Offsetting the current tendency toward “life-course reductionism,” insights from these papers illustrate a broader (“aging and society”) paradigm — one that includes the life-course perspective, but also complements it with deeper understanding of the dialectical interplay between changes in lives and changes in the surrounding social structures.

Key Words: Life-course reductionism, Aging and society paradigm, Dialectical interplay

Discussion: What Does It All Mean?

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Ten years ago I predicted that, as the middle-aged grew old, they would recognize the personal threat of AIDS. Now, the New York Times describes the distribution of condoms in retirement communities! It would be fun to discuss that aspect of the life course — but it would be a distraction. Instead, Deborah Gold has given us an important challenge: How does an emerging special field of sociology, the life course, enlarge — and at the same time integrate — our discipline as a whole? The papers presented in this symposium have confronted the challenge. They have demonstrated the intersection of the life course with other sociological paradigms: demography, social psychology, stress, and social class.

However, one unanswered question runs through all these articles: What is a “life-course paradigm”? (As Leonard Pearlin has put it, “There are many paradigms of aging and they are not always clearly specified.”) In my “Discussion,” I first give one answer to this question from my own experience. Then I touch on insights from each of the authors that contribute to broader answers.

Life-Course Reductionism

I begin with my own audacious answer to the question: We do not have a “life-course paradigm” as such — we have only a truncated one. Why do I say this? Because people’s lives can only be fully understood as they influence, and are influenced by, the surrounding social structures (of roles, primary groups, nation states, and other social and cultural institutions). What we now have in life-course studies is a direct focus on people — on how people grow up and grow old from birth to death, and how cohorts of people continually replace each other in a changing society. But this “people focus” largely neglects the other great body of sociological work on structures — on social and cultural institutions. What we now have is a social system processes: self-generating and self-perpetuating in systemic ways.

The Encompassing “Aging and Society Paradigm”

What seems needed, then, is a broader conceptual framework — one that includes the life-course perspective, but also complements it with deeper exploration of age-related structures and structural changes. Toward this end, many of us have been struggling for the past three decades with an emerging paradigm, which I now quickly review. (In its earlier stages it is familiar to many as “age stratification” — but we have abandoned this term as too static, and now call it the “aging and society — A&S paradigm.”) This paradigm rests on the axiomatic distinction between people, on the one hand, and the surrounding structures, on the other. Its aim is to understand the interplay between two “dynamisms” (or sets of processes): changing lives of people and changing social structures. The two dynamisms are seen as interdependent: each influences the other. Yet each is also distinct: each changes (or remains stable) in its own ways and according to its own timing. Within the enormous complexity and heterogeneity of lives and structures, this aging and society paradigm continues to seek a parsimonious selection of general concepts that can broaden the life-course perspective. This, I take it, is Deborah Gold’s challenge to us here.

The articles in this symposium are bristling with insights (though often implicit) that help to clarify and specify key features of such a broad paradigm. I shall illustrate just two of these features: (1) the dynamic nature of both lives and structures, and (2) the dialectical interplay between them, as changes in lives and in structures each tend to transform the other.

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Uhlenberg and the Combined Features of the Paradigm

I begin with the article by Peter Uhlenberg, because his demographic analyses exemplify both paradigmatic features. First, the dynamic character of people's lives is transparent in his description of the life course as moving between "demographic events - birth and death" and as implicating such demographic "behaviors" as marrying, bearing children, migrating, entering the labor force, or retiring from it. Moreover, Uhlenberg sharpens the distinction between changes in the lives of people within a single cohort, and changes in life-course patterns across cohorts. The intra-cohort changes call for explanation in terms of aging; the inter-cohort changes, in terms of historical trends. Now the instant we recognize that aging and cohort succession are universal processes, involving continuous change or stability over time, we are released from the static biases of much recent sociological thought. (This is a major contribution of the life-course perspective! Society can never be static: it is continually vulnerable to pressures for change from the varied lives of people moving through.)

Uhlenberg's article goes far beyond the dynamic nature of people's lives to show how change (or stability) in the life course also involves change (or stability) in social structures. Here he clarifies the second feature of the A&S paradigm: the dialectical interplay between lives and structures. Consider just one example of this interplay:

- there has been unprecedented increase in longevity over this century (a change in lives);
- this produces a change in the structure of the kin network (e.g., more middle-aged adults with surviving elderly parents);
- then, in turn, the structural need for parental care creates a pressure on lives (especially women's lives) to devote themselves to caregiving;
- but, as more and more women have entered the labor force and caregiving becomes increasingly burdensome (lives have changed), pressures are mounting for still further structural changes that will provide aids to the caregivers (e.g., changes in community organizations, federal regulations).

And so on, and on... lives and structures sequentially influence each other.

So, in this (and in several other) examples, Uhlenberg is emphasizing a major point: the dialectical interplay between lives and structures is two-directional. A change in one direction tends to produce changes in the other direction. The other papers in this symposium contribute selected detail about each of these directions.

The Influence of Structures on Lives

In one direction of the interplay, O'Rand illustrates the influence of structures on lives. She shows how structural changes produce increasing heterogeneity and inequality in the economic lives of different members of a cohort. She directs attention to the mechanisms that produce patterning in lives, and notes as one mechanism the concept of "cumulative advantage or disadvantage." This concept, introduced in 1968 by Robert Merton in studies of scientists as the Matthew effect ("unto everyone that hath shall be given..."), had previously been applied to the life course in detail by Dannefer. Dannefer has elaborated the concept to explain how social organizations and social interactions operate over time to produce and heighten the differences among life-course patterns as members of a cohort age. O'Rand adapts the concept to accumulating inequalities in people's worklives. As one of several examples, she describes how life-course differences in structural opportunities (for lifetime employment and for pension savings plans) result, at the age of retirement, in pronounced inequalities in assets. Those people with early and sustained positive structural opportunities for job attachments over their lives can accumulate economic advantages, and thus are the most privileged when they finally reach old age.

Also dealing with the effects of structures on lives, Pearlin and Skaff emphasize both dynamics and structure (as in the A&S paradigm). Detailing the linkages between the stress process and life-course trajectories, they show how chronic stressors (which challenge people's adaptive capacities) are rooted in social roles and the relationships they entail. Like O'Rand, Pearlin and Skaff note the possible accumulation over time of role strains and the consequent intensification of undesirable outcomes. As they put it, "stress begets stress." They note the physiological implications as stressors operate through the immune and other bodily systems to affect health and social functioning over the life course. But their greater concern is with "social" stress, and the patterned variations (as by class, race, gender, as well as age) that can influence key circumstances of people's lives.

The Influence of Lives on Structures

Linda George, who pays special heed to social psychology, reminds us of the power of the subjective and social-emotional components of both lives and structures. I heartily agree. One could only wish that social psychology could in turn respond with clearer recognition of the dynamic aspects of aging. But here I want to highlight George's illustration of the converse direction of the dialectical interplay: the influence exerted by lives on structures. Not only can single individuals be "proactive and powerful initiators of their own life-course trajectories." But, in addition, many individuals collectively can change the entire "meaning" of social structures (e.g., new meanings have become attached to mental health care systems, work organizations, or kinship networks) - a process called "cohort norm formation" in the A&S paradigm.

As an example, in her remarks George noted one century-long shift in people's lives:

... the increased joint survival of husbands and wives; vs the decreased portion of the life course in
which parents have little children, rather than children who are “status-equal” adults (as Joan Waring and Beth Hess once called them).

Then, as these life-course shifts become widespread, they gradually alter the meanings of the kinship structure. They create new norms and expectations for the roles of spouse and parent; and they even increase the cultural value of marriage over parenthood.

In such ways, as lives change, new norms develop and become widely accepted and “institutionalized” in structural transformations. Factual age criteria for entering and leaving particular roles and performing in them become “expectations” or normative criteria. Thus, it is through changes in meaning that the demographic behaviors described by Uhlenberg can create institutionalized structural alterations — which then, in the dialectical interplay, come full circle to yield further influences on people’s lives.

In summary, these and many other insights from these papers help to round out the truncated life-course perspective: They add fuller understanding of structures and structural changes as these link to people’s lives. These insights help to offset tendencies toward a “life-course reductionism” which, partly through the straitjacket of survey research methods but also through conceptual myopia, has locked our thinking into an overemphasis on people without regard for the interconnected roles and institutions. But this symposium is only a beginning. For example, it is a beginning that resonates with my National Institute on Aging Program on Age and Structural Change (PASC), in which the continuing development of the A&S paradigm explores such concepts as the “asynchrony” between the two dynamisms of changing lives and changing structures, and the resultant “structural lag” as norms and institutions often fail to keep pace with alterations in people’s lives.

Many students of the life course, in PASC, in the American Sociological Association, and elsewhere, have now begun to restore structure to its rightful place in our paradigms. And I believe we can all enrich the discipline as a whole by bringing the dynamics of age into the quintessential focus of sociology on people as they relate to groups.

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