

Concept Paper

# Governing the Life Course through Lifelong Learning: A Multilevel and Multidimensional View

Marcelo Parreira do Amaral <sup>1,\*</sup> and Jenni Tikkanen <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institut of Education, Westfälische Wilhelms Universität-Münster, 48143 Münster, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, Turku Institute for Advanced Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Turku, 20014 Turku, Finland; jenni.tikkanen@utu.fi

\* Correspondence: parreira@uni-muenster.de

**Abstract:** The life course in general, and the educational trajectories of young people in particular, comprise a high degree of complexity as they take place in iterative, recursive and interactive negotiation processes in which numerous actors, institutions and discourses are involved. In this paper, an attempt is made to combine two conceptual discussions—Life Course and Governance—bringing them to bear on the examination of how Lifelong Learning (LLL) policies have been used to govern young people’s life courses. The paper synthesizes different discussions of the complex relations among governance, discourses and structures of opportunity that impact the governing of the life course and particularly educational trajectories. It suggests that the combination of life course research and a governance perspective enables analyzing the governance of educational trajectories along discursive, institutional and relational dimensions of opportunity structures. Considering these various dimensions, the paper argues, allows us to attend to the social interactions, decision-making processes and processing mechanisms that precede and/or underlie educational processes and thus favor or complicate them. The contribution also critically discusses the implications of a governance perspective on life courses and closes with a discussion of the multidimensional and multilevel challenge of governing life course by means of LLL policies.



**Citation:** Parreira do Amaral, M.; Tikkanen, J. Governing the Life Course through Lifelong Learning: A Multilevel and Multidimensional View. *Societies* **2022**, *12*, 84. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12030084>

Academic Editors: Siyka Kovacheva, Xavier Rambla and Gregor Wolbring

Received: 27 April 2022

Accepted: 23 May 2022

Published: 26 May 2022

**Publisher’s Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Keywords:** life course research; governance research; opportunity structures; multilevel research; LLL policy

## 1. Introduction

Notwithstanding the long and rich history of the term Lifelong Learning (LLL), in its *Communication Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* from 2001, the Commission of the European Communities defined LLL as:

*“all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”.* ([1], p. 9, Italics in original)

As its purpose, the Commission sees “personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability” (ibid). Since then, this definition of LLL has oriented a host of strategies and policies at European and national levels. For young people, it offers—in principle—a complex conceptualization that is well in line with the many facets of growing up in Europe; that is, it fits well the multidimensionality of the life course. Despite this conceptual richness, more recently, LLL policymaking further specified a number “key competences for lifelong learning”—as agreed by the Council Recommendations of 22 May 2018 (Council of the European Union (2018/C 189/01))—focusing more closely on specific functions and targeting particular groups of young people, thus resorting both to life course research and LLL to govern social and economic issues.

The life course in general, and the educational trajectories of young people in particular, comprise a high degree of complexity as they take place in iterative, recursive and

interactive negotiation processes in which numerous actors, institutions and discourses are involved. In this article, the complex relations among governance, discourses and structures of opportunity that impact the governing of the life course, particularly educational trajectories, are discussed. An attempt is made to combine two conceptual discussions—Life Course and Governance—bringing them to bear on the examination of how LLL has been used to govern young people’s life courses. As will be argued, the combination of life course research and governance perspective enables the analysis of the governance of life course along the discursive, institutional and relational dimensions, as well as of the social interactions, decision-making processes and processing mechanisms that precede and/or underlie educational processes and, thus, favor or complicate them. In a critical vein, the implications of viewing the life course from a governance perspective are also considered, in particular when local contexts are considered.

The contribution starts by introducing life course research and the governance perspective. It briefly presents the central features of both of these conceptual frameworks and deliberates on the added value of this combination. In concluding this section, the article questions the extent to which life course de-standardization processes have served as a governance occasion with LLL policies seen as an attempt to (re-)standardize and (re-)regulate the life course of young people. In a second section, the article shifts the analytical lens and offers a multilevel and multidimensional perspective on the governing of the life course. Here, a discussion of three types of opportunity structures—institutional, discursive and relational—focuses on the main features impacting the governing of young people’s life courses across Europe. The article is rounded out with some concluding remarks and an outlook to open questions.

## 2. Viewing the Life Course from a Governance Perspective

Life course is colloquially understood as the documentation of the sequences and the combinations of transitions between positions and stages through which individuals pass along their lives, especially institutionalized stages such as school, training, military or civil service and work. In sociology, research on life course defines it as “a social institution (. . .) in the sense of a rule system that orders a central realm or a central dimension of life” ([2], p. 1, own translation). An individual’s life course is multidimensional as it develops in different mutually related and influencing life domains, and life courses are a part and a product of societal and historical multilevel processes [3]. While subjective choices and individual resources impact life course formation, the negotiation and construction of life courses are always embedded in institutional macrosocial frames such as the labor market, education programs and the welfare mix, as well as more intangible frames such as social inequality, systems of relations and age norms [4–6].

Institutional configurations reflect their temporal and spatial surroundings, and life course analysis is directly related to the institutional, meso-social setup that structures the social space of a societal unit [7]. As such, the concept of the life course provides a useful conceptual tool to conceive of and examine biographies and educational trajectories embedding them in temporal, institutional and individual processes of growing up in modernity. As Elder suggested, the life course consists of “age-graded trajectories” ([8], p. 5) in which one’s individuality and skill sets are formed and perceptions by institutional regulations and policies constructed. Life course describes both the evolving of the developmental process of growing older into society, and the view of a “normal life” as it is constructed by the contextual structure in which it is embedded. As a lifelong process, it encompasses several life spheres “ranging from structured pathways through social institutions and organizations to the social trajectories of individuals and their developmental pathways” [8]. As an institutionalization process, it combines perceptions of normative, legal and organizational rules that define the social and temporal organization of human lives. In other words, the life course may be seen as an outcome of institutional regulations and policies. Since these perceptions can become universal expectations in which life events appear in a uniform timing, which is indicated, for example, by regulated events, such as school

entry age ([9], p. 32), one may speak of the standardization of life courses as a historical process in which the life course became closely linked to a given society's expectations as it constructs aims and goals for different life stages and age roles.

During the past decades, however, social modernization has favored a faster process of individualization releasing life opportunities from communal bounds and endorsing a loosening of traditional age and gender roles and life transitions. In this regard, it is generally assumed that increased choice and autonomy result in manifold life course choices and, therefore, pluralization and de-structuration of life courses [10]. Alongside these processes, it stimulated the expansion of more focused institutions tailor-made to all segments and sequences of the life course, making the welfare state the main responsible for its normative regulation. Furthermore, falling birth rates and growing longevity have led to major shifts in population growth and age structure. Accordingly, life courses have become more discontinuous and disordered. They now include an increasing age variability of professional and personal transitions as social paths become ever more varied and uncertain due to labor markets' instability [11–13]. Thus, the course and the sequence of the life course phases cannot be taken for granted in today's societies [14], and particularly the different transitions related to progressing from youth to adulthood have become more prolonged and non-linear (e.g., [15]).

These processes of disintegration are embedded in the broader context of social change due to overarching social, economic, and cultural processes, such as those encapsulated by globalization, internationalization and Europeanization [16], and they result in de-standardization of life courses. Whereas the process of standardization refers "to processes by which specific states or events and/or sequences in which they occur, become more universal for given populations or that their timing becomes more uniform", the process of de-standardization refers to life states, events and their sequences characterizing an increasingly smaller part of a population or occurring at more dispersed ages and with more dispersed situations ([9], pp. 32–33). The socially constructed time points are not only suspended but also vary in length, altering the successive life course phases. While school-to-work transitions progress over a somewhat distinct life span, transitions into different work careers and family statuses are not necessarily finalized at a distinct point in time but rather unfold as more open and unresolved processes ([8], p. 5). This results in the life course being characterized by a high reversibility and uncertainty—changes and transitions can be reversed by individual's decisions or external influences. For example, flexibility within labor biographies increases: working in the same job lifelong, usually in the same company, may no longer be the "normal" life course. Rather, alternating phases of vocational training, labor, unemployment and re-entry into the labor market become the rule. Standardized "normal" biographies can no longer be seen as certain and fixed nor do they provide role models for all.

Importantly, the responsibility for "failure" in life transitions is increasingly individualized [12,17,18] despite, for example, the fact that an individual's location within power structures still strongly affects the formation of their life course [19–21] as life courses are cumulative processes in which (dis)advantages follow a logic of path dependence [22–24]. Furthermore, policies and social expectations still are very much based on a standardized view of the "normal" life course with a linear and uninterrupted education–work–retirement trajectory, and deviations from it are perceived as faults or problems to be solved [25]. Difficulties young people experience in the transition from education to work are usually deemed as particularly central in this regard [26]. Despite the context of increasing societal uncertainty and labor market volatility, individuals are not only expected to seek biographical solutions to society's structural problems and avoid deviations from the "normal" life course, but they are also considered personally responsible for their successes and failures in this task [17].

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge, that while the view that life courses have become less predictable, stable and collectively determined and, hence, increasingly flexible and individualized has become a widely accepted perception [7,9,27], empirical

studies assessing the extent to which individuals are turning away from the “standard” life course have produced inconclusive evidence of de-standardization as a growing mass phenomenon (see e.g., [9,28–30]). For example, Widmer and Ritschard [31] have reviewed various empirical studies examining the hypothesis that the de-standardization of life courses has increased leading to more complex life courses in today’s societies. They argue that the trend towards the pluralization of life courses has been less pervasive than widely assumed, and that empirical evidence suggests that de-standardization is not a general development affecting all individuals, life domains, and life phases in the same way (c.f. [32]). For instance, there are significant national differences in de-standardization levels [30,33]. It has also been argued that the processes of both standardization and de-standardization can operate simultaneously in certain life course domains [32,34], and empirical studies have observed differences in the ways and degrees to which de-standardization manifests in regard to different aspects and domains of life courses [31,34–38], genders [28,31] and social groups [30,38–40]. This underscores the multidimensional, complex and overlapping nature of these processes in individuals’ life courses. Thus, while basing policies and social expectations on the “normal” education-work-retirement trajectory in today’s society is highly problematic, so is also to assume that the de-standardization of the life course is an all-encompassing result of social change. Furthermore, when discussing the effects of increased individualization on the life course, it is both important and useful to make a distinction between de-standardization, which is the diversity between individuals’ life courses, and differentiation, which refers to the movement between states or stages within individual life courses [41].

The life course approach enables an analysis of the ways in which individual lives are affected by macro-level societal conditions and changes, and how different institutions have a filtering role in the way these changes impact individual opportunities, constraints and decision-making [5,10]. It helps to gain more understanding of the processes and mechanisms that translate social change into individuals’ action space, as well as the ways in which individual life courses affect societal phenomena and the life course itself. Here, three conceptual features are pertinent to analyzing life courses from a governance perspective: (1) time horizons (how institutional, macro-economic and political structures form the infrastructure of the modern life course); (2) decision-making (how individuals make decisions shaping their life courses); and (3) institutions (how they collectively both frame/limit the scope of autonomy of individual actors by establishing notions of cultural appropriateness, but also reduce transaction costs).

The next section briefly presents governance research, before we proceed to ask whether and to what extent perceived de-standardization is seen as an occasion to intervene in life courses.

### *2.1. Governance Research*

Although no consensual definition prevails, governance may be best understood as an analytical concept used to indicate important changes in the political field by shifting the perspective from actors to institutions. That is, it focuses on actions within frameworks and on forms of steering and regulation [42,43]. This shift of perspective entails addressing issues of “government”, “management”, “coordination” and “regulation” among the various stakeholders, sectors and levels involved in non-hierarchical and network-like structures [44,45]. As such, the governance perspective allows a differentiated examination of policies by accounting for the intersections of policy sectors, policy field crossings, and different modes of governance [43].

Governance is understood, in the social sciences, for instance, as an interdisciplinary “bridging concept” (cf. [46], p. 373) that links various academic discussions on forms of collective decision-making and implementation in political, legal and administrative sciences, in sociology, and more recently also in education science. Renate Mayntz refers to governance as comprising all forms in which public and private actors, separately or jointly, aim to produce common goods and services and solve collective problems. For her,

“Governance means the sum of all concurrent forms of collective regulation of social issues: from the institutionalized self-regulation of the civil society, through the diverse forms of cooperation among state and private actors, up to the action of sovereign state agents.” ([47], p. 66, own translation).

Governance research focuses on “mechanisms and strategies of coordination adopted in the face of complex reciprocal interdependence among operationally autonomous actors, organizations, and functional systems” ([48], p. 52). Departing from issues such as steering, steering capacity and governability, Mayntz and Scharpf focus on actor-centered institutionalism, meaning “how the interaction between micro- and meso-level actors and institutional factors shapes the possibilities of effective governance” ([49], p. 111). These ideas are a response to a changing understanding of statehood that, in turn, implies a change in forms of coordination of social actions and structures. Affected by these transformations is not only the coordination between different actors and sectors, but also within organizations. Therefore, as an analytical concept, governance puts the focus on structures and processes of regulation [43,47]. The governance perspective helps us to address issues of coordination of action among the different agents within the state, the economy, the labor market, civil society, and not least young people. In short, governance offers us a conceptual instrument to understand the interactions of different actors at different levels and with different mandates, competences and with different degrees of leverage power at their disposal.

The following section discusses how changes in the life course are taken up as an occasion to intervene in the regulation of educational trajectories of young people.

## 2.2. Life Course de-Standardization as Governance Occasion

As discussed above, there is a broad debate as to whether or not the normative power of institutionalized life courses is diminishing and a pervasive process of de-standardization of the life courses is taking place. Policy making has taken up the developments of de-standardization and differentiation of life courses as opportunities for intervention, as argued below.

In prevailing policy discourses—despite the far-reaching structural changes increasing discontinuity and disorder in people’s lives—disruptions in and deviations from the linear “normal” life course progression are viewed as individual faults or problems to be solved by policy interventions to reduce associated risks [25]. In this regard, life course de-standardization both provides “an occasion” for governance to intervene and legitimizes the need for steering life courses, particularly young people’s educational and occupational transitions and trajectories, to take them to the “right” direction or bring them back on the “right” track. This applies all the more for those groups of young people defined as ‘vulnerable’, (see [50,51]). In the context of governance, the life course approach is evoked as it is seen to provide significant evidence for policy making by helping to identify the points where policy can intervene most effectively to fix “wrong” choices and deviating trajectories. Here, the central question regarding the life course is how to make its progression smoother, timelier and freer of disruptions, thus better serving the needs of the economy and the labor market.

As research carried out by Brunila and colleagues (see e.g., [51–53]) shows, varying groups of young people, such as those outside education and work, those from migrant background, and those still looking for their place in society—or even young people in general—are typically conceptualized as vulnerable. This ethos of vulnerability works through discursive practices that do not only state what is desirable, but also what is considered acceptable for individuals’ life courses—and it plays a central role in shaping contemporary youth transition policies [52,54]. This ethos can be approached as a psycho-emotional discourse, a form of neoliberal governance that, as it were, has the capacity to provide more efficient ways of steering and shaping education and training through various opportunities for more tailored and individualized engineering of learning. “This type of governance cultivates policies and techniques for young people to become more

learnable, manageable, and reliable: someone who has development potential, someone who knows their place, and makes realistic plans to achieve them" ([52], p. 118). While this discourse ignores largely the cultural, political, economic and social factors behind the problems young people face, the structural challenges and societal insecurities are still acknowledged as a reason why today's youth needs to become resilient, competitive, self-disciplined—in order to be more employable and able to cope with uncertainty in the labour market and beyond [25,52].

The appeal of the life course approach for governance lies in that life courses can be seen to offer feedback loops, which are central for cybernetic rationality in governing (see [55]). Gadinger and Peters [56] emphasize that cybernetics can be read as a generalized theory of governance that is concerned with how order is created and maintained. It rests on the view that, while disorder is ever increasing, there are some pockets of order—and those pockets are maintained by one central mechanism: feedback management. Feedback loops are mechanisms in which, broadly speaking, a system's output affects the input into that same system and, thus, the system's subsequent output. In this regard, the key for effective steering and controlling is monitoring whether the performed actions had the intended effects and, if not, adjusting the actions accordingly. Governance through feedback must always remain ongoing, because the ultimate result of the feedback process is difficult to predict beforehand, and because disturbances in the environment and distortions in the received information make control via feedback a difficult, precarious process [56]. Besides cybernetic feedback loops—that is, a continuous circular and recurring loop of acting, sensing, comparing to goal and adjusting actions—requires first and foremost information, what enables a cybernetic rationality in life course governance is an instrumental view of the life course together with "objective", measurable and calculable indicators about its progression. This kind of logic is particularly prominent in what Mertenan and colleagues [57] conceptualize as *precision education governance*, which brings together different, increasingly prominent development trends in the governance of education at different levels varying from global to local and joint together by the economically driven ethos. Precision education governance aims to transform education to be more calculable, predictable, efficient and individualized than ever before. The goal is to enhance the efficiency of education and, through that, assess, control and calculate individuals' learning with the ultimate outcome of shaping human subjectivity [52,57]. What results from these developments is that the approach to and the understanding of the life course in governance becomes rather narrow, individualized, de-contextualized and instrumentalist (c.f. [52]) as the multidimensionality, complexity and contextual embeddedness of individuals' life courses does not fit this "field of vision".

In addition to the narrow view of life course in governance, as Parreira do Amaral [58] points out, in European policy agendas, social sciences and humanities—including life course research—are being reduced to their potential for techno-scientific innovations, strategic interventions and instrumental solutions for predefined challenges. Viewing life course research, education research and other fields of social sciences as primarily serving the ends of the dominant economic imaginary reduces their ability to produce more critical, contextualized and alternative knowledge as it narrows the focus to evidence-based strategies overly relying on quantifications and measurements. "This undermines the capacity to provide alternative views or critique imbalances and grievances, leading to a research which is always *for* and never *of* social reality" ([58], p. 129).

The following section departs from the multidimensionality of the life course and discusses three different levels at which life courses are governed through discourses, institutions and interactions.

### 3. A Multilevel and Multidimensional Perspective on Governing the Life Course through LLL

This section synthesizes different discussions of the complex relations among governance, discourses and structures of opportunity that impact the governing of the life

course in general and educational trajectories in particular. It suggests that the combination of life course research and a governance perspective enables the analysis of the governance of educational trajectories along discursive, institutional and relational dimensions of opportunity structures.

*Opportunity structures* represent collective and individual responses to situations facing us. In short, our responses to these situations are fundamentally framed by the kinds of opportunities for thought or action that we have at our disposal, the range of both construals and constructions of the nature of the problem/issue we are facing, and the scope and types of responses from which we might select (see [58,59]). The next paragraphs discuss *discursive*, *institutional* and *relational* types of opportunity structures.

### 3.1. Discursive Opportunity Structures

*Discursive Opportunity Structures* (DOSs) may be seen as setting the boundaries of “the political-cultural or symbolic opportunities that determine what kind of ideas become visible for the public, resonate with public opinion and are held to be ‘legitimate’ by the audience” ([59], p. 72). DOSs set limits on how we may describe and understand particular situations, texts, experiences and such. They may be viewed as a set of meanings, rules and practices, and they are manifest in language use that orients the social construction of political and social relations and institutions as well as cultural identities, which has practical consequences for the social world (c.f. [60,61]).

At the European level, DOSs can be seen as functioning as the common discursive “context of contexts” [62]. For instance, in the field of education, it has become difficult to justify any education policy without some reference to the Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE), LLL or New Public Management [16,63–65]. It is amidst these global hegemonic discourses that most current education policy options originate and are discussed anchored largely in arguments around the need to develop more effective and efficient education systems and enhanced human capital, which will allow European societies to keep pace with the “quantum shift resulting from globalization and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy” [66].

As Parreira do Amaral and Rinne [60] argue, the impact of these common discourses is that governance reforms have been attempted, which aimed, though to differing degrees and with different foci, to optimize the coordination and the outputs of education, thus, better preparing pupils for a putative knowledge-based economy through lifelong learning. Of course, these discourses play out substantially differently at the national and subnational levels; indeed, these differences can change the meaning of the discourses themselves. Nevertheless, in terms of DOSs, these discourses fundamentally set the limits to what the aims and objectives of national policies could be. To be sure, these discourses do not determine policies, but they do set common limitations on their stated purposes and objectives providing powerful DOSs that operate *proscriptively* and on a basis of *exclusion* rather than inclusion, that is, to rule out policies that do not conform to the KBE/LLL discourse instead of prescribing particular policies (c.f. [58]). Though these policies may be contested at national and other levels, the contestation takes place *within* the opportunity structure provided by the discourse itself, rather than providing alternatives. While national variations may be substantial and lead to rather different conceptions, framings and implementations affecting access, coping and relevance of education, these variations remain broadly within the common discursive opportunity structure.

### 3.2. Institutional Opportunity Structures

*Institutional Opportunity Structures* (IOSs) impact the governance of educational trajectories and transitions by intervening in the structures, policies and practices that frame a specific education system. These complex and multi-layered features limit, but do not completely control or shape, current or future policies and practices (c.f. [61]).

IOSs entail deeply ingrained and characteristically implicit conceptions about how education systems are set up, the functions they are deemed to fulfil and how they are to

“work” and how they get things done, that is, the set of structures and rules through which the system is organized. Such institutional/organizational frameworks powerfully channel and frame what it is possible to achieve in and through education systems. The purposes, forms, structures and procedures of national educational administrations set fundamental limits to states’ capacity to shape policy and set limits to what could or should be done.

Abundant evidence of this can be found in the varying regulations of entry, progression and further destinations in primary and secondary schools, but also to higher education, across countries, and in the different degrees of selectivity they offer, as mentioned above (see [67,68]). Here, we might also notice that the IOSs also modify the broader DOSs in particular ways, most especially as it reflects and embeds conceptions of the nation(al) as it is expressed through arrangements for formal education. They also help us understand how arrangements at local level play out, for instance, whether or not a particular type of school is available or not.

In terms of common IOSs, research has clustered countries according to the different regulations and institutional/organizational frameworks that frame educational trajectories and “that provide varying levels of access (and accessibility) and display differing degrees of selectivity:

- *high-level comprehensive systems* (FI, SI) where organizational differentiation and degree of selectivity is low and no transitions in compulsory education exist;
- *low-level-differentiated systems* (UK, IT, PL), where there is a medium degree of organizational differentiation, a low degree of selectivity and the existing transitions are ‘smoother’ compared to those in:
- *high-level differentiated systems* (FR, DE, NL), where there is a substantial organizational differentiation, a medium to high degree of selectivity and transitions exist which represent a medium to high threshold from one education level to the next ([68], p. 34).”

Although such classifications do not hold for, or explain, all characteristics of education systems, they do serve as a useful heuristic device for the distinction of different degrees of selectivity in the education systems. Further, they help “to highlight systems with more inbuilt transition points which, at least in principle, bear the potential to produce frictions related to access and inequality issues”. ([68], p. 35). In sum, IOSs offer insights in understanding the governance of life courses at more structural/institutional/organizational levels.

### 3.3. Relational Opportunity Structures

According to the opportunity structure theory [58,69], the interaction between structuring agents, such as family background, education and the labor market, creates blueprints or career routes within which different groups of young people are required to make their career choices while adjusting themselves to the opportunities available for them [70]. Thus, these structuring agents frame the configuration of—selective and unevenly distributed—possibilities and constraints for thought and action of young people constructing their life courses by producing discursive and institutional opportunity structures [61,71,72]. However, there is an ongoing debate (see e.g., [73–75]), which problematizes the limitations of focusing only on DOSs and IOSs and criticizes the opportunity structure theory’s view that, in life course transitions from education to the labor market, individual agency operates ultimately within pre-determined material and cultural possibilities, and that, while exercising their agency, young people tend to adapt their aspirations to pre-built pathways and trajectories consolidating them [69,76]. Benasso and colleagues [71] highlight the value of this line of criticism as it emphasizes the importance of considering the interactions between opportunity structures and individuals as a less rigid and pre-determined process, and calls for acknowledging the nuances of agency in life course construction by taking into account how macro-level processes, such as globalization and family changes, are filtered through the meso-level of national and local institutions to the micro-level, where they interact with individual agency.

In their theoretical elaboration of opportunity structures and particularly the relationship of structure and agency within them, Dale and Parreira do Amaral [61] argue that while discursive and institutional opportunity structures frame young people's life course possibilities, they do not rule out the existence of alternative legitimate courses of action or competing framings. Following this line of thinking, a concept of *relational opportunity structures* (ROSs) has been introduced [71], adding a third dimension to the opportunity structure theory that enables further reflection and investigation of a individuals' relationality, interaction, negotiation and adaptation in the context of opportunity structures. Thus, it highlights the structure of interactions whereby people negotiate what opportunities they choose, aspire to, reject or do not perceive as opportunities at all. By doing so, the concept of ROSs "helps emphasizing the active character of the subject, whereas discursive and institutional opportunity structures mainly look at structuring agents and their impact on individuals' possibilities of choice" ([71], p.33).

Thus, ROSs complement the more established approaches of the discursive and institutional opportunity structures as it enables analyzing the consequences of individuals' different interaction patterns in their structural and discursive contexts. The perspective of ROSs sheds light on the relevance of the processes of negotiation of individual aims, strategies, and solutions—in other words, the link between the formation of the "lists of possibilities" and the choices made by individuals within them. The argument is that, while relationality and interaction take place within the frame set by IOSs and DOSs, their results are not necessarily pre-determined in the strict reproduction of rules and ideas as also negotiations, flexible adaption, selective appropriation of meanings and even construction of alternative pathways are possible for individuals who are able to exercise their agency to build and foster micro-level relations with relevant, often street-level, actors in their key institutional and policy contexts [71,77,78].

According to Benasso and colleagues [71], the unfolding of relational opportunity structures includes a range of outcomes. At the level of structures, outcomes may include a selection of a course of action within the list of possibilities, an exclusion of some options, and a creative opening of new opportunities; they can reproduce but also modify previous institutional and discursive opportunity structures. ROSs impact the amount and nature of opportunities achievable by individuals often by broadening them. Therefore, at the level of the subject, outcomes may include consequences of choices on the individual life course and impacts on identity construction. Indeed, research has shown the importance of the ROSs as the construction of positive relations with actors participating in a given field can aid the individuals to question or even overcome structural rigidities or the limits reinforced at cultural level and, thus, foster individuals' self-reflexivity, self-confidence, and life-plan revision.

Recent research on young adults' participation in different LLL policies across Europe (see [77,78]) has shown the relevance of exactly this kind of relational dimension of opportunity structures to young people's life course construction in the context of a range of policy interventions developed to tackle the challenges they face in their transition to adulthood, particularly through education into the labor market. These studies shed light on the importance of the above-mentioned micro-level relations some young people are able to actively form with relevant street-level professionals or other key policy actors to widen the scope of available opportunities, thus introducing changes in the range of "visible" opportunities shaped by the discursive and institutional opportunity structures [79]. For instance, some young adults are able to customize policy offerings and find individualized leeway even in rather rigid and pre-determined LLL policy contexts through positive relationships that they foster with policy actors, which is something potentially very impactful for their life course construction, but which would go unaccounted for by acknowledging only the discursive and institutional opportunity structure dimensions [78]. Furthermore, for some young people, the interactions in the context of ROSs provide them, through the relations, with more access to "informal", network-based sources of information and, thus, enable them to expand their aspirations and consider a wider set of options for the future [77]. In

short, this line of research has shown that “different relations contribute both to bridging the gap between structure and individuals’ choice, therefore impacting the institutional and discursive opportunity structures faced by youths in their contexts, and to creating more room for their agentic capacity” ([71], p. 41, c.f. [61,79]).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

The article set out to discuss a governance perspective on the life course. It presented briefly the central features of both conceptual frameworks and deliberated on the added value of this combination. The article also offered a multilevel and multidimensional perspective on the governing of the life course by discussing three types of opportunity structures—institutional, discursive and relational. Furthermore, it asked to what extent life course de-standardization processes have served as a governance occasion with LLL policies seen as a policy attempt to (re-)standardize and (re-)regulate the life course of young people. Beyond academic debates about whether changes in life course amount to societal processes of de-standardization or pertain to a differentiation of life courses, it was argued that, from a governance perspective, these are seen as an occasion for intervention, in particular on those groups defined and targeted as “vulnerable”. Here, life course research risks serving the needs of those interested in streamlining social control and in providing ready-made human capital for the economy, rather than helping us better understand the conditions of growing up in contemporary societies.

As discussed in the later part of this contribution, viewing the life course from a governance perspective nevertheless contributes to seeing different levels or dimensions at which the life course is governed: discourses, institutions and interactions.

**Author Contributions:** All authors share same contribution. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The research on which this article draws has been funded by the European Commission under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under the Contract Number: 693167 (YOUNG\_ADULLLT Project 2016–2019, [www.young-adulllt.eu](http://www.young-adulllt.eu)) as well as under Contract Number SSH-CT-2009-243868 (GOETE Project 2010–2013 [www.goete.eu](http://www.goete.eu)).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### References

1. Commission of European Communities (CEC). *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*; Office for Official Publications of the European Communities: Luxembourg, 2001. Available online: <http://aei.pitt.edu/42878/> (accessed on 15 April 2022).
2. Kohli, M. Die Institutionalisierung des Lebenslaufs. Historische Befunde und theoretische Argumente. *Kolner Z Soz Sozpsychol* **1985**, *37*, 1–29.
3. Mayer, K. Whose Lives? How History, Societies, and Institutions Define and Shape Life Courses. *Res. Hum. Dev.* **2004**, *1*, 161–187. [[CrossRef](#)]
4. Elder, G.H.; Kirkpatrick Johnson, M.; Crosnoe, R. The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory. In *Handbook of the Life Course*; Mortimer, J.T., Shanahan, M.J., Eds.; Kluwer Academic Publisher: New York, NY, USA, 2003; pp. 3–19.
5. Kok, J. Principles and prospects of the life course paradigm. *Ann. Demogr. Hist.* **2007**, *1*, 203–230. [[CrossRef](#)]
6. Settersen, R.A., Jr. Age structuring and the rhythm of the life course. In *Handbook of the Life Course*; Mortimer, J.T., Shanahan, M.J., Eds.; Kluwer Academic Publisher: New York, NY, USA, 2003; pp. 81–98.
7. Levy, R.; Bühlmann, F. Towards a socio-structural framework for life course analysis. *Adv. Life Course Res.* **2016**, *30*, 30–42. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. Elder, G. Time, Human Agency, and Social Change: Perspective on the Life Course. *Soc. Psychol. Q.* **1994**, *57*, 4–15.
9. Brückner, H.; Mayer, K.U. De-standardization of the life course: What it might mean? And if it means anything, whether it actually took place? *Adv. Life Course Res.* **2005**, *9*, 27–53. [[CrossRef](#)]
10. Mills, M. Individualization and the Life Course: Toward a Theoretical Model and Empirical Evidence. In *Contested Individualization: Debates about Contemporary Personhood*; Howard, C., Ed.; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2007; pp. 61–79.

11. Hamilton, M.; Antonucci, L.; Roberts, S. Introduction: Young People and Social Policy in Europe: Past and Present. In *Young People and Social Policy in Europe: Dealing with Risk, Inequality and Precarity in Times of Crisis*; Antonucci, L., Hamilton, M., Roberts, S., Eds.; Palgrave Macmillan: London, UK, 2014; pp. 1–12.
12. Heinz, W.R.; Huinink, J.; Weymann, A. (Eds.) *The Life Course Reader. Individuals and Societies Across Time*; Campus: Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 2009.
13. Sironi, M. Economic Conditions of Young Adults Before and After the Great Recession. *J. Fam. Econ. Issues* **2018**, *39*, 103–116. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Parreira do Amaral, M. Lifelong learning policies for young adults in Europe: A conceptual and methodological discussion. In *Lifelong Learning Policies for Young Adults in Europe. Navigating between Knowledge and Economy*; Parreira do Amaral, M., Kovacheva, S., Rambla, X., Eds.; Policy Press: Bristol, UK, 2020; pp. 3–20.
15. Lorentzen, T.; Bäckman, O.; Ilmakunnas, I.; Kauppinen, T. Pathways to Adulthood: Sequences in the School-to-Work Transition in Finland, Norway and Sweden. *Soc. Indic. Res.* **2018**, *141*, 1285–1305. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. Dale, R.; Robertson, S.L. *Globalisation and Europeanisation of Education*; Symposium Books: Oxford, UK, 2008.
17. Bauman, Z. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*; Polity Press: Cambridge, UK, 2007.
18. Beck, U. Beyond class and nation: Reframing social inequalities in a globalizing world. *Br. J. Sociol.* **2007**, *58*, 679–705. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Furlong, A. Revisiting transitional metaphors: Reproducing social inequalities under the conditions of late modernity. *J. Educ. Work* **2009**, *22*, 343–353. [[CrossRef](#)]
20. Iannelli, C.; Smyth, E. Mapping gender and social background differences in education and youth transitions across Europe. *J. Youth Stud.* **2008**, *11*, 213–232. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. MacDonald, R.; Shildrick, T.; Webster, C.; Simpson, D. Growing up in poor neighbourhoods. *Sociology* **2005**, *39*, 873–891. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Elder, G. The Life Course as Developmental Theory. *Child. Dev.* **1998**, *69*, 1–12. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Elder, G. Life Course Perspective. In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*; Ritzer, G., Ed.; Blackwell: Malden, MA, USA, 2007; pp. 2634–2639.
24. Elder, G.; Shanahan, M.; Jennings, J. Human Development in Time and Place. In *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*; Bornstein, M., Leventhal, T., Eds.; Wiley: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2015; pp. 6–54.
25. Neves, T.; Alves, N.; Cossetta, A.; Domovic, V. The changing meanings of lifelong learning policies: Consequences for young adults and their life courses. In *Lifelong Learning Policies for Young Adults in Europe. Navigating between Knowledge and Economy*; Parreira do Amaral, M., Kovacheva, S., Rambla, X., Eds.; Policy Press: Bristol, UK, 2020; pp. 199–216.
26. Scandurra, R.; Cefalo, R.; Kazepov, Y. School to work outcomes during the great recession, is the regional scale relevant for young people's life chances? *J. Youth Stud.* **2020**, *24*, 441–465. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Elzinga, C.H.; Liefbroer, A.C. Destandardization of family-life trajectories of young adults. *Eur. J. Popul.* **2007**, *23*, 225–250. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. McMunn, A.; Lacey, R.; Worts, D.; McDonough, P.; Stafford, M.; Booker, C.; Kumari, M.; Sacker, A. De-standardization and gender convergence in work-family life courses in Great Britain: A multi-channel sequence analysis. *Adv. Life Course Res.* **2015**, *26*, 60–75. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Nico, M. Variability of the transitions to adulthood in Europe: A critical approach to destandardization of the life course. *J. Youth Stud.* **2014**, *17*, 166–182. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Nico, M.; Caetano, A. Untying Conceptual Knots: The Analytical Limits of the Concepts of De-Standardization and Reflexivity. *Sociology* **2017**, *51*, 666–684. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Widmer, E.; Ritschard, G. The de-standardization of the life course: Are men and women equal? *Adv. Life Course Res.* **2009**, *14*, 28–39. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Zimmermann, O. Destandardization in later age spans in Western Germany. Evidence from sequence analysis of family life courses. *Adv. Life Course Res.* **2020**, *43*, 100287. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Van Winkle, Z. Family trajectories across time and space: Increasing complexity in family life courses in Europe? *Demography* **2018**, *55*, 135–164. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Ramos, V. The de-standardization of the life course in Portugal. A cross-cohort analysis using entropy analysis. *Adv. Life Course Res.* **2019**, *42*, 100291. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Chaloupková, J. The De-standardization of Early Family Trajectories in the Czech Republic: A Cross-cohort Comparison. *Czech Sociol. Rev.* **2010**, *46*, 427–451. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Scherger, S. Social Change and the Timing of Family Transitions in West Germany. Evidence from cohort comparisons. *Time Soc.* **2009**, *18*, 106–129. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Robette, N. The diversity of pathways to adulthood in France. *Adv. Life Course Res.* **2010**, *15*, 89–96. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Van Winkle, Z. Early Family Life Course Standardization in Sweden: The Role of Compositional Change. *Eur. J. Popul.* **2020**, *36*, 765–798. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
39. Worts, D.; Sacker, A.; McMunn, A.; McDonough, P. Individualization, opportunity and jeopardy in American women's work and family lives: A multi-state sequence analysis. *Adv. Life Course Res.* **2013**, *18*, 296–318. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Zimmermann, O.; Konietzka, D. Social disparities in destandardization. Changing family life course patterns in seven European countries. *Eur. Sociol. Rev.* **2018**, *34*, 64–78. [[CrossRef](#)]

41. Aisenbrey, S.; Fasang, A.E. New Life for Old Ideas: The ‘Second Wave’ of Sequence Analysis Bringing the ‘Course’ Back into the Life Course. *Sociol. Methods Res.* **2010**, *38*, 420–462. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Benz, A. (Ed.) *Governance—Regieren in komplexen Regelsystemen; Eine Einführung*; VS Verlag: Wiesbaden, Germany, 2004.
43. Schuppert, G.F. *Alles Governance Oder Was? Nomos*: Baden-Baden, Germany, 2011.
44. Benz, A.; Lütz, S.; Schimank, U.; Simonis, G. (Eds.) *Handbuch Governance. Theoretische Grundlagen und Empirische Anwendungsfelder*; VS Verlag: Wiesbaden, Germany, 2007.
45. Ball, S.; Juneman, C. *Networks, New Governance and Education*; Policy Press: Bristol, UK, 2012.
46. Schuppert, G.F. Governance im Spiegel der Wissenschaftsdisziplinen. In *Governance-Forschung. Vergewisserung über Stand und Entwicklungslinien*; Schuppert, G.F., Ed.; Nomos: Baden-Baden, Germany, 2006; pp. 371–469.
47. Mayntz, R. Governance im modernen Staat. In *Governance—Regieren in komplexen Regelsystemen. Eine Einführung*; Benz, A., Ed.; VS Verlag: Wiesbaden, Germany, 2004; pp. 65–76.
48. Jessop, B. Critical semiotic analysis and cultural political economy. *Crit. Discourse Stud.* **2004**, *1*, 159–174. [[CrossRef](#)]
49. Jessop, B. Metagovernance. In *The SAGE Handbook of Governance*; Bevir, M., Ed.; SAGE: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2011; pp. 106–123.
50. Parreira do Amaral, M.; Zelinka, J. Vulnerabilität als (neues) europäisches bildungspolitisches Deutungsmuster? Ein Beispiel aus dem Bereich des Lebenslangen Lernens. In *Handbuch Inklusion International—Globale, Nationale und Lokale Perspektiven auf Inklusive Bildung*; von Köpfer, A., Powell, J.J.W., Zahnd, R., Eds.; Barbara Budrich: Opladen, Germany, 2021; pp. 523–546.
51. Brunila, K.; Ikävalko, E.; Kurki, T.; Masoud, A.; Mertanen, K.; Mikkola, A.; Mäkelä, K. Transitions, Justice and Equity in Education. In *Oxford Encyclopedia of Education*; Noblit, G.W., Ed.; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2017. Available online: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/oxford-research-encyclopedias-education-9780190264093?cc=fi&lang=en&#> (accessed on 13 April 2022).
52. Brunila, K.; Mertanen, K.; Tiainen, K.; Kurki, T.; Masoud, A.; Mäkelä, K.; Ikävalko, E. Vulnerabilizing Young People: Interrupting the Ethos of Vulnerability, the Neoliberal Rationality, and the Precision Education Governance. *Suom. Antropol.* **2018**, *43*, 113–120. [[CrossRef](#)]
53. Ecclestone, K.; Brunila, K. Governing Emotionally-Vulnerable Subjects and the Therapisation of Social Justice. *Pedagog. Cult. Soc.* **2015**, *23*, 485–506. [[CrossRef](#)]
54. Brunila, K.; Honkasilta, J.; Ikävalko, E.; Kurki, T.; Lanås, M.; Leiväskä, A.; Masoud, A.; Mertanen, K.; Mikkola, A.; Mäkelä, K.; et al. Nuorten tukijärjestelmät haavoittuvuuden eetoksessa [Youth Support Systems in the Ethos of Vulnerability]. *Kasvatus* **2019**, *50*, 107–119.
55. Wiener, N. *Cybernetics and Society: The Human Use of Human Beings*; Houghton Mifflin: Boston, MA, USA, 1950.
56. Gadinger, F.; Peters, D. Feedback loops in a world of complexity: A cybernetic approach at the interface of foreign policy analysis and international relations theory. *Camb. Rev. Int. Aff.* **2016**, *29*, 251–269. [[CrossRef](#)]
57. Mertanen, K.; Vainio, S.; Brunila, K. Educating for the future? Mapping the emerging lines of precision education governance. *Policy Futures Educ.* **2021**. [[CrossRef](#)]
58. Parreira do Amaral, M. Embedding Education Research in the European Economic Imaginary. In *Researching the Global Education Industry*; Parreira do Amaral, M., Steiner-Khamsi, G., Thompson, C., Eds.; Palgrave-Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2019; pp. 115–133.
59. Kriesi, H. Political Context and Opportunity. In *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*; Snow, D., Soule, A., Sarah, A., Kriesi, H., Eds.; Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 2008; pp. 67–90.
60. Parreira do Amaral, M.; Rinne, R. Reading Discourses in the Governance of Educational Trajectories of Youth in Europe. In *Shaping the Futures of Young Europeans—Education governance in Eight European Countries*; Parreira do Amaral, M., Dale, R., Loncle, P., Eds.; Symposium Books: Oxford, UK, 2015; pp. 67–86.
61. Dale, R.; Parreira do Amaral, M. Distributing Life Chances through the Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe. In *Shaping the Futures of Young Europeans: Education Governance in Eight European Countries*; Parreira do Amaral, M., Dale, R., Loncle, P., Eds.; Symposium Books: Oxford, UK, 2015; pp. 171–188.
62. Brenner, N.; Peck, J.; Theodore, N. Variegated neoliberalization: Geographies, modalities, pathways. *Glob. Netw.* **2010**, *10*, 182–222. [[CrossRef](#)]
63. Jessop, B.; Fairclough, N.; Wodak, R. (Eds.) *Education and the Knowledge-Based Economy in Europe*; Sense Publishers: Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2008.
64. Verger, A.; Curran, M. New public management as a global education policy: Its adoption and re-contextualization in a Southern European setting. *Crit. Stud. Educ.* **2014**, *55*, 253–271. [[CrossRef](#)]
65. Lauder, H.; Young, M.; Daniels, H.; Balarin, M.; Lowe, J. (Eds.) *Educating for the Knowledge Economy: Critical Perspectives*; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2012.
66. European Parliament. Lisbon European Council 24 and 24 March 2000 Presidency Conclusions. 2000. Available online: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1\\_en.htm](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm) (accessed on 18 April 2022).
67. Tikkanen, J.; Biggart, A.; Pohl, A. The Diversity of Education and Welfare Systems in Europe. In *Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe. Pathways, Policies and Practice*; Walther, A., Parreira do Amaral, M., Cuconato, M., Dale, R., Eds.; Bloomsbury: London, UK, 2016; pp. 35–52.
68. Biggart, A.; Järvinen, T.; Parreira do Amaral, M. Institutional frameworks and structural factors relating to educational access across Europe. *Eur. Educ.* **2015**, *47*, 26–45. [[CrossRef](#)]

69. Roberts, K. The entry into employment: An approach towards a general theory. *Sociol. Rev.* **1968**, *16*, 165–184. [[CrossRef](#)]
70. Roberts, K. Opportunity structures then and now. *J. Educ. Work* **2009**, *22*, 355–368. [[CrossRef](#)]
71. Benasso, S.; Cefalo, R.; Tikkanen, J. Landscapes of lifelong learning policies across Europe—Conceptual lenses. In *Landscapes of Lifelong Learning Policies in Europe—Comparative Case Studies*; Benasso, S., Bouillet, D., Neves, T., Parreira do Amaral, M., Eds.; Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2022; pp. 33–44.
72. Hay, C. Globalisation as a Problem of Political Analysis: Restoring Agents to a ‘Process without a Subject’ and Politics to a Logic of Economic Compulsion. *Camb. Rev. Int. Aff.* **2002**, *15*, 379–392. [[CrossRef](#)]
73. Atkins, L. The odyssey: School to work transitions, serendipity and position in the field. *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* **2017**, *38*, 641–655. [[CrossRef](#)]
74. Moensted, M.L. Social Citizenship Aspirations: An Alternative Line of Analysis of the Social Reproduction of Youth Inequality. *YOUNG* **2021**, *29*, 236–255. [[CrossRef](#)]
75. Ozaris Kacar, S.; Verduijn, K.; Essers, C. Opportunity structures from an intersectional perspective. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Minority Entrepreneurship*; Cooney, T.M., Ed.; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2021; pp. 87–115.
76. Roberts, K. Explaining education-to-work transitions: Thinking backwards, situating agency and comparing countries. *Rev. Eur. Stud.* **2018**, *10*, 72–82. [[CrossRef](#)]
77. Pandolfini, V.; Petkova, B.; Verlage, T. Youth aspirations towards the future: Agency, strategy and life choices in different structural contexts. In *Landscapes of Lifelong Learning Policies across Europe: Comparative Case Studies*; Benasso, S., Bouillet, D., Neves, T., Parreira do Amaral, M., Eds.; Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2022; pp. 59–76.
78. Tikkanen, J.; Jakovkis, J.; Vanderhoven, E. Exploring Young Adults’ Lifelong Learning Policy Participation Styles: Comparative Perspectives from Finland, Scotland, and Spain. In *Landscapes of Lifelong Learning Policies in Europe—Comparative Case Studies*; Benasso, S., Bouillet, D., Neves, T., Parreira do Amaral, M., Eds.; Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2022; pp. 77–95.
79. Parreira do Amaral, M.; Benasso, S.; Neves, T.; Bouillet, D. From cases to stories to lessons: Exploring landscapes of lifelong learning across Europe. In *Landscapes of Lifelong Learning Policies in Europe—Comparative Case Studies*; Benasso, S., Bouillet, D., Neves, T., Parreira do Amaral, M., Eds.; Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2022; pp. 164–176.