The major purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate that the knowledge base has suffered as a result of insufficient cross-fertilization of social-psychological and life course/aging perspectives. The central focus of the article is identification of research issues of interest to life course and aging scholars that would be enriched by increased attention to social-psychological principles and, conversely, identification of social-psychological research topics that would be advanced by increased attention to life course and aging issues.

Key Words: Subjective well-being; Transitions; Life course trajectories

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The major premise of this discussion is that there has been insufficient cross-fertilization of social psychology and life course sociology. This is true despite the fact that there are several "natural" links between these paradigms. Indeed, many life course and aging studies have examined social-psychological outcomes. A few examples will be noted briefly in support of this conclusion.

First, for more than two decades, the work of Glen Elder and his colleagues (e.g., Elder, 1974; Elder & Clipp, 1988; Elder, Pavalko, & Hastings, 1991) has consistently demonstrated that life-course experiences, such as living through the Great Depression and military participation during World War II, have demonstrable effects on subjective outcomes (e.g., sense of self, levels of psychological distress, attitudes toward work and family life). The fact that historical events influence personality and attitudes as much as 40 or 50 years later, when other potent and temporally more proximate predictors are statistically controlled, provides powerful testimony to the persisting effects of life-course experiences on social-psychological states.

As a second example, consider the work of Meyer (1986), who argues that the modern sense of self resulted from "institutionalization of the life course," which in turn was possible only after life expectancy increased to the point that large proportions of individuals survived until late adulthood (cf., Kohli, 1986; Watkins, Menken, & Bongaarts, 1987). Meyer's central thesis is that the social differentiation of the modern nation state, in which households were separated from the workplace and family life was separated from work and school, led to a "temporalized" concept of the life course. Meyer notes that these same processes led to the concept of a self — a self that is separate from and, perhaps, more important than the collectivity. And Meyer, among others (e.g., Guillemard & van Gunsteren, 1991), posits that cultural adherence to the concept of a separate, unfettered self has become a force facilitating the demise of the institutionalized life course from which the self emerged.

As a final example, consider the complementary works of two scholars who investigated the persisting effects of political activism during young adulthood. Weil (1987) compared attitudes toward democracy among German cohorts who had and had not participated in Nazi youth groups prior to and during World War II. McAdam (1989) studied the effects of participation in the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1960s on later accomplishments and attitudes. Both Weil and McAdam found evidence of persisting effects: Political activism during late adolescence or early adulthood significantly affects political attitudes more than 20 years later. McAdam also demonstrated that the social bonds developed via political activism in early adulthood form a structural tie that sustains distinctive attitudes and behaviors over time.

These studies are but a small sample from a larger universe of research that reveals a subjective component of life-course dynamics. This is not surprising, of course. Social and behavioral scientists assume that subjective states are related to life-course experiences. More surprising, however, are the facts that (a) the points of convergence between social-psychological and life-course perspectives have been largely unarticulated, and (b) empirical investigation of those points of convergence remains non-systematic and, to a lesser degree, relatively sparse.

More effective cross-fertilization of social-psychological and life-course perspectives will require complementary insights. First, life-course scholars need to focus more attention on the ways that life-course experiences affect and are affected by social-psychological states. Thus, social-psychological processes and outcomes are strategic sites for testing
some central propositions of life-course perspectives. Second, and conversely, social psychologists need to recognize that subjective states reflect early experiences, as well as the opportunities and constraints of the contemporaneous social environment. Increased attention to distal environments and earlier life-course experiences will help social psychologists to better understand both subjective states per se and the distribution of individuals across different contemporaneous environments.

The major purpose of this article is to highlight the ways in which the knowledge base has suffered as a result of insufficient cross-fertilization of social-psychological and life-course perspectives. My primary strategy for accomplishing this goal is to identify issues of clear concern to life-course scholars that would be enriched by increased attention to social-psychological processes and states and, conversely, to identify key areas of social-psychological research that would be advanced by increased attention to life-course issues. First, however, central principles of both social psychology and life-course perspectives are briefly described. Attention to these principles facilitates identification of complementary interests.

Social Psychology: Central Principles and Propositions

Social psychology is sometimes labeled as a separate discipline; in other cases, it is viewed as a major paradigm within its parent disciplines of psychology or sociology. However it is labeled, social psychology is a large and heterogeneous research arena. Numerous scholars have tried to conceptualize the content and characteristics of social psychology — apparently without consensus. There is considerable agreement, however, that investigators from the parent disciplines of psychology and sociology tend to focus on different issues and, to a lesser extent, use different methods (House, 1977; Thoits, 1995).

One branch of social psychology is commonly called psychological social psychology; the other, sociological social psychology. Psychological social psychology typically focuses on how the presence of other people affects the thoughts, attitudes, and behavior of the individual (House, 1977; Thoits, 1995). The social environment examined is usually narrow and immediate, both spatially and temporally. In addition, although a variety of research methods are used in this tradition, laboratory studies are dominant. Sociological social psychology is also referred to as the social structure and personality approach (House, 1977; Thoits, 1995). Researchers in this tradition typically focus on the ways that individuals' locations in social structure and broadly defined social environments affect their attitudes and behavior. Although the social environments examined by sociological social psychologists are quite broad, temporality is typically restricted to contemporaneous or short-term conditions. Survey research dominates sociological social psychology, but is not universal. Thus, the two branches of social psychology typically focus on different independent variables (Thoits, 1995). Psychological social psychologists tend to focus on narrow parameters of the social environment (e.g., number of persons present, behaviors of persons present). Sociological social psychologists focus on broader, more structural features of the social environment (e.g., social class, roles).

Henceforth, this article is restricted to the potential payoffs associated with cross-fertilization between sociological social psychology and life-course perspectives. In part this reflects space limitations, but this decision can be justified on conceptual grounds as well. Because life-course research has been performed predominantly by sociologists, there are more potential links between it and sociological social psychology than between it and psychological social psychology. For example, much life-course research focuses on roles and social class (e.g., Burton & Bengston, 1985; Gee, 1987; Hogan, 1981), which also are key independent variables in sociological social psychology.

A final characteristic of some social structure and personality research merits brief note. Social psychological variables often are used as mediators, as well as outcomes. That is, investigators frequently posit that social psychological processes or states mediate or help explain the relationship between an independent variable and an outcome of interest. For example, social psychological resources such as a sense of control or high levels of self-esteem are frequently posited to mediate the relationships between social class and other outcomes such as mortality and morbidity.

Life-Course Perspectives: Central Principles

There is no single, unified theory of the life course. Instead, life-course scholars share general principles that underlie and guide their research. First, at the broadest level, life-course research focuses on the intersection of social and historical factors with personal biography (Elder, 1985). More specifically, life-course research typically examines the "age-differentiated, socially-recognized sequences of transitions" (Rossi, 1980) that characterize the lives of individuals, population subgroups, and populations. Within this rubric, scholars examine a wide variety of life-course issues. Some researchers focus on characteristics of life-course transitions, such as their prevalence, duration, timing, and sequencing. Other investigators focus on the antecedents and consequences of life-course transitions. (For a recent review of life-course research, see George, 1993).

One of the distinctive characteristics of life-course perspectives is attention to heterogeneity. Unlike developmental theories that emphasize invariance, life-course scholars expect heterogeneous life-course patterns across time and place. Empirically such heterogeneity is observed as inter-cohort and intra-cohort variability.

The concepts of transitions and trajectories have become key themes in life-course research (Elder,
Transitions refer to changes in status (most often role transitions) that are discrete and relatively bounded in duration, although their consequences may be observed over long time periods. Trajectories refer to long-term patterns of stability and change that can be reliably differentiated from alternate patterns (see Clipp, Pavalko, & Elder, 1992, for an excellent empirical examination of multiple trajectories). Trajectories often include multiple transitions. Transitions and trajectories are inevitably interrelated. As Elder (1985) notes, “transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning” (p. 31). Thus, attention to transitions and trajectories is another way in which life-course research pays attention to heterogeneity.

It is obvious, but worth mentioning, that life-course perspectives focus on dynamic patterns that unfold over time. Unfortunately, data suitable to the study of long-term stability and change are rare. Consequently, most research informed by life-course perspectives examines transitions rather than trajectories. And much of the life-course research spanning long time periods is based on simulated cohorts or retrospective life accounts. Despite data limitations, extant life-course studies have made important and unique contributions to our understanding of changes in the timing, duration, and sequences of transitions and the persisting effects of early experiences on subsequent life-course patterns.

Gerontological Research in Relation to Social Psychology and Life-Course Studies

Life-course research and gerontological research are not synonymous. Most life-course research does not cover the entire life course — and a relatively small proportion of it focuses on late life. Gerontological researchers have long been aware of the distinctions among age, period, and cohort effects. But relatively little aging research is firmly entrenched in the principles of life-course research summarized above. It is prudent to place gerontological research in the context of the larger issue of cross-fertilization of social psychology and life-course perspectives.

Social-psychological processes and states have long been key issues in gerontological research (for a more extensive review than is possible here, see George, 1990). Subjective well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, morale, and related concepts) and the self (i.e., primarily self-concept and self-esteem) are probably the social-psychological states that have received most attention in aging research. Two decades ago, Maddox and Wiley (1976) described subjective well-being as “perhaps the oldest, most persistently investigated issue in the social scientific study of aging” (p. 15). And it continues to be a strong research area. Components of the self are central to a number of research issues being vigorously pursued in aging research. Examples include the role of self-esteem in the stress process and the effects of retirement or illness on personal identity. Other social psychological states commonly used in aging research include locus of control, numerous attitudinal measures, and perceptions of stress.

Social-psychological aging research fits our definition of social psychology more broadly in terms of focusing on the linkages between social psychological states, on the one hand, and location in social structure and the social environment more broadly, on the other hand. Studies of subjective well-being typically rest on the premise that life satisfaction and related concepts are largely, albeit not totally, the result of objective life conditions. Similarly, the aging self is typically viewed as responsive to the changing external environments associated with late life (George, 1990).

Gerontological researchers also have used social-psychological processes to better understand later life. For example, social comparison theory has been used to explain high levels of satisfaction with life in the absence of advantaged status in objective terms (e.g., Carp & Carp, 1982; Usui, Keil, & Durig, 1985). Similarly, expectation states have been used to explain numerous social-psychological states, including subjective health, attitudes toward the elderly (including older adults’ attitudes toward aging, and perceived adequacy of income (e.g., McFarland, Ross, & Giltrow, 1992; Stoller & Kart, 1995; Strate & Dubnoff, 1986). Socialization has been the social-psychological process used most frequently to explain the attitudes, subjective evaluations, and behaviors of older adults, across a wide range of specific issues (e.g., Chappell & Orbach, 1986; Marshall, 1975; Rosow, 1985).

Most studies labeled as life-course research do not include older adults. Nonetheless, an increasing proportion of life-course research examines late life, as well as other portions of the life course. Some of these studies were performed by “life-course researchers,” who previously studied other parts of the life course and have added late life to their research agendas. Other studies were performed by “gerontological researchers,” who incorporated life-course principles into their investigations.

Life-course principles have been incorporated into gerontological research on several substantive issues. Aging research informed by life-course perspectives has been most common in studies of work and retirement (e.g., Elder & Pavalko, 1993; Henretta, O’Rand, & Chan, 1993; O’Rand & Landerman, 1984). Results of these and other studies demonstrate that the timing of retirement and its economic consequences are strongly related to decisions made earlier in the life course. In addition, these patterns are especially strong for women. Studies of family relationships in late life have only recently begun to focus on long-term periods, as is compatible with life-course perspectives. For example, caregiving research is now beginning to examine life-course issues in two ways: (a) by incorporating information about the nature and quality of family relationships prior to the illness of the care recipient (e.g., Mui, 1995; Wright, 1991), and (b) the transitions and trajectories that comprise the caregiving career (e.g., Aneshensel, Pearl, & Schuler, 1993; Bass & Bowman, 1990). As another example, Burton and colleagues (e.g., Burton, 1990; Burton & Bengt-
Potential of Social Psychology To Enrich Life-Course Studies

A necessary prerequisite for increased cross-fertilization of social-psychological and life-course perspectives is heightened awareness that cross-fertilization will benefit the knowledge base. In this section, three issues are examined to demonstrate the ways in which social-psychological principles can further life-course research.

Life-Course Trajectories. — A central issue in life-course research is trajectories: descriptions of the patterned pathways individuals exhibit over time, identification of the antecedents of those pathways, and, especially, revealing the consequences of diverse pathways. The transition to adulthood has been perhaps most frequently examined with regard to trajectories and their consequences. The transition to adulthood was viewed as a strategic site for examining the effects of norms on behavior and identifying the negative consequences that result when norms are violated. The normative sequence for the transition to adulthood consists of leaving school, followed by first full-time job, followed by first marriage. Researchers hypothesized that deviation from this normative sequence would result in poorer outcomes.

In pioneering studies of American men born between 1907 and 1952, Hogan, (1978, 1981) examined the effects of orderly versus disorderly transition sequences. He found that American men who experienced disorderly sequences earned less money, had less prestigious jobs, and were more likely to divorce than men with orderly sequences. Although these findings are compatible with the hypothesis that disorder results in poorer outcomes, the magnitudes of the differences between orderly and disorderly men were modest — so small that it is difficult to view them as evidence of social sanctions for violating norms. There is now a broad body of research on the transition to adulthood. Early work has been supplemented with studies of women (e.g., Marini, 1984), to diverse populations (e.g., Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987), and to comparative studies that highlight the effects of societal arrangements, such as educational systems, on the transition to adulthood (e.g., Kerckhoff, 1990). Findings have been remarkably similar across studies. Young adults exhibit an enormous array of life-course trajectories, but the consequences of that heterogeneity are modest. Absolute levels of achievement are much more strongly linked to socioeconomic and other outcomes than are the timing or sequencing of transitions.

An obviously missing piece in the portrait of the transition to adulthood is the effects of orderly vs. disorderly transitions — and heterogeneous life-course trajectories more broadly — on subjective states such as perceptions of well-being, feelings of self-worth, or a sense of mastery or control. Social psychologists would be interested to know whether the consequences of disorderliness on subjective states are similar to those for more objective outcomes. As a social psychologist, however, I would begin such research with a hypothesis much different from that tested in previous research. I would predict that the timing and sequencing of life-course transitions, including the degree to which they are normative or non-normative, will be unrelated to subjective well-being. The rationale for this hypothesis will be addressed at a later point. The key issue here is that increased cross-fertilization between social-psychological and life-course perspectives has the potential to broaden our understanding of the consequences of heterogeneous life-course trajectories.

The Evolution of Cultural Meanings. — A second issue that illustrates the potential payoff resulting from increased cross-fertilization of social-psychological and life-course perspectives is the evolution of cultural meanings. One of the important, but often neglected, consequences of social change is its impact on the cultural meanings attached to social phenomena. Because they can best be measured by eliciting individuals' definitions and perceptions, cultural meanings are social-psychological phenomena.

Some research has examined the evolution of cultural meanings, but most of it is armchair speculation rather than empirical investigation of cohort and/or period differences in the meanings attached to fundamental elements of social life. Ann Swidler (1980), for example, has written a stunning, but largely speculative piece on the cultural evolution of the meaning attached to romantic love. I find her work an extraordinarily insightful exposition about the ways in which marriage and romance take different forms and have different consequences, depending on the cultural meaning of love. Though persuasive, those insights are largely speculative. And yet, collection of
supporting data — at least for recent cohorts — would be relatively straightforward.

Research by Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981) provides an example of data-based conclusions about the evolution of cultural meaning. They report that data collected in 1957 and 1976 strongly suggest that the meaning of “personal problems” has changed over time, with Americans increasingly defining such problems as psychological in origin and appropriate for seeking help from mental health professionals. This example doesn’t have a life-course focus, but it illustrates that changes in cultural meaning can be observed empirically, at least in the short run.

One of the major contributions of life-course studies has been documentation of the effects of social change on social phenomena such as family formation and dissolution, labor market entrances and exits, and the timing and duration of social roles. What is missing is equal attention to the effects of social change on the meanings attached to social institutions and structures. Interestingly, there has been considerable speculation about the effects of social change on cultural meanings. Watkins and her colleagues (1987), for example, suggest that, because of changes in the duration of spousal and parental roles over the past century, marriage may have replaced parenthood as the most important social relationship of adulthood. Similarly, Eggebeen and Uhlenberg (1985) speculate that the decreased time that recent cohorts of American men spend co-residing with children may erode their commitments to their own children and to investments in future generations.

Obviously, we cannot collect data about the cultural meanings attached to life-course experiences from past cohorts. We can and should, however, determine the extent to which heterogeneous life-course trajectories among current cohorts are related to differences in cultural meanings. We also should design prospective studies and repeated cross-sectional studies that permit investigation of changes in cultural meaning and the ways that social change sets the evolution of cultural meaning in motion. To ignore cultural meanings is to neglect a primary consequence of social change and, perhaps, one of the primary mechanisms by which social change affects behavioral outcomes.

Individuals as the Architects of Their Life-Course Trajectories. — Third, life-course studies too frequently fail to view individuals as proactive and powerful initiators of their own life-course trajectories. This seems to be a perennial complaint against sociological — and a complaint that is voiced most frequently by social psychologists. This complaint is as old as Wrong’s classic piece (1961) on the “over-socialized conception of man” and as recent as Thoits’s publication (1994) on “the individual as psychological activist.” It is an appropriate complaint about much of the life-course research to date.

Along those lines, it is interesting to note that a large proportion of life-course studies — especially earlier and now classic studies — focus on the effects of historical conditions or early experiences that are, in fact, least likely to reflect the proactive efforts of individuals. Studies of historical events such as the Great Depression and military participation in World War II examine social forces beyond the control of individuals, as do studies of the persisting effects of childhood traumas (such as parental death/divorce and childhood physical abuse) on adult behaviors and health. It is fascinating that so many studies have focused specifically on the types of social situations in which personal choices and motivations are least likely to affect subsequent life-course patterns. These are certainly important studies; but it is not clear that they are representative of the more ordinary processes from which the life-course trajectories of most individuals emerge.

More recently, life-course trajectories that reflect the choices of individuals have received attention. For example, the work of Moen, Dempster-Clark, and Williams (1989, 1992) indicates that participation in social roles, especially voluntary or discretionary roles such as organization member, improves women’s health and longevity. Similarly, Henretta and colleagues (1993) discuss the synchronization of older couples’ retirement transitions, with the language of choice and decision making implying that retirement reflects the motivations of older workers, as well as the opportunities and constraints that they face. And Hagan and Wheaton (1993) note that personal desires for “early exit” from the adolescent role affect the timing and sequencing of the transition to adulthood. Life-course studies that recognize the importance of personal motivations vary in the extent to which those subjective states are inferred vs measured. In the studies of Moen et al. and Henretta et al., the role of personal choice in decision making is inferred rather than measured. In contrast, Hagan and Wheaton directly measured commitment to adolescent vs young adult roles. As a social psychologist, of course, my preference is for explicit measurement of personal motivations and proactive behaviors.

Despite the importance of some recent studies, widespread recognition of the importance of individual motivations, desires, and aspirations remains inadequately recognized by many life-course scholars. Moreover, social psychologists’ studies of these subjective states offer life-course researchers an important insight: individuals self-select into the kinds of environments that are compatible with their subjective perceptions and desires — and by doing so, they are happier and healthier than they would be otherwise. At an earlier point, I promised to provide a rationale for my hypothesis that orderly vs disorderly sequencing of transitions during early adulthood would be unrelated to perceptions of well-being and other social-psychological states. This hypothesis flows directly from my view of individuals as proactive initiators of their own life-course patterns. In the absence of rare and highly powerful external forces, it is my belief that most people experience the transitions that they desire at the time and in the order that they prefer. Under such conditions, a variety of life-
course patterns can be expected to perform equally well in generating perceptions of high life quality. As a social psychologist, I believe that the central issue in relating heterogeneous life trajectories to perceptions of well-being is the degree to which social environments permit individuals to implement their behavioral choices — not the degree to which sequences of behaviors are orderly versus disorderly.

**Potential of Life-Course Perspectives To Enrich Social-Psychological Research**

Effective cross-fertilization of life-course and social-psychological perspectives implies that each perspective offers benefits to the other. In this section, the potential of life-course perspectives to enrich social-psychological research is briefly examined.

Life-course perspectives offer one major contribution to social-psychological research: appreciation of temporality. Although this appears to be a simple contribution, its potential effects on social-psychological research are enormous. Traditionally, an emphasis on the “here and now” has been a defining characteristic of social psychology (e.g., House, 1977), reflecting the overarching power of Kurt Lewin’s field theory (1951) on the discipline. Obviously, social-psychological research has not totally ignored time — and, in fact, research in the social structure and personality tradition has been most likely to note the potential importance of time. Nonetheless, the vast majority of social-psychological research examines the effects of contemporaneous social environments on individuals’ subjective states and behaviors.

To the extent that distal environments are expected to affect current attitudes and behavior, social psychologists typically assume that their effects are indirect and operate through current social environments. They have shown little interest in either (a) testing the assumption that distal environments have only indirect effects on current attitudes and behaviors or (b) explicating the causal or temporal processes by which individuals are distributed across social environments. In my opinion, neglect of temporality is not only an issue that can be corrected by attention to life-course principles, it is the single greatest weakness of social-psychological research. There is virtually no topic examined by social psychologists that would not profit from reexamination with attention to temporality. Let us reexamine the three issues discussed in the last section, but with attention to the potential of temporality to inform the social-psychological knowledge base.

**Life-Course Trajectories.** — The study of life-course trajectories offers social psychologists an ideal strategy for understanding the persisting effects of early experience on subjective states and the conditions under which contemporaneous conditions override the effects of past experience. For example, socialization is a key process in social-psychological theories about conformity, deviance, social rewards, and social sanctions. Socialization occurs throughout life, but childhood socialization is more intense and basic than adult socialization (e.g., Clausen, 1968). Yet, little is known, for example, about (a) the ways that childhood socialization affects selection into specific social environments during adulthood, (b) the conditions under which adult socialization experiences override childhood socialization, and (c) how self-concept and self-esteem respond to incongruent childhood and adult socialization experiences. Socialization is but one example of a social-psychological construct that would profit from examination in temporal context.

Life-course perspectives offer more than an emphasis on long-term temporal processes. Trajectories offer the opportunity to examine subjective states in the context of heterogeneous life-course patterns. For example, self-concept can be studied over long intervals without utilizing the concept of life-course trajectories. It might be more profitable, however, to study the self-concept in the context of work or family trajectories. In this way, changes in self-concept could be linked to changes in specific roles or environments, thus elucidating the social as well as the temporal context within which self-concept changes occur. By adopting the concept of trajectory, both social and temporal contexts can be linked to subjective states.

Duration, another concept routinely used in life-course studies, is also relevant for understanding social-psychological states and processes in temporal context. In general, the longer an individual is exposed to a specific social environment, the more likely that environment is to affect subjective states and behavior. Most social-psychological research totally ignores length of exposure to environments. (Along these lines, one of the problems with generalizing from laboratory studies to the “real world” is that the laboratory environment is not only artificial, but also of short duration.) Life-course principles remind us that social environments differ in duration and that differences in length of exposure are likely to correlate with the power of environments to produce changes in subjective states and related behaviors.

**Evolution of Cultural Meanings.** — Social psychologists have developed four primary theories for explaining attitude change: reinforcement theories, social judgment theory, cognitive dissonance theory, and functional theories (e.g., Deaux, Dane, & Wrightsman, 1993). Two of the theories — social judgment theory and functional theories — were developed to demonstrate how difficult it is to change attitudes. Cognitive dissonance theory is fascinating, but has had little practical application because (a) cognitive dissonance occurs in only very specific circumstances, and (b) attitude change is but one of four methods of reducing it. Reinforcement theories, in contrast, have had substantial practical utility. They underlie the science of persuasive communication and are applied in mass communications ranging from political speeches to advertisements. All four theories were developed and tested in short-term experimental designs.
Social psychologists have exhibited remarkably little curiosity about how and under what circumstances attitudes develop and change over periods of time longer than a few weeks. Consequently, social psychologists have as much to learn as life-course scholars from studies of the ways that cultural meanings evolve in response to social change. Even in the absence of compelling research, it seems clear that there will be variability in the extent to which individuals alter the meaning of common concepts in relation to social change. Characteristics likely to affect individual changes in meaning include degree of exposure to social change, personal characteristics relevant to the concept (e.g., rich people may be less receptive than poor people to ideologies supportive of redistributing income), and age (as noted earlier, for example, political attitudes developed during adolescence and early adulthood often persist despite changes in political climate). And social change is likely to alter factors other than the content of cultural meaning. For example, as a result of having lived through several wars, current cohorts of older Americans might be expected to have more complex attitudes toward and beliefs about war than current cohorts of young adults, who cannot remember the Viet Nam conflict. Studies that link social change to the evolution of cultural meaning would, by definition, cover longer time periods than traditional social-psychological studies of attitude change. Such studies would teach social psychologists a great deal about the dynamics of subjective states.

Individuals as Architects of Their Life-Course Trajectories. — Earlier, I noted that sociologists often ignore the degree to which individuals are proactive initiators of their own life courses. Although social psychologists are more likely than sociologists to recognize the proactive power of individuals, many social psychologists also underrate the ability of people to change their lives and their environments. To the degree that social psychologists make this error, it appears to result as much from the traditional “stimulus-response” paradigm of psychology (House, 1977) as from the social determinism of sociology.

And, again, the truncated temporality of most social-psychological research is responsible, at least in part, for blinding social psychologists to the power of the individual. Indeed, social psychologists who believe in the power of the individual have found it difficult to demonstrate that power. So long as social psychologists restrict their research to contemporaneous or short-term studies, they are unlikely to observe the ways in which individuals use a variety of strategies — ranging from single-minded determination to deviant behavior to trial-and-error — to place themselves in environments that are conducive to and supportive of their personal goals. Although it would be an exaggeration to state that people are where they are, with regard to social location, because they want to be there, it also would be an error to assume that people are inevitably where they are as a result of external social forces. Some sociologists are well aware of that fact. Riley has long recognized that a dialectic operates between social structures and individual lives (e.g., Riley, 1987; Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994). One element of the dialectic is the strong effects that social structure exerts on individual lives. The other part of the dialectic is that individuals, especially when they act collectively, change social structure. Again, however, studies documenting the effects of individuals on social structure are scarce and badly needed. As this discussion illustrates, social psychologists have as much to gain as life-course scholars from studying the power of individuals, acting separately to construct their own lives and collectively (and often unknowingly) to make social structure more responsive to the needs and desires of societal members.

Conclusion

My purpose in this discussion has been to serve as matchmaker — to argue that wedding social-psychological theory and life-course principles makes scientific sense. Effective cross-fertilization is a partnership in which both partners profit from the substantive and/or methodologic insights of the other. Social-psychological theories offer life-course and gerontological scholars a veritable smorgasbord of topics at the heart of the links between social structure and personal biography. Conversely, life-course principles, with their emphasis on temporality, can be used by social psychologists to generate better knowledge about subjective states and social-psychological processes.

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