



The Life Course and the stress Process: some Conceptual Comparisons

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This paper compares the meanings and applications of concepts relevant to both the life course and the stress process frameworks. Some of these concepts bear the same labels but serve quite different scholarly agendas. Other concepts have different labels but have closely related applications. The purpose of this kind of comparative analysis is to help both fields clarify the conceptual tools needed to advance their scholarly goals.

Key Words: Conceptual specification—Life course paradigm—stress process paradigm.

OUTSTANDING among the many contributions of Matilda Riley to the study of aging was her enrichment of its theoretical foundations (see Dannefer, uhlenberg, Foner, & Abeles, 2005). On the occasion of the award that bears her name, therefore, it is entirely fitting to engage in what Merton (1968) many years ago referred to as conceptual analysis. The careful consideration and analysis of major concepts, perspectives, and research agendas is an ongoing requirement of any area of research, but especially in rapidly maturing fields whose interests overlap those of other fields and on which different disciplinary orientations converge. These are the conditions that can foster ambiguity and contradiction, such as the use of the same labels that essentially represent different concepts and, conversely, the employment of different labels that basically pertain to the same concepts.

However, as Merton (1968) also observed, a fresh look at our concepts and the meanings and uses we attach to them has implications that go beyond clearing up the confusions of language that might have emerged. A critical examination of important concepts can reveal the ambiguities and unquestioned assumptions that might underlie their use and, in so doing, contribute to a keener understanding of the larger theories of which the concepts are a part. In addition to providing greater theoretical clarification of the phenomena in which we are interested, conceptual analysis may also lead to a refinement of the research that is guided by the concepts. For example, it can help us to reconsider and improve the measures and other devices we employ to empirically assess our concepts. It may also help to reveal instances where disparate measures are employed to assess the same or closely similar concepts, a practice that can lead to competing findings and interpretations.

Whether intended or not, conceptual analysis is often conducted in the normal course of scholarly work. Our concepts come under unavoidable scrutiny as we think about the issues in which we are interested, as we plan our research, and as we seek reasonable interpretations of the

findings that emerge. In this paper, of course, the scrutiny is purposive. Moreover, it is largely done through the comparative examination of the conceptual components of the life course and stress process paradigms. Each provides a unique vantage point for considering the other, the life course from the perspectives of the stress process and the stress process from those of the life course. It can be recognized, however, that comparisons across specialty areas are susceptible to selective bias. I assume that if either the life course framework or that of the stress process were viewed from different vantage points, similarities and differences would come into focus.

It also deserves to be underscored that meaningful comparisons between the two scholarly domains can be drawn only when some intellectual kinship exists between them, that is, where the work of one is relevant to the thinking about the other. such kinship can be found among multiple areas of study within sociology; indeed, the vast expansion of specialties within the discipline in past decades has nurtured the scope of their interfaces. It can be accurately asserted that with the multiplication of specialty areas, there has been a corresponding increase in shared interests and orientations among them. As I attempt to show, this is certainly the case with the life course and stress process paradigms.

Prominent among their shared interests is that of continuity and discontinuity through time, that is, the stability or change in the circumstances and directions of people's lives as they age and, similarly, the stability and change of conditions affecting their well-being. This certainly is at the basis of my adoption of life course perspectives many years ago. It was less a deliberate choice than an inescapable recognition that the complex relationships between the various components of the stress process are established over a considerable span of time. stress that is rooted in social and experiential conditions typically cannot be fully understood as a happening, as in an immediate response to a stimulus. It is partly because the relationships between well-being and its social



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antecedents evolve over time that we speak of the sources and consequences of stress as being embedded in a process. In addressing their core interests in continuity and change, both fields have borrowed or developed a variety of concepts, some of them unique to each field and some similar to both. As I describe subsequently, even those that are similar may have taken on different nuances, labels, and agendas.

Although there is a general consensus concerning the conceptual components of each of the fields, there is less agreement among life course scholars as to whether the framework represents a theory (Elder, 1998), a set of perspectives (George, 1999), or a phenomenon (Dannefer, 2003). Despite there being a reasonable basis for each of these descriptors, here I shall treat the life course primarily as a framework whose array of concepts alerts us to the changes and continuities of people's lives. Moreover, though scholars over the years have conducted seminal empirical research that has given impetus and direction to the development of life course sociology (e.g., Elder, 1974), its importance is not solely the result of being itself a field of research. Instead, its value also stems substantially from the guidance it provides to inquiries conducted by those located within other fields. Studies launched from multiple specialty areas, such as criminology, demography, and status attainment, have either implicitly or explicitly adopted some of the perspectives of the life course framework. As I have indicated earlier, this has certainly been the case of the sociology of stress in its effort to identify some of the antecedents of systemic disparities in health and well-being.

The Components of the Life Course and Stress Process Frameworks

A brief overview of the principal components of the life course and stress process frameworks can provide some background for a closer and more detailed examination of their overlapping and distinctive features. Considering first life course sociology and its conceptual underpinnings, probably no concept is more instrumentally central than the notion of transitions, which usually refers to the movement into and exit from various institutional roles and statuses (see Ferraro, 2001). Closely tied to transitions is a pair of additional concepts: timing and sequencing. Among those making a transition, not everyone makes it at the same age or point of the life course, and variations in the timing of transitions may be relevant to the directions they impose on the life course. The same is true of the sequencing of the transition, which refers to whether it precedes or follows other transitions. Transitions, together with their timing and sequencing, shape life course trajectories, the patterns of change and continuity of people's lives within the multiple, social, and economic institutions of the society. The notion of trajectory is also extended occasionally to include change in the health status of people as they age (e.g., Meadows, McLanahan, & Brooks-gunn, 2008).

Also among the conceptual foundations of the life course framework is "agency," an important notion referring to the decisions and actions taken by people in controlling and directing their own life course trajectories. The concept implies that individuals can be agents serving on behalf of their own interests, steering their lives toward the fulfillment of their values and goals. Still another concept is that of linked lives, which calls attention to the fact that people do not live in a social vacuum but, instead, are typically embedded in social networks composed of many types of relationships, some formal and others informal, some involving close ties and others loose. As a consequence of these ties, the conditions and actions that initiate and give form to one individual's life course trajectories may set in motion reciprocal effects between the individual and some of those with whom she or he has social relationships. Finally, an overview of the panoply of concepts should also include the notion of "cohort," which calls attention to the large-scale social and economic changes that might emerge within a historical era and that are capable of stamping different age groups with a historically distinct set of experiences and distinguishing attributes (Alwin & McCammon, 2003). These attributes, in turn, are reflected in cohort variations in life course trajectories.

Clearly, there is a rich assortment of concepts that constitute the life course framework. Although each of them can be understood apart from the others, it can be observed that there is a web of potential relationships among each of the multiple components of the framework. For example, the timing and sequencing of transitions such as entry into marriage or the labor force might vary across cohorts; or, to take a second example, linked lives may either constrain or enhance the exercise of agency. Moreover, each component is bound to others through their joint effects on life course trajectories. Collectively, they represent the circumstances that guide lives through time and that help us to understand how the life course trajectories of individuals and groups come to differ.

I turn now to an outline of the stress process, a framework which, like that of the life course, rests on multiple conceptual components, each of them potentially related to the status placement of people in the hierarchical arrangements of the society. It is the emphasis on the pivotal part played by status stratification that helps to establish the place of the stress process within sociology and to distinguish it from other disciplines that also have an interest in stress (Pearlin, 1989). Also of vital importance to the framework, of course, is the concept of stressors, the broad array of problematic conditions and experiences that can challenge the adaptive capacities of people. Stressors appear either in the form of disruptive events or the more persistent hardships and problems built into the fabric of social life. The stressors that are of special interest to research into the stress process are those that are related both to people's social and economic status and to indicators of their health.

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It is stressors of this type that most clearly represent factors helping to explain the epidemiologically observed relationships between status placement and health.

We have learned that exposure to one stressor, regardless of whether it is an event or more chronic hardship, may lead over time to exposure to other, secondary, stressors, a process we call stress proliferation. It has been observed, for example, that economic strain and family conflict often follow involuntary job loss (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981) or that being involved in a caregiving role can lead to problems in one's occupational role (Pearlin, Aneshensel, & LeBlanc, 1997). Stress proliferation can result in people's lives becoming mired in clusters of stressors, some of which may persist and contribute to cumulative adversity (O'Rand, 1996) and to increases of what is called allostatic load, the burden of adaptation placed on various systems of the organism (McEwen & Seeman, 1999).

Several additional components of the stress process help to explain, at least partially, why people exposed to similar stressors do not necessarily suffer the same deleterious health consequences. Among the resources that potentially serve as protective barriers to these consequences are social support, social integration, various belief systems, coping repertoires, and self-concepts, such as mastery and self-esteem. Possession of these resources may vary with status placement, just as exposure to stressors does. Finally, in its effort to explain the stratification of health in the society, studies guided by the stress process framework observe a variety of dimensions of physical and mental health that are consequences of exposure to stressors. Some aspects of health and well-being, such as anxiety, can appear immediately following exposure to the stressor and abate when the stressor eases. By contrast, others, such as impairment of the cardiovascular system, may take several years to develop and persist even after its stressful antecedents are diminished.

Different Meanings and Applications of Similar Concepts

Transitions

There is probably no concept more fully shared by life course and stress process scholars than the notion of transitions. Nevertheless, they tend to be drawn to the concept for different reasons. For the former, interest is largely based on the fact that entry and exit transitions tend to be aligned with age and, therefore, serve as markers of movement along the life course. Indeed, it has been observed that the sheer number of transitions people are likely to experience tends to taper off with age (Murrell, Norris, & Grote, 1988). Moreover, the types of transitions through which people pass are also likely to vary with their age. Younger adults, more than their elders, are usually involved with entry into new roles and statuses, whereas the transitions of older people are more likely to involve exits from roles and statuses.

The stake of stress researchers results foremost from the fact that some of them are potentially disruptive. However, certain stressful transitions are likely to occur in step with age, thus bringing the interests in line with those of life course scholars. The loss of a spouse in late life and marital dissolution at an earlier point of the life course is an example of age-related transitions that have a high likelihood of being stressful. It is this correspondence between the occurrence of challenging transitional events and the point in the life course at which they are likely to take place that stands at the crux of what we have earlier called an alliance between life course and stress process paradigms (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996).

Despite their alliance, each field approaches transitions with somewhat different considerations and perspectives. Whether they entail role entry or role exit, to the life course scholar, transitions represent the principal benchmarks of the twists and turns and directions of life course trajectories. Stress process researchers, on the other hand, examine some of the same transitions as stressors having the potential capacity to disrupt lives and impose a load on the adaptive systems of individuals. In general, transitions that are sought after and built into normative social life, such as a long-awaited retirement, are likely to be far less taxing than those that are unwanted, such as mandatory retirement or involuntary job loss. One possible reason for the comparative ease of normative transitions is that, unlike their counterparts, they are preceded by a great deal of anticipatory socialization, although this socialization frequently fails to prepare one adequately for the realities of role loss or of becoming an incumbent of a new role. Moreover, even transitions that are normally benign may become stressful if they take place in close temporal proximity with multiple other transitions. This bunching up of transitions is found particularly among young adults, a group that has not received from either life course or stress process scholars the attention it deserves. Within a relatively compressed time span, young adults are likely to enter into several normatively desired but demanding roles and statuses crucial to the remainder of their lives. Such transitions include entry into the labor force, becoming financially established, initiating courtship or marriage, establishing an affordable residence, and becoming a parent. Even as they juggle these multiple normative transitions, they may have to contend simultaneously with other transitions that are neither normative nor desired, such as becoming providers of care to impaired parents. It can also be noted here that occasionally people are frustrated by the failure to pass through a desired transition, a problematic situation that has been described as a "nonevent" (Wheaton, 1994). Some of these nonevents involving unrealized transitions result from what we have referred to as role captivity (Aneshensel, Pearlin, & Schuler, 1993; Pearlin, 1975), such as experienced by those who are unwillingly obliged to take on a caregiver role or workers who would like to retire or to be full-time homemakers but are economically bound to unrewarding jobs.

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