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SOCIOLGICAL
PERSPECTIVES ON LIFE
TRANSITIONS

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Abstract
Research on life transitions highlights the normative and nonnormative changes that individuals experience over time. During the past two decades, life course perspectives have provided a strategic context for studying the genesis of life transitions and their personal and social consequences. Both population-based and individual models of transitions have become more complex, focusing on the ways that social and historical contexts shape life transitions. At the individual level, progress has also been made in identifying the mechanisms by which transitions affect outcomes. Research on life transitions continues to grapple with two major issues—the challenges raised by heterogeneity, and the need to better link macro and micro perspectives—although advances have been made in both cases. One of the most promising characteristics of recent studies is cross-fertilization of concepts and methods from previously distinct research traditions: role theory, social stress theory, and life course sociology.

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, sociologists have devoted increased attention to history, to heterogeneity, and to the dynamics of change. One research area in which these issues have been the dominant themes and challenges is the study of life transitions. Thus, the sociology of life transitions shares intellectual concerns with the discipline more broadly. The study of life
transitions has unique history and themes as well. Although recent efforts have been especially vigorous, the roots of research on life transitions can be traced to classic perspectives on social roles, the relationships between social location and personal well-being, and the mechanisms by which social contexts shape individual lives.

This chapter examines progress in the study of life transitions. Initially, theoretical orientations that made important but limited contributions to the study of life transitions are briefly reviewed. The subsequent section depicts the contributions of life course perspectives to research on life transitions. The final section examines emerging issues and challenges in the study of life transitions. In line with the themes noted above, issues of history, heterogeneity, and change receive particular attention throughout the chapter.

PRECURSORS OF THE STUDY OF LIFE TRANSITIONS

Both role theory and social stress theory predate recent interest in life transitions. Both theories provided insights that were encompassed by, and typically expanded upon, in life transition studies. In this section, role theory and social stress theory are briefly reviewed, with discussion restricted to concepts and findings that contributed to the study of life transitions.

Role Theory

Linton (1936) introduced the initial elements of role theory, defining status as a position in social structure and role as the expected behaviors of status occupants. Over time, use of the term “role” broadened in two ways. First, role is now used to describe both a status and the behaviors associated with it. Second, role can refer to either the behaviors expected of a status occupant or the behaviors exhibited by a status occupant. Role theory became more complex—and more directly relevant to the study of life transitions—with the emergence of interest in the dynamics of role allocation and socialization (e.g. Biddle 1979, Brim 1966). Role allocation refers to the processes by which roles are assigned to individuals and to the related dynamics of role entry and exit. Socialization refers to the processes by which social structure transmits to individuals the skills and attitudes compatible with the roles that they enact. Role theorists view social norms as the cultural referents that permit role allocation and socialization to occur in a routinized and predictable manner. Norms are the basis of shared expectations about role behavior, the allocation of roles to individuals or subgroups, the timing of role entry and exit, socialization experiences that facilitate role performance, and social sanctions that are applied when individuals fail to perform their roles effectively (e.g. Brim 1966, Clausen 1968).

The link between role theory and life transitions is straightforward: role
entry and exit are, by definition, transitions (Allen & van de Vliert 1984, George 1980). Because of this link, role theory makes two major contributions to the study of transitions. First, role theory offers a potential explanation for the genesis and timing of life transitions. Most transitions are normatively governed and, hence, predictable in both occurrence and timing. Second, when available, socialization provides individuals with the skills needed to master transitions and perform new roles effectively. These principles lead to the prediction that role-based transitions typically operate smoothly, with little disruption to individual lives or to social structure.

With a few exceptions, role theory has been relatively dormant during the past three decades. The concepts of role and socialization are sometimes used to interpret empirical findings, but direct tests of role theory are rare. Ultimately, the breadth and generality of role theory may be both its major attraction and its greatest flaw. Role theory is attractive as a heuristic or general metaphor for thinking about links between social structure and individual behavior. Because role theory is so general, however, it is difficult to specify results that would refute it.

Other problems with role theory are relevant to the study of transitions. Although role allocation and socialization are, by definition, processes, role theorists have paid little attention to time per se. The major acknowledgment of time in role theory is the distinction between role entries and exits that occur “on-time” or “off-time,” that is, unexpectedly (e.g. Hagestad & Neugarten 1985), with the latter more likely to disrupt personal lives and social structure. Role theory also pays insufficient attention to heterogeneity, primarily because social context is largely ignored. A view of individuals embedded in heterogeneous social contexts that directly affect role allocation, socialization, and role performance has not been part of traditional perspectives on social roles (Granovetter 1985).

One recent work, relevant to the study of transitions, illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of role theory. Ebaugh (1988) studied role exits, correctly noting that they have received less attention than role entry. Based on interviews with persons who had exited one of nine roles, ranging from ex-nuns to transsexuals, Ebaugh concluded that the process of “becoming an ex” involves four stages: experiencing first doubts; searching for alternative roles; occurrence of a turning point (i.e. a specific event that triggers role exit); and creation of a new identity as former role occupant. Ebaugh also identified characteristics that shape the role exit. For example, role exits are easier to negotiate if they are potentially reversible and are voluntary.

Ebaugh’s work advances role theory in a number of ways. First, Ebaugh views role exit as a process. Second, this is the first study that attempts to identify a model of role exits that generalizes across roles. Third, identification of factors that shape the nature and outcome of role exits demonstrates greater
sensitivity to heterogeneity and social context than most previous work. But this study also illustrates some of the limitations of role theory. Most importantly, both timing and heterogeneity are inadequately examined. Because her sample consisted only of persons who had completed role exits, information was unavailable about unsuccessful attempts to relinquish roles. There also was no attempt to link the role exit process to social location; in particular, the genesis of role exits was unexamined.

Ultimately, role theory provides only a very abstract view of life transitions—a view that fails to adequately consider timing, heterogeneity, and social context. Role theory helped to shape studies of life transitions. More importantly, part of the distinctive nature of research on life transitions is a result of attempts to overcome the limitations of role theory.

**Social Stress Research**

The major impetus to development of stress research was the desire to better understand the relationships between social location and illness. Demographers and epidemiologists had long documented that social location—especially sex, race, and social class—are robustly related to the risk of physical and mental illness. During the 1960s, scholars began to investigate stress as a potential mechanism for explaining those relationships (e.g. Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend 1969, Langner & Michael 1963).

Initial conceptualizations of the link between stress and illness were simple and based on a homeostatic view of human lives. Stressful events were hypothesized to mediate the effects of social location on illness. Thus, women, older adults, members of ethnic and racial minorities, and persons who were economically disadvantaged were expected to experience higher levels of stress which would, in turn, increase their risk for physical and mental illness (e.g. Kessler 1979, Srole et al. 1962). Stress was typically operationalized as the number of life events experienced during a specified time period (e.g. Holmes & Rahe 1967). Most life events included in standardized scales are transitions, which is the direct link between stress research and the study of life transitions (George 1980). Early tests of this simple model yielded mixed results. In general, life events were significant predictors of illness onset, but the magnitudes of these relationships were modest (see Rabkin & Struening 1976 for a review of that early research).

Over time, a more complex view of stress and its consequences evolved. The most important element of this evolution was a change in the formulation of research questions concerning the links between stress and illness. In early studies, the primary research question was whether stress mediates the relationships between social location and illness. Later studies examined the conditions under which stress leads to adverse outcomes. Thus, social stress
theory was transformed from a mechanistic view to a richer, more complex perspective that emphasizes contingencies and heterogeneity.

Two other elements of stress research are relevant to the study of transitions. First, as stress theory evolved, investigators became concerned about the validity of summing the number of life events experienced in a defined time period and assuming that this indexed amount of stress. Some scholars also suggested that summary scales impede identification of the unique antecedents and consequences of specific life events. Although life event scales are still used, two other approaches have become increasingly common. One approach is to study single events (e.g. divorce, retirement) (e.g. Dohrenwend et al 1987). Other investigators suggest an intermediate approach in which theoretically relevant subsets of events are aggregated (e.g. family events, exit events) (e.g. Thoits 1987). The appeal of this approach is that events need not be examined individually, but the level of aggregation also will not mask distinctive relationships between events and their consequences.

Second, stress research now focuses on identification of the factors that mediate and moderate the impact of life events on well-being (e.g. Lin 1992). Life events have different effects, depending on the conditions under which they occur and the resources available to individuals experiencing them. A large literature suggests that multiple factors affect the stress process. Examples of such factors include personality, economic resources, coping efforts, and social relationships, especially receipt of emotional and instrumental support from significant others. Space limitations preclude review of these factors (but see Pearlin et al 1981 and Pearlin 1989 for theoretical models underpinning recent stress research and George 1989 for a review of studies).

Stress research has made two primary contributions to research on life transitions. The most important of these is recognition of heterogeneity among events, consequences of events, and the contingencies that shape the impact of life events. In addition, stress research demonstrates that life events (and, therefore, life transitions) are important for health and well-being. Physical and mental health are not the only important consequences of transitions, but stress research does the most effective job to date of demonstrating that the effects of transitions are of practical importance.

The narrowness of much stress research poses obstacles to an understanding of life transitions, however. Three problems are especially relevant. First, and most important, stress research pays insufficient attention to social structure, macrolevel social processes, and social contexts that are related to the occurrence and consequences of life events (Jacobson 1989, Pearlin 1989). Unlike role theory, for example, stress research largely ignores the fact that transitions tend to be normatively governed and are, therefore, often predict-
able and socially desirable. Emphasis on individuals, extracted from social structure, continues to dominate this field.

Second, reflecting the applied and epidemiologic foundations of stress research, many studies of life events focus on prediction rather than explanation, although this is less true of recent studies. Stress research too often emphasizes the prediction of illness rather than explanation of the processes by which life events affect well-being. Finally, although stress research focuses on process, timing per se has been largely ignored. Little attention is paid to the timing, as compared to the occurrence, of life events and to the expected lag between the occurrence of an event and its consequences.

TRANSITIONS IN LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

A distinctive sociology of the life course has emerged in the past two decades. Although there is no unified theory of the life course, life course perspectives share common principles, three of which are especially relevant to the study of life transitions. First, the life course is a social phenomenon, distinct from the life span (e.g. Hagestad & Neugarten 1985). Life span refers to duration of life; life-span characteristics are closely related to age and largely invariant across time and place. In contrast, the life course reflects the intersection of social and historical factors with personal biography (Elder 1985a). Hence, life course patterns are expected to vary across time, space, and populations.

Second, life course perspectives focus on “age-differentiated, socially recognized sequences of transitions” (Rossi 1980). Transitions and trajectories are key concepts in life course research (Elder 1985a, Hagestad 1990). Transitions refer to changes in status that are discrete and bounded in duration, although their consequences may be long-term. Trajectories are long-term patterns of stability and change, often including multiple transitions, that can be reliably differentiated from alternate patterns. Transitions and trajectories are interrelated. As Elder notes, “transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning” (1985a).

Third, and as implied by previous principles, life course studies require a dynamic, longitudinal perspective. Unfortunately, longitudinal data spanning long periods of time are scarce. Consequently, most life course research examines transitions rather than trajectories, although there are important exceptions as noted below.

Life course studies of transitions can be conveniently divided into two subsets, based on unit of analysis: population-based studies and studies of individuals. Each tradition will be reviewed in terms of the research issues examined, major findings, and implications for understanding transitions.
Population-Based Studies of Transitions

Population-based studies have examined three major issues: the timing of transitions, sequences of transitions, and transitions as life course markers.

TIMING OF TRANSITIONS In population studies, the timing of life course transitions is usually operationalized as either the average or median age at which a transition occurs or the age by which a majority of cohort members have experienced a transition. Variability of transition timing is typically examined both across and within cohorts.

During this century, the average age at which several transitions occur has changed. Compared to earlier cohorts, recent cohorts of men are older, on average, at school completion and age of first full-time job. For both transitions, the median age increased by two years for men born in 1948, as compared to those born in 1907 (Hogan 1981). The timing of marriage also has changed. From 1900 to 1930, median age of first marriage declined nearly three years for men (from 26.0 to 23.3). After that, median age at marriage declined more slowly, reaching a steady-state of about 21 years for men born between 1933 and 1951 (Hogan 1981). More recently, median age at first marriage has increased (Watkins et al. 1987). Intracohort variability in these transitions is significant. Persons of lower social class, African-Americans and Hispanics, and rural residents complete these transitions earlier than their peers (Hogan 1981). In general, women experience these transitions earlier than men, but cross-cohort patterns parallel those of men (Hogan 1985).

The timing of transitions in middle and later life also changed during the twentieth century. The average age at which individuals experience death of the last parent has increased dramatically (Gee 1987, Uhlenberg 1980, Winsborough 1980). Over the same period, average retirement age has dropped steadily, despite increases in life expectancy that suggest the potential for extending employment to later ages (Tuma & Sandefur 1988). Widowhood has become more strongly linked to both sex and age since the late 1800s, occurring later and with women at much greater risk (Martin Matthews 1987). Intracohort variability in the timing of these transitions is substantial. Persons of lower socioeconomic status and members of disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities experience parental death, retirement, and widowhood at younger ages, on average, than do their peers.

SEQUENCES OF LIFE TRANSITIONS Investigators also have examined sequences of life transitions, their compression or dispersion over time, and their consequences. Initial hypotheses posited that transition sequences are governed by norms specifying the appropriate ordering of transitions and that deviance from those norms would result in negative outcomes.
Most research on transition sequences focuses on entry into adulthood. Modell et al (1976) performed the pioneering work; Hogan (1978, 1981) examined the issue most comprehensively. The normative sequence for three key transitions of early adulthood consists of leaving school, followed by first full-time job, followed by first marriage. Using data from American men born between 1907 and 1952, Hogan found that disorderliness is substantially more prevalent among recent than earlier cohorts. Recent cohorts also completed the three transitions in a shorter period of time than earlier cohorts, suggesting that the transition to early adulthood has been compressed. Similar findings are reported by other investigators, including those using data from other western societies (e.g. Featherman & Sorensen 1983, Kerckhoff 1990). The youngest men in Hogan’s study were born in 1952. Thus, recent trends toward later marriage were not represented in his data.

Hogan found limited evidence that disorderly transition sequences result in poorer outcomes. Men who experienced disorderly sequences earned less money, had less prestigious jobs, and were more likely to divorce than men with orderly sequences. The magnitudes of these deprivations were modest, however. In addition, for some men, the costs of disorderliness were compensated for by higher socioeconomic achievements. The nature of the variability within younger cohorts operated against Hogan’s hypothesis: orderly sequences were most prevalent among men from lower socioeconomic and rural backgrounds. Both groups also exhibited relatively low levels of educational and occupational attainment.

Data permitting cross-cohort comparisons of the sequencing of young adult transitions among women are less common. Comparisons of recent cohorts, however, suggest that disorderly sequences are more prevalent among women than men (e.g. Hogan 1985, Kerckhoff 1990).

**LIFE COURSE MARKERS** Transitions that are both highly prevalent and highly predictable are viewed as life course markers (Winsborough 1980). During the 20th century some transitions became more predictable; others became less so. Transitions that are now less predictable are concentrated in early adulthood. The timing of marriage and parenthood exhibit greater variability among younger than older cohorts (Cherlin 1988a, Modell 1980). These transitions also are less predictable now because larger proportions of recent cohorts do not marry and/or do not have children (Watkins et al 1987). Another less common and less predictable transition during early adulthood is death of a minor child. Uhlenberg (1980) estimates that, early in this century, parents had a 62% chance of losing at least one minor child; in 1980, the probability had dropped to 4%, no longer representing a life course marker.

In contrast, transitions during middle and old age have become more prevalent and predictable. Death of a parent during middle age is now so
predictable that Winsborough (1980) suggests that it is a publicly recognized life course marker. As noted previously, voluntary retirement has become a predictable, nearly universal transition. Martin Matthews (1987) demonstrated that the timing of widowhood has become more homogeneous during the past century. She suggests that this increased predictability helps recent cohorts of older women to better prepare for widowhood and provides natural support groups of widowed age peers.

Population studies provide important information about the evolution of the life course across cohorts and about variability within cohorts. One limitation of these studies is the relative lack of attention to mechanisms of change (Hogan & Aston 1986). Social change is often interpreted as the driving force for cohort differences in transitions. For example, some scholars suggest that, in the United States, historically unprecedented affluence experienced during the middle of this century accounts for declines in age at first marriage. Other observers argue that life course markers during middle and late life were unlikely to emerge until life expectancy increased to the point that most cohort members lived til advanced ages. These are credible post hoc inferences; but they are not empirical tests of hypothesized explanatory mechanisms. To date, population-based studies of life transitions have been more successful in describing changes in transition patterns than in explaining them.

**Individual-Based Studies of Transitions**

Individual-based studies examine the effects of transitions at one point in time on subsequent life course outcomes. The emphasis of these studies is explication of the processes by which early transitions exert enduring influences on later life patterns. Studies in this tradition typically are based on longitudinal data; a few investigators have used prospective data covering large segments of the life span.

**LINKING HISTORICAL EVENTS, LIFE TRANSITIONS, AND OUTCOMES**

Elder’s pioneering studies (e.g. 1974, 1979) of the effects of the Great Depression on subsequent life patterns and achievements became a catalyst for much of the research in this tradition. Elder examined two cohorts of children: (i) children born in the early 1920s, who were adolescents during the Depression and (ii) children born in 1928–29, who were young children during the Depression. Within-cohort variability was examined in terms of (i) social class prior to the Depression and (ii) the amount of economic deprivation triggered by the Depression. In brief, substantial differences were observed across cohorts, within cohorts, and between girls and boys. The younger cohort was more adversely affected by the Depression than the older one. Within cohorts, the strongest effects were found among those whose families suffered the
greatest economic losses, children in working- rather than middle-class families, and boys rather than girls. Effects of the Depression persisted in adulthood. Although socioeconomic achievements did not differ significantly, several life domains—including sex roles within the family, patterns of work and leisure, and political values—exhibited differences across and within cohorts, depending on amount of deprivation.

The impact of World War II on subsequent life patterns also has been studied. Elder et al (1991) examined the impact of World War II military service on midlife career achievements among two cohorts of US men. The older cohort, who entered adulthood during the Depression and did military service later, had lower midlife career achievements than did the younger cohort. Military service was unrelated to occupational achievements in the younger cohort but was advantageous in the older cohort.

The effects of World War II participation on subsequent life course patterns have been examined in other countries as well. Mayer (1988) compared German cohorts born between 1900 and 1936 on adult socioeconomic achievements. Men born between 1914 and 1925 were most intensely involved in the war effort; more than 75% of the men in those cohorts served in the military. Surprisingly, the most severe short- (1945–1948) and long-term (1965–1971) negative effects were experienced by men born between 1926 and 1930, most of whom did not serve in the military or who served only briefly. These findings are the opposite of those reported by Elder et al (1991), who found older cohorts to fare less well than younger cohorts, and probably reflect Germany’s disastrous economic and social conditions in the years immediately following the war. Cook (1983) studied post-war career lines of men who served in Japan’s military elite during World War II. Before and during the war, they were among Japan’s most honored citizens; after the war, their occupations were terminated and the post-war labor market was closed to them. Older members of the military elite fared worst in both the short- and long-term; although intelligent and well-educated, many had to settle for farming or menial labor. Younger members fared better; they were permitted to enter educational institutions, and most pursued professional careers.

In terms of more recent history, McAdam (1989) examined the short- and long-term consequences of activism during the Civil Rights Movement. In a design superior to previous studies, he compared subsequent life course experiences of applicants to the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, some of whom participated and some of whom were accepted for participation, but withdrew. Twenty years later, participants differed significantly from nonparticipants. The former were more likely to endorse leftist political attitudes, more active in politics, disproportionately employed in “helping”
professions, more likely to label themselves as “liberal” or “radical,” much less likely to be married, and had lower incomes than did the no-shows.

McAdam views political activism in early adulthood as a “watershed” experience that has enduring impact on life course patterns. He also suggests that social bonds developed during political activism form a structural tie that sustains activist attitudes and behaviors over time. Weil’s research (1987) also suggests that political activism during early adulthood has persisting effects. In Germany, cohorts who were adolescents and young adults during the Third Reich, especially those who participated in Nazi youth groups, endorse less democratic values throughout adulthood than did earlier and later cohorts.

LIFE COURSE EFFECTS OF EARLY EVENTS

Other individual-based studies focus on the conditions under which events or transitions experienced earlier in life affect subsequent life course patterns. The emphasis here is not on historical events, but on personal transitions and choices. A broad body of research falls under this rubric; studies reviewed here are, of necessity, selective.

Childhood traumas (e.g. loss of a parent, physical abuse) have been linked to subsequent life course patterns. In a classic study, Brown & Harris (1978) traced the impact of parental loss during childhood on adult outcomes. Using data from a sample of working class women in London, they found that parental loss during childhood was associated with increased risk of clinical depression, lower socioeconomic achievements, and poorer quality marriages during adulthood. Additional analyses suggested that the effects of parental loss were mediated by the quality of care the child received after parental loss: fewer negative outcomes were observed among women who received high-quality care as children from parental substitutes. Although Brown & Harris found both parental death and divorce to increase the risk of negative adult outcomes, later US studies report that parental divorce has stronger and more negative effects than parental death (e.g. Landerman et al 1991, Tweed et al 1989). These findings suggest that family dysfunction, rather than parental loss per se, may explain the persisting effects of parental loss on adult outcomes. Landerman et al (1991) also found that the effects of contemporaneous life events on mental health during adulthood are stronger for persons who experienced childhood traumas.

More normative childhood transitions also affect subsequent life course patterns. Alexander & Entwisle (1988) found that the transition to school (entering the first grade) significantly affects subsequent achievement trajectories. This transition is more difficult for blacks than for whites, despite similar levels of cognitive achievement at school entry. These data strongly suggest that the transition to school has both immediate and long-term consequences and that racial differences in achievement emerge quickly.
Another illustration of the persisting effects of childhood events is the relationship between age of onset of mental illness and subsequent life course patterns. In the most rigorous study to date, Turnbull et al (1990) compared adults who experienced early onset of mental illness (i.e. before age 20), late onset, and no mental illness on socioeconomic and family outcomes. Analyses were performed for four types of mental illnesses. Overall, early onset had significantly more adverse effects than did late onset. For all illnesses but depression, early onset was associated with lower educational achievement, lower occupational prestige, lower income, and increased unemployment. Similar patterns were observed for adult family roles: for all illnesses except depression, early onset was associated with lower rates of ever marrying and, among the ever married, higher rates of divorce. Early onset was associated with lower fertility, however, only among those with depression.

A final illustration of research in this tradition concerns the effects of early events and choices on retirement income. As is true for the employed, retired men have substantially higher incomes, on average, than do retired women. This income differential reflects several differences in the work histories of men and women. Compared to women, men typically have longer work histories, higher annual and lifetime earnings, and they are more likely to work in markets that provide private pensions (DeViney & O’Rand 1988). Examination of the joint trajectories of women’s work and family roles helps to explicate the processes that generate these sex differences (e.g. O’Rand & Henretta 1982, O’Rand & Landerman 1984). Because of family roles, especially parenting, women are less likely to work full-time and continuously throughout adulthood, decreasing their annual and lifetime earnings. For women covered by private pensions, truncated and discontinuous work histories result in lower pension income. Women also are substantially less likely than men to be employed in markets that provide private pensions. Although family transitions and trajectories partially explain sex differences in retirement income, they do not account for the social allocation processes that result in women disproportionately working without pension coverage (O’Rand 1988).

The individual-based studies reviewed here are highly selective, but they document that transitions at one point in time often have long-term consequences. As these studies illustrate, individual-based studies have made progress in three areas that are generally neglected in population-based studies: explication of the mechanisms by which transitions affect outcomes, examination of transitions in the context of long-term trajectories, and consideration of the joint effects of transitions in multiple domains (e.g. family and work).
Studying transitions in the life course context has been substantially more profitable than earlier research based on role theory and social stress theory. The link between transitions and life course patterns has been profitable for life course theory as well. Two decades ago, Clausen (1972) predicted that studying life transitions offered the best chance of generating a theory of the life course. Subsequent research supports that prediction. Knowledge of transitions is richer as a result of studying the life course; conversely, knowledge of the life course has been advanced by studying transitions.

Research on transitions in life course perspective also has weaknesses. One limitation, previously addressed, concerns mechanisms of change. Two other problems concern the challenges of heterogeneity and the struggle to integrate findings from micro and macrolevel studies. This final section addresses those two problems and the increasing cross-fertilization of concepts and methods among formerly distinct research traditions.

Challenges of Heterogeneity

Heterogeneity is relevant to the origins of transitions, the varying outcomes of transitions, and the factors that mediate and buffer the effects of transitions. Most research on transitions focuses on modal transition patterns, underplaying the fact that large proportions of individuals do not fit those patterns (e.g. Dannefer 1988). A study by Rindfuss et al (1987) illustrates this point. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972, these authors coded participants’ role sequences for 8 years following high school graduation, examining five roles: work, education, homemaking, military, and other. They report that 1100 sequences were required to describe the experiences of the 6700 men in the sample; 1800 sequences were needed to capture the patterns of the 7000 women in the sample. Even the simple, two-event sequence of education followed by work applied to only slightly more than half the men and to less than half the women. This level of heterogeneity challenges the assumption that transitions are patterned in predictable ways, and it complicates research on the consequences of transitions.

Heterogeneity may, in fact, challenge the assumption that there is an “institutionalized life course” (Meyer 1986). Kohli et al (1991) describe patterns of early retirement using data from seven industrialized nations, focusing on the mix of public and private institutional arrangements that shape the retirement process. Although there are multiple pathways to retirement across and within societies, a common element of these pathways is the demise of chronological age as a basis of exit from the labor force. Guillelma...
van Gunsteren (1991) suggest that this represents a “deinstitutionalization” of the life course in that the major milestone that defines entry to old age is no longer standardized or predictable.

Heterogeneity also is being addressed by increased attention to the ways that pre-transition characteristics affect both the occurrence of transitions and their outcomes. Caspi et al (1987, 1988) demonstrate that childhood personality traits affect the timing and outcomes of later transitions. In their studies, shy children experienced the transition to adulthood later than did their more outgoing peers, and they also had more adverse outcomes. Children with explosive interaction styles also experienced adverse outcomes during the transition to adulthood. Hagan (1991) studied the socioeconomic achievements of two subgroups of adolescents weakly linked to parental and educational control: a subculture of deviance and a party subculture. Preference for a delinquent subculture negatively affected early adult status attainment. Identification with a party subculture had weaker effects. Both subcultures had stronger effects for working class men. Research that focuses on the ways that pre-transition statuses affect transition outcomes is similar to the recent advances in stress research, noted previously. In both cases, attention to heterogeneity has led to a richer understanding of social dynamics.

**Linking Macro and Micro Findings**

Current research also does not adequately link micro and macro evidence about the genesis and consequences of transitions, a common problem in sociology more broadly. Indeed, Ritzer (1989) suggests that “the issue of micro-macro linkage has emerged as the central problematic of sociological theory in the 1980s” (italics in the original). This continues to be true in the 1990s. Accumulated evidence, however, suggests that primary groups, especially family and occupational environments, are the major contexts within which broad social patterns influence transitions and their outcomes (Hagestad 1990).

**FAMILY** Changes in family structure appear both to result from macrosocial changes and to alter the timing and consequences of transitions (George & Gold 1991). Kertzer & Hogan (1988) studied the impact of economic change on life course patterns in a nineteenth century Italian community. Their data suggest that changes in family structure were the initial responses to changing economic conditions, followed by observable effects on the life transitions of family members. During the past 30 years, in the United States, timing of the transition to parenthood has become less predictable, generating distinctive patterns of family structure based on age differences between generations. Bengtson et al (1990) suggest that these family structures lie along a continuum anchored at one end by “age-condensed” families, in which age differences
between generations are small, and "age-gapped" families, in which age differences between generations are large. Age-condensed families are generated by early fertility; age-gapped families result from delayed fertility. Furstenberg et al (1987) traced the life course outcomes associated with early fertility. Burton and colleagues (Burton & Bengtson 1985, Hagastad & Burton 1986) trace the consequences of teenage parenthood on the two older generations in the family. The impact of divorce on intergenerational family roles also has been examined (Hofferth 1985, McLanahan & Bumpass 1988).

Increased life expectancy has altered the length of time spent in various family roles. For example, using simulated cohort data from census records, Gee (1986) compared time spent in specific family roles by Canadian women in the 1830s and 1950s. She estimated that during the 1830s, women spent fully 90% of their married years rearing minor children. By the 1950s, this had dropped to 40%. Patterns for men may be even more dramatic. Because of declines in fertility and high divorce rates in recent cohorts, American men have experienced a precipitous decrease in the amount of time that they live with children. Eggebeen & Uhlenberg (1985) report that, between 1960 and 1980, white men in the United States experienced a 43% decrease in the time spent living with young children, from 12.3 to 7.0 years. During the same interval, American black men experienced a 23% reduction, from 15.1 to 11.6 years. These authors suggest that changes in the duration of family roles have important social consequences. Gee speculates that the decline in time spent in active parenting has decreased the salience of parenthood and increased the importance of marriage during adulthood. Eggebeen & Uhlenberg are concerned that the brief time that many men spend living with children may erode their commitments to their own children and to investments in future generations more broadly (also see Uhlenberg & Eggebeen 1986). These are credible interpretations about the impact of changes in duration in family roles, but nevertheless they remain speculative. And some authors offer alternate explanations (see, for example, Furstenberg & Condran 1988 for a reconsideration of the Eggebeen & Uhlenberg position).

OCCUPATIONS  Occupations are a strategic context for studying life transitions. Job shifts (vertical and lateral moves, as well as movement in and out of the labor force) are transitions, and careers are the trajectories within which job shifts occur. In the past decade, sociological interest in job shifts has increased (for a recent review of this research base, see Rosenfeld 1992). Much of the recent research has taken advantage of event history methods to examine the degree to which job shifts are duration dependent (a concept more broadly useful in life course research as well, see Featherman & Lerner 1985). The general expectation is that duration dependence is negative, i.e., that voluntary job shifts decline over time. Most research results support this
expectation, although there are inconsistent findings. One factor creating both estimation and interpretation problems in understanding the dynamics of job shifts is the typical confounding of duration, age, and seniority. Job shifts and careers would seem to have obvious links with life course perspectives. As yet, however, job mobility research has paid little attention to life course concepts. Rosenfeld suggests that infusion of life course concepts into job mobility research would help (i) to disentangle age and duration effects in job shifts, (ii) to focus increased attention on the transitions that anchor the beginnings and ends of careers (job entry and retirement), and (iii) to overcome the relative neglect of the ways in which other life domains and the life courses of family members shape job shifts and careers. Indeed, intersections of work and family roles have received considerable attention in previous life course research. The joint effects of work and family roles on retirement income of women were reviewed previously. The interacting effects of work and family roles also have been examined earlier in adulthood (e.g. Bielby & Bielby 1989, Wheaton 1990a).

Research on job shifts and careers also offers evidence about the ways in which broader social patterns affect individual transitions. Substantial attention has been paid to the ways in which job shifts are a function of opportunity structures in specific firms or internal markets (see Althauser 1989 for a review). These intermediate structures, in turn, are responsive to broader changes at the organizational, national, and political levels (e.g. DiPrete & Krecker 1991, Sorenson & Tuma 1981).

The study of job transitions served as the basis for one attempt to develop a generic model of transition behavior. Nicholson (1984, 1990) used data on promotions and job shifts to develop the “transition cycle” model, which he claims can be applied to all transitions. The transition cycle includes four steps: preparation, encounter (occurrence), adjustment (short-term responses), and stabilization (long-term accommodation). The model is highly abstract, with few clues as to how it could be applied empirically. Nicholson’s model is similar to Ebaugh’s model of role exits, reviewed earlier. Both authors wish to delineate a single model that will apply to an entire class of transitions. Unfortunately, I fear that they are doomed to fail in this quest. The vast majority of research suggests that transitions are too heterogeneous and too dependent upon social context to be captured by a single, generic model. Nonetheless, the occupational arena provides a strategic context for the study of life transitions—and the integration of macro and micro findings has been more successful here than in other social contexts.

Cross-Fertilization

Perhaps the most important emerging theme in research on transitions is cross-fertilization among the previously distinct traditions of role theory,
social stress, and life course sociology. The boundaries among these research traditions are increasingly and appropriately indistinct. Pearlin (1983) was one of the first to articulate the utility of cross-fertilization across these research domains. He prescribed examination of life events and transitions in the context of social roles, noting that this would help to remedy neglect of the “structured and durable social and economic antecedents of stress.” He expanded this theme in a more recent essay (Pearlin 1989). Similarly, Cowan (1991) notes that an adequate model of transitions must (i) apply to both normative and nonnormative transitions, (ii) examine both roles as contexts within which transitions emerge and role reorganization as an important outcome of transitions, and (iii) apply across the life course, thus calling for integration of themes from all three research traditions.

Empirical studies that cross the boundaries of life course, stress, and role theories illustrate the payoff of cross-fertilization. Many of the studies described earlier, especially those that document the persisting effects of childhood deprivations on adult achievements and outcomes, incorporated elements of multiple perspectives. Other examples are more explicit, in that the authors announce their intentions to cross paradigms. Combining elements of role and stress theory, Wheaton (1990b) demonstrated that role histories moderate the effects of transitions on mental health. Another of Wheaton’s studies links life course and stress perspectives (Wheaton & Roszell 1992). Results of that study indicated that the effects of current stress on mental health were conditioned by the level of cumulative lifetime stress. Both very high and very low levels of cumulative stress were associated with increased risk of mental health problems in the face of current stress, moreso than were moderate levels of cumulative stress. Two recent edited volumes offer multiple illustrations of research that bridges at least two of the research traditions. Eckenrode & Gore’s edited volume (1990) examines the links between stress and family and work roles, although life course issues are not explicitly considered. Cowan & Hetherington’s book (1991) focuses on family transitions, and all eight empirical papers rely in part on role theory and life course perspectives. Several also focus explicitly on stress. Fortunately, research based on cross-fertilization of these research traditions seems to be gathering momentum.

CONCLUSION

Research on life transitions has become a growth industry in sociology. The emergence of life course sociology during the past two decades provided the most fertile field in which to examine the dynamics, heterogeneity, genesis, and outcomes of life transitions. Role theory and social stress theories made important but limited contributions to the study of life transitions. The most
promising current work, however, indicates that integrating life course perspectives, social stress theory, and role theory yields the richest understanding of life transitions. The study of life transitions also parallels developments in sociology more broadly. Issues that challenge both the study of life transitions and the sociological enterprise as a whole include depicting and explaining the dynamics of change, revealing and accounting for heterogeneity, identification of the mechanisms by which social contexts shape human lives, and integration of macro and micro patterns. It seems reasonable to conclude that, within the field of life transitions, progress is being made on all these fronts.

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