Burkitt, 2016; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Ratner, 2000). From a relational perspective, human agency is not an essentialist property of an individual, detached from the larger social worlds and relationships. Rather, agency only comes into being *through interactions* with these social worlds and within these relationships (Burkitt, 2016; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). As such, a relational perspective on agency shifts attention away from seeing agency as an independent action of individuals toward viewing agency as a "intrinsically social and relational" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 973).

Bandura (1989) provides one of the earliest articulations of a relational understanding of agency within the field of psychology. By differentiating between individual and collective forms of agency, he insists that "many," but not all, agentic actions occur within interdependent social relationships (2000, p. 75). Ratner pushes this idea forward within psychology by contending that *at all times* human agency "depends on" or "needs" social relations (Ratner, 2000). Despite recognizing the social aspects of agency, neither Bandura nor Ratner clarify whether by social relationships they mean interpersonal relationships alone, or whether this may entail relationships with other social entities mentioned in their work, such as "collective" groups or actions, culture, and/or larger social structures or institutions. Sociologists Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 963) and Burkitt (2016, p. 336) agree with Ratner when they assert that *all* agentic action is "temporally embedded" or "constituted" within social relationships. Additionally, they provide more clarity on their intended meaning of social relationships, explaining that while often constituted by interpersonal relationships, social relationships may also be composed of relationships with larger social structures or institutions (Burkitt, 2016, p. 331), or "places, meanings, and events" within society (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 973).[1]

This relational understanding of agency developed within psychology and sociology is consistent with life course thought in that it emphasizes that agentic action develops and unfolds over time, in the midst of social relationships, and within the bounds of larger social structures and institutions. On at least one occasion, it appears that Hitlin and Elder (2007a, p. 37) concur with the idea that agency is closely intertwined with relationships, suggesting that "[A]gency also *depends on* [italics added] social relations, though it is often mischaracterized as simply a characteristic of individuals." Yet, as is the case in general with life course thought, their understanding of the relational aspects of agency are in need of theoretical development and empirical exploration. Due to this lingering underdevelopment in their conceptualization of agency, later in the same paper they make seeming contradictory claims, asserting that agency "*exists within* [italics added] networks of social relationships," and is in its essence "a property of individuals" (pp. 49–50). In the midst of these conflicting descriptions of the ways in which relationships may or may not influence agency – as either a fundamental component of agency on which it is dependent, or simply part of the larger social context in which agency exists – Hitlin and Elder (2007a) limit their empirical analysis of agency to include only cursory measures for social relationships, then briefly report that "positive relations" increased a sense of agency among young adults in their study.

Possibly recognizing the nascent, and inconsistent, aspects of their reflections on the relational aspects of agency, Hitlin and Elder state their intention to explore the effect of "social networks" on agency in future work (2007a, p. 58). But they do not offer specific ideas or directions for advancing a relational understanding of agency. Instead, reflecting a perspective similar to Bandura, they persist in their view of agency as a "socially mediated, individual-level property," speculating that "social supports" or "relationships" *may*, at times, foster agentic action (Hitlin & Elder, 2007a, pp. 39, 57Hitlin and Elder, 2007aHitlin & Elder, 2007a, pp. 39, 57). This critique extends to the subsequent work of Hitlin and colleagues on agency (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Hitlin & Kwon, 2016; Hitlin & Long, 2009).[2] As a result, in their empirical analysis of agency, Hitlin and Elder (2007a, p. 43) hypothesize a parsimonious relationship between interpersonal relationships and agency that allows for agency to develop either in the midst of, or outside of, social relationships:

> Although individuals who develop within more isolated constructs may develop high senses of agency, we suspect that positive development occurs within supportive social networks. Such support allows individuals latitude for making mistakes in terms of emotional (and possibly financial) support. Such relationships can facilitate the development of a sense of personal efficacy through guiding individuals toward repeated success that, over time, lead to a sense of efficacy. Also, one might feel more optimistic about one's life chances if they feel as if they are not encountering problems alone.

In the understanding of agency put forth by Hitlin and Elder, positive support received within interpersonal relationships *may* increase feelings of efficacy as individuals deal with life's challenges, and in turn, *may* increase a sense of optimism about the future. What is clearly evident in their brief description is that agency is not in any way *dependent upon* interpersonal relationships. Instead, interpersonal relationships are an optional or separable aspect of agency, indicated by their assertion that individuals "within more isolated constructs may develop high senses of agency."

This strikes us as curious, especially as the principle of linked lives is paramount to Elder's earlier conceptions of the life course paradigm – that "lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships" (Elder et al., 2004, p. 13). Discussing the importance of linked lives in his earlier work, Elder (1994, p. 6) explains that "[N]o principle of life course study is more central than the notion of interdependent lives. Human lives are typically embedded in social relationships with kin and friends across the life span." Given the centrality of linked lives in a life course perspective, and the natural ways in which agency is entangled with linked lives, why are interpersonal relationships underdeveloped in conceptions of agency? A sociological perspective on agency demands robust development of the intersection of linked lives and agency. It is here that we hope to help advance the field, as this shortcoming reflects deeper problems in life course thought.

As detailed throughout this paper, the logical contradiction of trying to impose an exclusionary restriction on the universality of agency – that is, in asserting that agency is universal, except for persons who are

[1] In his discussion of relational sociology, Emirbayer (1997) conceptualizes society as "nothing but pluralities of associated individuals." Thus, it could reasonably be concluded that human agency is dependent upon interpersonal relations, even when being described in relation to social structures. However, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) do not provide the same description to their discussion of "places, meanings, or events," and do not carry this line of thought into their more formal discussion of agency.

[2] In their review of agency within life course thought, Hitlin and Kwon (2016, p. 440) recognize that conceptions of agency and linked lives are "more intertwined" within collectivist East-Asian cultures. This would seem to suggest that a largely individualistic conceptualization of agency may not account for culturally different understandings of agency in non-Western societies. One might similarly wonder whether individualistic conceptualizations of agency are adequate for non-collectivist Western societies as well.

'developmentally abnormal' – creates a deficiency in life course thought. Contrary to this argument, persons with cognitive and other kinds of limitations do exhibit agency, although they may struggle more than others to develop it on their own and are more dependent on relationships with others to do so. And yet, *for all persons* – even the "developmentally normal" – 'personal' agency is not so much personal as it is interpersonal, a direct function of linked lives. Confirmation that individuals with cognitive and other kinds of limitations exhibit agency *dependent* upon interpersonal relationships, a characteristic of agency common to all human experience, reveals a deeper fault line that prevents life course thought from developing a more robust understanding of the intersection of agency and linked lives.

The notion that agency is most purely or exclusively a characteristic of 'independent' individuals both contradicts reality and reifies a problematic view of human experience. Agency is primarily relational rather than individual. Yet, the relational aspect of agency is undermined by the moral imperative of modern Western life that agentic individuals should be "active, intentional, autonomous, independent, capable, and constantly willing and able to make deliberative choices in their lives" (Burkitt, 2016, p. 329). The mantra associated with this imperative, as Reader (2007, p. 580) poignantly observes, is: "when I am an agent, I am, I count. But when I am passive, incapable, constrained, dependent, I am less a person, I count less."

Thus, reconceptualizing agency as primarily existing within the context of linked lives demands a fundamental shift in thought. To say that agency is relational means that any agentic action of an individual is, at any given point in time, *dependent* upon the individual's interpersonal relationships. What we are arguing is distinct from the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), and Burkitt (2016). We wholeheartedly agree that agency does not occur in individuals in ways that are independent of social relations because "agency appears only among people in their relational contexts" (Burkitt, 2016, p. 332). Furthermore, we fully recognize that agency often involves social relationships with larger social structures and institutions. However, contrary to their contention that the relational aspect of agency may be constituted by either interpersonal relationships *or* relationships with larger social groups or structures, we contend that linked lives is not an optional component of agency. They are inseparable. Thus, agency is always dependent not just upon social relationships in general, but specifically on interpersonal relationships. In our minds, this is one of the most compelling contributions that life course thought offers a conceptualization of agency.

Again, this argument applies to all persons. It may simply be seen more easily in individuals with various forms of disability, in youth who are gradually acquiring independence as they enter adulthood, and in older people who are struggling to maintain independence as they move through life's final decades. Indeed, a primary critique levelled by disability scholars is aimed at the assumption that any person, with or without a disability, is actually 'independent' of others. Viewing independence as a culturally constructed fiction of modern society, these scholars point out that no person is completely independent, even – and perhaps especially – in the many decades of adulthood as we rely on one another for physical and emotional care, encouragement, and social and material support, and as we simultaneously hold roles of spouse, parent, worker, and other statuses that deepen our interdependence with others (Kittay, 2001; Oliver, 1990; Rossetti, Ashby, Arndt, Chadwick, & Kasahara, 2008; Wehmeyer & Mithaug, 2006). As Oliver (1990, pp. 83–84) describes, "the dependence of disabled people. . . is not a feature which marks them out as different in *kind* from the rest of the population but as different in *degree*" (italics added).

In accepting the assumption of independence as a hallmark of human agency, life course theory seems to have relinquished its commitment to understanding linked lives and its corresponding recognition of the inherently interpersonal aspects of human agency. Assessing the state of life course research, Settersten (2009, p. 78) contends that, despite the frequent reference to the principle of linked lives in the life course literature, the reality is that "we too often study individuals as if they exist in isolation of others, and our methods further fracture whole people into tiny variables," leaving the field "undersocialized." To simply evoke the sentiment that lives are linked reveals little about "their nature, length, purposes, or consequences" (Settersten, 2015, p. 223) – and in the case of the topic at hand, how these aspects of interpersonal relationships affect the agency of the people involved. To further clarify our perspective, we turn to the life history of one woman with an intellectual disability.

5. Life histories and the revelation of human agency

The use of life histories is central to understanding life course dynamics (Brückner & Mayer, 1998; Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1988; Giele & Elder, 1998; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Mayer & Tuma, 1990; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Ideally, they should focus primarily on the "individual level of action," revealing "*human agency* as a key element in shaping and directing an individual's life path" amid "social constraints and opportunity" (Giele & Elder, 1998, pp. 12, 17). Several life histories documented by disability scholars convey the stories of individuals with intellectual disability, each illustrating complex and meaningful expressions of agency that are present in the midst of and admixture of competence and incompetence, independence and dependence, and that vary by conditions of social environments and across the life course (Angrosino, 1994; Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Booth & Booth, 1994; Edgerton, 1993; Langness & Levine, 1986; Stuart, 2002; van Heumen, 2015). For individuals with intellectual disability, indicators of agency can especially be seen in the resistance to social marginalization that stems from labels of incompetence. The same can be seen in the life histories of individuals and whole populations who similarly exist in socially marginalized categories, such as those related to race, ethnicity, or sexuality (García, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles, 2008; Kimmel, 1980; Sparkes, 1994; Wilkinson, Magora, Garcia, & Khurana, 2009). The life histories of these marginalized groups often reveal experiences of being victimized and controlled by larger social systems. At the same time, they demonstrate the achievement of agency through "resistance in the face of adversity; agency in the shaping of their lives; and a capacity to reflect on how, and why, they survived" (Atkinson, 2010, p. 9).

5.1. The case of Pattie Burt

To illustrate the power of challenging these assumptions and shifting the perspective, we draw upon the life history of an individual with intellectual disability, Pattie Burt (pseudonym), as reported by sociologists Bogdan and Taylor (1994). We choose the life history of an individual with intellectual disability because persons with this disability have historically been assumed to be abnormal and/or incompetent and, as such, especially marginalized within conceptualizations of human agency (Aldred, 2013; Carlson & Kittay, 2010; Trent, 1994).

Pattie was born in 1955 into a violent and unstable family in which her parents struggled with multiple addictions and lacked the emotional and financial resources needed to support their children. Pattie's parents placed her and her sister in foster care when Pattie was two years old. She was diagnosed as having an intellectual disability early in life, with an IQ in the low 60 s to 70 s, and was often labelled by professionals as a "problem child" or "disturbed." Between the ages of two and eight, Pattie lived in 21 different foster homes. Between the ages of eight and 16, she was placed in a succession of state institutions for individuals with disability. After age 16, Pattie left the state institution and moved into the community, temporarily living in a "transition center," then with families she met through a church or through her caseworker, briefly with her mother, and eventually in her own apartment. Although her life in the community was filled with substantial personal and social challenges, she was able to work, attend

church, participate in social activities with others, and engage in meaningful relationships.

Pattie provided a detailed narrative of her time in foster homes and state institutions, including disturbing stories of severe discrimination, physical abuse, and neglect. Most pertinent to our objective was her explanation of the limitations that were imposed on her agency within these facilities. In life course thought, these would be instances in which Pattie's agency was *bound* by social structures and policies. With foster parents and institutional staff often assuming or outright telling her she was "stupid," Pattie stated: "they wouldn't let me make up my mind half the time about what I wanted to do" (p. 147). Though commonly misinterpreted as instances of misbehavior, her story does include glimpses of agency, often seen in her aborted attempts to make minor choices, and in her refusal to follow the arbitrary commands of foster parents or institutional staff. One example of Pattie's attempts to express her agency in the midst of the severe limitations of her foster home occurred around meals:

> We had pepper and onions that night. I don't like them so I told her, 'I can't eat those things.' She said, 'Yes you are; don't tell me that you're not or I will shove them down your throat.' I said, "No, you're not going to feed me either." So she forced them down me and I heaved up. She made me really sick. There was another incident. . . She made me eat something that I couldn't stand again. Then she made me go to bed at 6:00 o'clock because I gave her a hard time. She made me go to bed after my [foster] father was through hitting me. . . When he whipped me it was with a horse whip. (pp. 96–97)

Another occurred upon her arrival to one of the state institutions:

> I will never forget my first experience. The counselor told me to go in and clean out my room. I didn't want to. I wanted to read some books. Well, anyway, she also wanted me to clean the bathtub that everyone in the cottage uses. I told her, 'I'm not cleaning that tub. I didn't use it last. I got really upset. I put on one of my temper tantrums. I started stomping up and down and banging my head up against the wall. The counselor came in again and said, 'What's the matter, Pattie?' I said, 'I don't want to clean that tub.' I remember that Heather was the one that used it last. . . Well, anyway, the counselor told me, without even checking, 'Heather didn't use it last.' She made me clean it. (p. 104)

As is apparent in these as well as numerous other incidents that Pattie shared, her efforts to engage in agentic activity were severely constrained by the policies and procedures of the facilities in which she lived. Similar to the life course theories described earlier, these policies and procedures were constructed or exercised under the assumption that people like Pattie did not have the rational capacity to make choices or decisions. Reflecting on her time in one of the state institutions, Pattie intimated her own perception that her agency was structurally restricted due to misperceptions of her capabilities:

> We were really just slow learners. That's what I was. To me that was not retardation at all. . . They called it a training school. Now they call it a developmental center. Those names don't hit no bell. Developmental sounded to me like they were really trying to get kids developed. That's not what really goes on there. They try to make a name for it, but the names they are using is not what they are doing at all. They should name it for what they are doing, but they don't want anybody to know. I would name it 'prison.' A prison home. That is really what it was. (pp. 136–137)

While apparent that Pattie's agency was severely curtailed by the policies and procedures enforced within the institutions in which she lived, it is important to see that this structural binding of her agency occurred via her interpersonal relationships with her foster parents or institutional staff. In most every instance that Pattie shared, foster parents or institutional staff were engaged in efforts to control her behavior through the enforcement of strict rules and regulations, or through the liberal use of medications, which was common within these settings. However, demonstrating the ability of interpersonal relationships to, at least temporarily, overcome the ways in which oppressive structures can bound agency, Pattie told the story of a state caseworker, Mr. Orwell, who intervened on her behalf during an admission to a state institution:

> I was afraid, walking into that administration building. I walked in with Mr. Orwell and my mom. They saw my reaction to the place because I was crying. They said, 'She'll be OK.' I said to them, 'Don't leave. Please, I want you to stay around for a little while.' An attendant and a Dr. Shoemaker – she was a lady – she told me, 'You are going to like it here.' I said, 'Yeah?' The attendant said, 'Are you going to eat? It is good food. You really need to eat after driving all that way.' I sat down, but I couldn't eat. The stuff looked like ground puke, really. It was terrible – ground food. Ground meat, ground vegetables, and milk. I said, 'I don't want this.' Mr. Orwell said, 'Don't make her eat it.' (p. 112)

Unfortunately, while the intervention of her caseworker did enable a minor expression of Pattie's agency on this one occasion, as soon as the caseworker and her mother departed, the binding of Pattie's agency resumed in full.

The combined effect of social structures and interpersonal relationships not only limited Pattie's agency while she lived in these institutions, but also led to difficulties when she moved into the community. It is at this point that Pattie's narrative illustrates the difficulty with viewing agency simply within the context of social structures or social relations in general. Upon being discharged from the state institution, Pattie was freed from the social structures and policies that had severely curtailed her agency for the first 16 years of her life. And yet, her narrative reveals that she struggled to engage in agentic behavior, even living in the community. Pattie explained:

> The major problem with people leaving the state school is that you are so used to everything being handed to you. Like your food is provided, and you don't have to cook. You don't know how to do your laundry. They do it for you. They won't let you touch the washer. When you get out, it is not fun because you don't know what the outside is all about. They don't tell you about expenses, like food. I never learned anything about food. I never had to get a balanced meal before getting out. They never showed you what a nutritional diet was.. . . When you get out you're lost. You gotta go 'round asking people and you feel kind of stupid. Here you are in an apartment. If you are in an apartment, people would look at you and think you don't know what you are doing. You ask these questions that everyone else knows. It gets them wondering. (p. 184)

However, through a litany of good and bad decisions, multiple attempts at finding a secure living environment, and a resolute desire not to ever return to a state institution, Pattie's agency gradually developed and expanded. Despite the assumptions that the institution's policies, procedures, and staff made about her lack of agency, at the age of 21, five years after leaving the state institution, Pattie described a very different picture of her life, one replete with agency. One example is found in her negotiation of rent payments:

> I am on my own. Right now I make $2.10 an hour. That's $130 every two weeks as my net pay. After they take the tax out and I bring it home it's about $112. This last check, I got $100 because I missed some days, so I wasn't able to pay my landlord the full amount due. I told him that I would give him the $50 now, and I would give him the $30 plus $70 when I get paid again. The rent is $150 so I pay him $70 one time and $80 the other. . . (p. 183).

This example begs the question: what changed? How did Pattie transition from struggling to adapt to living in the community to displaying the agency to make reasonable choices regarding her finances and responsibilities? In the midst of a detailed description of her

choices regarding shopping for groceries, Pattie answered these questions:

> Meat is expensive and fish isn't cheap. I buy frozen vegetables because I like them better than the canned stuff. You don't know what's in those cans. I used to have ice cream and stuff like that, but I don't have sweets now. . . I am on a diet. . . Mrs. Mack, my friend from the church I belong to, took me food shopping last Saturday. . . She said to me, 'Pat, let me take you shopping and I will help you compare prices.' So she took me to the store. Let me tell you, going with her and learning how to compare prices and how to find out what's the best buy helped me save. I usually come home with only two bags and I came home with three and still had extra money in my pocket to spend. This is because she took me. When I go by myself I picked up anything. I don't really stop to think what I'm buying. I'm in a big hurry, in such a rush. Somebody is behind you pushing you along and you grab anything. When you get out of the state school you don't know where to go. You don't know where to turn to, and if you don't find friends you are just stuck. . . I am speaking for myself now, but I feel I have been successful outside because I have listened to people with advice. . . My pastor helped me to budget. He showed me the different things about budgeting. Church has always been something for me, because I found people who were really able and willing to help. (pp. 183–185)

Pattie Burt's life story proves informative to understanding human agency on multiple levels. First, it illustrates the problem of assuming that agency is only present among those who are "developmentally normal." In small amounts in her early life within the foster system and state institutions, and to a larger degree after she moved into the community at age 16, Pattie was quite capable of engaging in agentic behavior. Thus, life course theory must recognize that contrary to the assumption of modern rationalism, agency can be present in the lives of those who are deemed 'developmentally abnormal' or 'socially incompetent' and can grow and develop over time. As a result, agency should not be denied *prima facie* to those who may be considered 'developmentally abnormal,' as was the case in Pattie's experience. Unfortunately, Pattie's narrative is not an outlier, but is indicative of many persons with intellectual or other types of disability, who are too often deemed as 'abnormal' by society. As her narrative reveals, as well as the told and untold stories of many others, the direct effect of this erroneous assumption resulted in a dismal history of unnecessary and unjust social marginalization and abuse for persons with intellectual disability that, in many ways, continues to this day.

Second, Pattie's story affirms the contention in the life course literature that agency is bounded by larger social structures and historical context, and by settings of everyday life. An individual's position within society, and the characteristics of their local settings, determine the opportunities to develop and exhibit agentic behavior. Although there are glimpses of agency in Pattie's early life, and at least one occasion when an interpersonal relationship temporarily increased her agency, it did not fully develop until she moved out of the state institution. Had she lived during a time prior to the deinstitutionalization movement (Lerman, 1985; Mechanic & Rochefort, 1990), she may have spent her entire life within state institutions and never been afforded the opportunity to fully develop her agentic capacity. Despite the fact that she was born amid the deinstitutionalization movement, Pattie described a life in which her agency was seriously curtailed, not primarily because of her individual challenges, but because her social environments, and the relationships present within these environments, did not teach her to develop it or permit her to express it. Indeed, it is not until she left the state institution at age 16 and moved into less restrictive community settings that Pattie experienced greater freedom in her choices and a sort of unbounding of her agency. Yet, it is imperative to see that Pattie's agency did not develop simply due to the fact that she moved to a less restrictive social environment. Loosening the bounds of the social structures is not sufficient for the development and expression of agency.

More importantly, Pattie's story powerfully reveals that agency is *dependent upon interpersonal relationships*. That is, her ability to engage in agentic behavior was constrained by the *people* in the foster families she lived in, and the *people* working in the schools and institutions she attended, where she was highly controlled and on many occasions abused. In the early part of her life history, her attempts at agency amount to resistance, such as refusing to eat or clean a bath tub, which staff often misinterpret as problematic behavior. Neither the social structures in which she lived, nor the interpersonal relationships that surrounded her life provided opportunity for her to develop her agency. Yet, her move into the community, away from the highly restrictive social structures of the state institution, did not automatically unbound her agency. Pattie struggled to make decisions as she did not have prior opportunity to develop her agency. Instead, according to her own account, Pattie's agency developed and expanded once she formed supportive friendships in the community that helped her learn and grow. Or as she explained, "if you don't find friends you are just stuck." Though informed by her social location and individual characteristics, the development of Pattie's agency was *dependent* upon interpersonal relationships.

6. Conclusion and future directions

The notion of human agency is central to the study of the life course. Most conceptualizations of agency in the life course literature, however, have not acknowledged or treated its relational aspects; those few that do, do so only superficially, as if interpersonal relationships are an optional or peripheral component of agency. In contrast, we demonstrated that human agency cannot be truly or fully understood without acknowledging that it is at all times in life, and for all people, dependent upon interpersonal relationships. As such, advances in the conceptualization and measurement of agency must account for linked lives. To do so will require that life course scholars also tend to how their notions of agency – intentionally or unintentionally – judge people, exclude populations, and reify constructs related to being 'developmentally abnormal' and 'socially incompetent.' It will similarly demand more critical reflection on the assumption or the insistence – knowingly or not – that having agency requires that people and populations are 'independent.' Without these shifts, current models of agency are not logically or empirically appropriate – or accurate in reflecting the reality of lives.

There is significant need to explicate a wider range of types of individual agency, understand how levels and types of agency for a given individual vary across different spheres of life and are nurtured or hastened by social environments and by the *people* and *practices* in those environments. Individuals are never disconnected from interpersonal relationships. Although individuals may at times be alone, and act without direct consultation with an intimate, they are never outside of the sphere of influence of their interpersonal relationships, whether past or present. Even in their most independent moments, individuals draw from the wellspring of their relational histories when making decisions and taking actions. The life history of Pattie Burt readily illustrates these realities.

Acknowledging that persons who are often described as 'developmentally abnormal' or 'socially incompetent' have agency is not our ultimate goal here. Instead, it is to affirm that the agency of all people, at all times in life, is fostered, constrained, or otherwise conditioned by social relationships. Furthermore, all people experience at some point in their adult lives events that increase their levels of dependence – physical illness, disability, mental health issues or illnesses, older age, injury, lack of social resources. Our levels of agency fluctuate. Are we content in moments, or long stretches, of such dependence to have our capacity measured simply by our ability to act independently? Or, would we rather that others realize that our social environments and interpersonal relationships bind and/or amplify our level of agency?

This latter point about amplification is important: Interpersonal relationships do not only constrain individual agency; they also make agency possible or heighten it. Much of what masquerades as 'independence' actually rests on social relationships and the resources and opportunities received or marshalled through them.

Methodologically, it is also imperative that life course scholars move beyond the tendency to categorically exclude entire groups of people from agency. One way to do so is to more carefully consider agency within the life histories of persons who display increased levels of dependence. When focusing on vulnerable or marginalized populations, as in this paper, we should question our assumptions and test the limits of normative theories. But this is no less important to do for other populations. We chose to utilize a critical disability perspective, not simply to reflect on the experiences of persons with disability but to instead view disability as "the space from which to think through a host of political, theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all" (Goodley, 2011, p. 157). Pattie's life history demonstrates that not only do people considered "developmentally abnormal" have agency, but that policies, procedures, and people (regulations, power relationships, etc.) can deny or strip people of opportunities to learn how to be agentic and to find ways to express it, or similarly, to bring it out of people.

We believe the immediate benefit of recognizing the inseparability of agency and linked lives will be to help clarify how individual characteristics and/or social environments influence agency. Our contention is that both do so *through* interpersonal relationships. This is apparent in Pattie's story. While her recollection of the severe boundedness of her agency within foster homes and state institutions included descriptions of the policies of these organizations, Pattie's emphasis was on how individuals who enforced and/or abused these policies curtailed her agency. It was obvious that Pattie possessed individual characteristics necessary to engage in agentic action. Yet, once freed from the severely binding social structure of the state institution and situated in a social environment that presented more opportunities for agency, she did not automatically develop in her agency. Instead, she did so as she met and interacted with friends who were willing to take the time to assist her in her growth and development.

In illustrating our argument with the life history of an individual with intellectual disability, we are not rejecting the reality that there are individual differences in agency – that some persons have more agency than others or, that they have it in different ways, or that they have different levels or types of agency in different spheres of life, or in different environments, or with different people. In fact, disability scholars readily accept that cognitive limitations can limit levels of agency (Becker, 2000; Kittay, 2001). In addition, we are not denying that, in rare instances, it may be that some persons do not have agency due to the severity of their impairment. However, our concern is not with deciding *prima facie* who does and does not have it, or who these persons are or what characteristics prevent them from having/not having agentic capacity. In our view, this is not a helpful way to move forward, as it reifies many of the problems we have already noted and runs the risk of marginalizing 'non-normative' populations.

Instead, we are concerned with conceptualizing agency in such a manner that is sensitive to its relational aspects and maximizes its levels or types in all persons. In order to achieve this goal, life course theory must not erroneously suggest that whole groups of people, such as those with intellectual disability, do not have and will not develop agency simply because they do not or cannot conform to culturally normative standards of rationality and human development. Instead, it must more thoroughly explore how interpersonal relationships can expand or suppress the boundaries of agency for persons across the life course, despite inter-individual variation in agentic capacity.

It is obvious in Pattie's story that some of her interpersonal relationships hindered or blocked the development of her agency, while others nurtured and encouraged the development and expression of her agency. It is possible that some of the pathways by which Pattie's relationships influenced her agency are common to all persons. Thus, it is necessary to discern the general agentic boundaries of interpersonal relationships – the characteristics of relationships that either expand or suppress agency for all persons. However, it is also possible that other pathways through which interpersonal relationships shape agency may be unique to specific groups of persons due to the particularities of their level or type of dependence, and/or their social locations.

In order for life course scholarship to obtain a more profound understanding of the inseparability of agency in linked lives, our hope is that others will expand on our effort and devote increased attention to the life histories of people and groups who are vulnerable or marginalized in various ways. This will both help our field root out and respond to marginalizing conceptualizations of agency, and delineate both the universal and the unique characteristics of individuals, social settings, and interpersonal relationships that hinder or foster human agency across the life course. For example, we think this should at least include persons with disability (and the inevitability for everyone of adapting to losses associated with normal aging, let alone the management of chronic illnesses and major disability), those in the criminal justice system (monitored, incarcerated), immigrants and others in flux socially and legally, and other groups that society wrongfully deems as non-human, or does not allow to be fully human. And yet, as we do so, it is important to remember that the interdependency of agency and interpersonal relationships is not only characteristic of those in more vulnerable groups, but of all human beings.

As agency is clarified and developed as a concept and in theory and research, it will be important to advance its measurement. This has not been our focus, but we note two concerns moving forward. The first regards the conceptual framing of measures of interpersonal agency in quantitative models. Based on the arguments of this paper, relationships cannot be viewed as an optional component of agency; agency is always dependent on relationships – specific relationships from aspects of larger social networks down to familial and non-familial networks and dyads (Alwin, Felmlee, & Kreager, 2018; Bernardi, Huinink, & Settersten, 2018; Bidart, 2018). It is therefore imperative that life course research develop and include measures – eventually, nuanced measures – of interpersonal relationships that might be components of, determine, or otherwise interact with agency. Models of agency that do not include specific measures of interpersonal relationships, and that do not begin to ascertain how those relationships enable or constrain agency, are incomplete estimations of life course trajectories (Glăveanu, 2015; Levy & Pavie Team, 2005).

The second methodological concern regards samples that are utilized to test empirical models of agency. We assume that many of these samples generally do not include individuals with higher levels of dependence, as these individuals may be excluded due to a determination that they are not competent to participate in research studies. As such, even when including measures for interpersonal relationship in empirical models, life course researchers should explain that results likely are biased toward confirming more individualistic interpretations of agency. Though not always an option, testing interactions between measures of agency and measures of dependence (such as activity limitations due to disability or age), and/or stratifying samples by measures that indicate higher levels of dependence may prove helpful in capturing variation in the effects of individual volition and interpersonal relationships on agency.

We are aware that our suggestions add a layer of complexity to life course research on agency. However, embracing the "complexities of life" was one of the motivating factors behind Elder's vision of the life course perspective. One of his goals in advancing a life course perspective was to "enhance the understanding that human lives cannot be adequately represented when removed from relationships with significant others" (Elder et al., 2004, p. 13). If studies of human agency continue to exclude those with higher levels of interdependence or dependence in interpersonal relationships – again, concerns that are universal, not specific to 'abnormal' or 'incompetent' groups – we lose sight of this original purpose. This would be a missed opportunity for

life course scholarship, which is meant to embrace a rich understanding of the unfolding of human lives across time, situated in the context of social structure, and nurtured within the ebb and flow of interpersonal relationships. It therefore seems imperative to conceptualize agency in ways that are more attentive to linked lives and to challenge to the predominant misunderstanding that agency is an individual characteristic possessed only by 'independent' people. The failure to recognize the inseparability of agency and linked lives limits the full potential of life course theories and methods to reflect and capture the complexity of human lives.

As we stated earlier, we are not denying or arguing against the existence of human agency. We highly value the work of scholars such as Hitlin and Elder who have firmly established human agency as an essential principle in life course thought. Instead, we are arguing for life course theory to stay true to its roots and engage in a more robust conceptualization of agency that fully embraces the reality that all of us, to some degree and across the life course, exhibit agency in the midst of dependence, and that the nature of our social ties can foster or constrain our perceived or actual agency. Thus, the real action for life course research is not found in agency or structure, but instead in their interaction and, especially, in the deep and complicated level of interpersonal relationships.

An interaction from the latter part of Pattie Burt's life story provides a fitting conclusion to our thoughts (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994, p. 186). Commenting on her discomfort with referring to students with cognitive limitations as 'retarded,' she asks the principal of a local school where she is attending night classes, "Why do you call them kids retarded?" The principal explains, "Because they are not normal like we are. They are not able to do the things that we can. They need an awful lot of help which we don't." Pattie responds, "Do you really think that they should be called retarded? Why can't they be called people that need help?" We are asking life course scholars a similar question. Why summarily exclude people who are considered 'developmentally abnormal' or 'socially incompetent' from having agency due to a host of limitations and increased dependence? Why not accept that all of us, with or without disability, are 'people that need help' – people who are able to exhibit different types and degrees of agency, at every point in life, because we are ensconced in and formed by the web of interpersonal relationships of which we are part?

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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