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Sociological research on age: legacy and challenge

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ABSTRACT
The hallmark of sociology is its emphases on first, people, secondly, structures and, thirdly, their interrelationships. Similarly, we see sociological research on age as concerned with (1) people over their life course; (2) age-related structures and institutions; and (3) the dynamic interplay between people and structures as each influences the other. Guided by our 'aging and society paradigm', we review the *research legacy* as it has focused more on (1) than on (2), and is only now concerned with understanding the interplay between them (3). Hence our *challenge* to future researchers is to devise strategies for understanding and analysing this interplay and its possible contributions to the ever-accumulating research legacy.

KEY WORDS – Changing lives, neglect of structure, interplay between lives and structures, cohort norm formation, aging and society paradigm.

An autobiographical introduction

Alan Walker, as 1998 President of the Research Committee on Aging (RC 11) of the International Sociological Association (ISA), invited us together with Lars Andersson to open a discussion on 'The research legacy and future challenges' of the sociology of age.[1] The sociology of age, as we have come to define it, is concerned with (1) people over their life course; (2) age-related social structures and institutions; and (3) the dynamic interplay between people and structures *as each influences the other*. This tripartite theoretical and empirical base is not new. It has frequently been illustrated, for example in Figure 1, on the 'interplay between lives and structures' (see M. Riley 1994*a*). This base reflects the hallmark of sociology itself which, unique among the sciences, similarly emphasizes people, structures, and the relationships between them. Thus, it speaks to Alan Walker's exhortation that RC 11 act 'as a global focal point' not only for social gerontology but also for sociology as a whole (Walker 1998).

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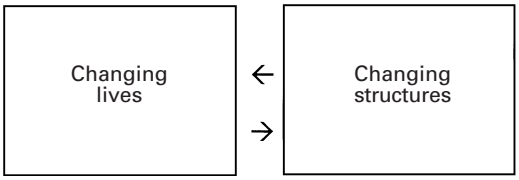


Figure 1. Interplay between lives and structures

Toward meeting this challenge, this paper first describes the *research legacy* as it has focused more on people's lives than on structures; then it considers the *challenge* of examining the interplay between lives and structures.

How, we asked ourselves at the outset, in a short paper could we review the critical lacunae in the research legacy and the consequent future challenge? As far back as 1968, when the first *Aging and Society* volume codified the available literature on the middle and later years (Riley *et al.* 1968), there were already no less than 3000 social science findings. Since then, the output of research on age has increasingly reflected such unprecedented changes as the ageing of populations, the globalisation of commerce and migration, and the computerisation of knowledge and communication. Clearly, we could not even begin to cope in this short paper with this massive research record.

Instead, we decided to draw on our own collaborative experiences with the 'aging and society' paradigm. Over the past several decades a range of scholars, using this approach, have been attempting to keep abreast of the literature on age as an ingredient of both changing lives and changing structures (as summarised in M. Riley, 1994*a*; Riley *et al.* 1999).

The research legacy

In reviewing the legacy, our analyses of research on both lives and structures have been moving from misinterpretations and fallacies, to cohort analyses, to the current preoccupation with the life course and neglect of structure.

Changing lives

Early in our review of the research on human lives, we were puzzled by frequently conflicting interpretations of the data. Back in the 1960s many researchers had defined ageing as an inevitable decline after some arbitrary age such as 40 or even 20; but other researchers had

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found few consistent declines with ageing in performance or self-confidence. How do we account for these discrepancies?

Careful scrutiny of various research procedures led to identification of several fallacies that produced potentially conflicting misinterpretations (M. Riley 1973). One was the 'life-course fallacy': that is, erroneously interpreting cross-sectional age differences as if they referred to the process of ageing. Another was the 'fallacy of cohort-centrism': that is, erroneously assuming that members of all cohorts age in the same fashion as members of the cohort under scrutiny. Such fallacies tended to persist, despite the few studies which began to trace the lives of individuals longitudinally over time, and despite the dawning realisation that changes in the ageing process must be disentangled from changes in the environing society (*cf.* Riley *et al.* 1968: 10; Cohn 1972).

Prompted by these puzzling interpretations, understanding was sought in *cohort analysis*, to which attention was turned as early as the 1980s (prior to the broad awareness later generated by the 'baby boom cohorts'). Numerous studies, by comparing the lives of selected cohort members, identified many cohort differences which today are taken for granted. These were differences in educational level, family history, work history, diet and exercise, exposure to acute relative to chronic diseases, standard of living, number of years in retirement, and – perhaps most significant of all – the number of years people can expect to survive.

This research on cohort differences in lives has left a significant legacy. It has demonstrated the important principle that different cohorts age in different ways. This means that no fixed pattern of decline with age is inevitable. Indeed, the life course is highly variable.

In addition, the many cohort differences also showed that the variability of the ageing process is one of the few truly *universal* social principles: because, as every society undergoes change, new cohorts of people are continually being born, ageing, dying, and replacing each other. Walker (1998) notes the significance of this principle in several domains of research.

But the discovery of these cohort differences in the ageing process left one question unanswered: *how* did they come about? We knew that they cannot be explained simply by evolutionary changes in the human genome, because the genome changes so slowly that it remains much the same from cohort to cohort (Riley and Abeles 1990: iii). Instead, we inferred that the cohort differences in lives must result from some kind of still unknown *interplay* between a relatively unchanging genetic background and a continually changing society. Thus attention was

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redirected to the neglected area of social structure and its links to ageing.

Neglect of structure

Our 'aging and society' review shows that studies of structure have made fewer contributions to the legacy than have the studies of lives. To be sure, there have been some important sociological analyses of such social structures as the state (*e.g.* Myles 1989) or social networks (as by Andersson and Sundstrom 1996). But few sociologists have followed Tamara Hareven's historical model of connecting ageing with changing structures such as the family (Hareven 1982). The crucial linkage of ageing to structure has been relatively neglected (as compared with studies of lives), especially by researchers in the United States.

As an illustration of this neglect, we have often cited the repeated failure of the well-known intervention studies to recognise that the source of their successful outcomes is *social structure* (Riley and Riley 1994). Studies of older people show, for example, that:

- cognitive functioning can be improved, *if*…
- porous bone mass can be reconstituted, *if*…
- memory loss can be recovered, *if*…
- productivity can be increased, *if*…

If? A moment's pause should make clear that, in all such instances, the 'if' is found in the surrounding social structures: in firms, families, social networks, training establishments, nursing homes, etc. Yet the predominant focus on lives has tended to obscure this structural aspect of the research legacy.

At the extreme, an indication of the neglect of structure is the preoccupation with the 'life course approach' (M. Riley 1998). Especially in the United States this approach has become a virtual obsession, in which structural phenomena, if heeded at all, have been largely reduced to 'contextual' characteristics of individuals. This preoccupation threatens a possible 'life course reductionism' in research on age, a threat that leads to challenges for the future, the second major portion of this paper.

Future challenges

The major challenge for future research on age, as we see it, is to examine, not lives or structures *alone*, but the dynamic *interplay* between them as each influences the other. In the continuing dialectic between

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lives and structures, it is not only lives that change: structures also change. And full understanding requires understanding the linkages – both methodological and substantive – between ageing and the process of change in the surrounding structures (as in the 'aging and society' paradigm with which we began).

The importance of understanding the interplay

An insight into the substantive nature of the interplay is found in Gordon Streib's research on retirement communities (1993). Streib demonstrates that the characteristics and experiences of residents in such communities (*structures*) depend, not only upon the *lives* of the residents, but also upon the 'adaptability, vitality, and long-range survival' of the community itself. Most studies of retirement communities focus exclusively on samples of residents as the sole research unit, often erroneously portraying them as enjoying a largely placid leisure lifestyle. But studies of residents alone can be misleading. They cannot explain how the inner workings of structures, *i.e.* particular communities, may result in failure to meet the needs of some residents, *e.g.* for continuing education, exercise programmes, or health care facilities. Similarly studies of residents alone ipso facto ignore the external sources of structural change, such as the labour supply, mortgage rates, or shifts in the local population.

Streib counters with an agenda for complementary studies that uses a sample of retirement *communities* as the research unit. Just as residents grow older over time and new cohorts are recruited, structures also experience change – social, economic, and physical – as they endure over time. Thus a community in a 'mature' stage may lose its viability if a newer community is organised that attracts younger, more recent retirees. And, as the interplay continues, understanding how communities change can lead to deeper insights into the human lives involved.

Streib's example points to the substantive utility of samples of communities to supplement samples of people in exploring the reciprocal influences between changes in lives and changes in the structures to which these people belong.

The methodological challenge

This example evokes the methodological challenge for future research: how to study the interrelated changes when two research units are involved – both individuals and structures. A few incipient research

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models, made possible today by modern computers, are promising, although they still require much further development to become widely practical (described in M. Riley 1994*b*).

Illustrative of the promise is David Kertzer's study of the interplay between alterations in *households* and in the lives of their *members* in an Italian province during six decades of industrialisation (see Karweit and Kertzer 1986). His remarkable dataset contains separate event history files for each individual and for each household; and the files are cross-linked by identifying (by its own key) every individual and every household. Using these sets of files, Kertzer can simultaneously focus on households, to examine how individual members are involved in the dynamism of structural change, and on individual lives, to see how structures are implicated in the dynamism of individual change. This model, though unique in the completeness of its data, seems worth emulating.

In a different example, Arne Kalleberg and Richard Rockwell (1995) have designed plans for combining data on firms and on their employees. When the major research focus is on structures, they begin with data on a sample of firms, and then collect information about those workers whose lives are at that time contained within these structures. Alternatively, when the research objective focuses primarily on individuals, they begin with a sample of employees, and then survey those firms to which these individuals belong.

Future methodologists will predictably confront the technical challenges of devising strategies for specifying the interplay between individuals and structures.

The substantive challenge

In the meantime, what substantive contributions to the accumulating research legacy may be expected from future analyses of the interplay between lives and structures? Two are already emerging from current work in the 'aging and society' paradigm.

Structural lag

The first contribution provides understanding of the problem of structures that lag behind changes in lives (see the chapters in Riley *et al*. 1994). Throughout the industrialised world a mismatch is found between the strengths and capacities of the increasing numbers of older people, and the inadequate opportunities in society to utilise, reward, and sustain these strengths. As nearly three decades have been added

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over this century to the average length of life, and as people grow older in new ways, the surrounding social structures have lagged behind. This structural lag is defining strains on both people and institutions.

Age integration

A second emerging contribution defines the potential for age integration, as changes in people's lives press toward a reduction of the structural lag (see Riley and Riley 1994). Studies of age integration examine several questions. First, the lag has been created by age barriers that separate individuals into the 'three boxes' of education for the young, work and family responsibilities for the middle aged, and leisure in retirement for the old. What structural changes might lead to the breakdown of these age barriers? Secondly, how, in turn, do these structural changes relate to possible individual changes toward interspersing periods of education, work, family time and leisure, over people's long lives?

These questions have attracted attention from RC 11 researchers since the 1970s, and were discussed at international meetings in Acapulco (1989), Madrid (1990), Stockholm (1992), and Budapest (1993). Discussions took on a fresh emphasis in a concurrent session at the ISA Montreal meetings on 'Age Integration: Update and Critique'. Here scholars from seven countries examined the question: is age integration not only breaking down age barriers, but also increasing *cross-age interaction* between older and younger people? Continuing studies define a range of possible implications of age integration that may ensue in the future if structural lag is reduced.

An Aid to the Challenge

Beyond opening investigations of structural lag or age integration, can the challenge to study the interplay between lives and structures add new findings to the future research legacy? One illustration of how actual changes can eventuate from the interplay has been formulated as the process of 'cohort norm formation' (M. Riley 1979).

This process was first understood through the remarkable, and often repeated, example of women's changing occupational roles. We had uncovered historical data on the work lives of successive cohorts of United States women, spanning an entire century. These data revealed a consistent and striking transformation: in each more recent cohort, larger and larger proportions of individual women had spent their adult lives in the labour force (*individuals changed*). From generation to

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generation, this wave mounted until, with the changes in lives, the historical record shows that *structures* also began to change. The age and gender barriers were gradually shifting. As women in those early cohorts demonstrated what they could do, more and more work roles opened up for them at every age. Gradually, too, the *norms* changed. First it became acceptable for women to work. Then it often became expected that women, even including young mothers, should work. Clearly, changes in the individual lives of millions of women in successive cohorts, and their employers, had revolutionised work structures – and family structures too.

Those changes, which focused on women, illustrate the process of cohort norm formation. But these findings are part of the research legacy of the past. How might the process continue to add new findings toward meeting the challenges of the future? One can speculate. Clearly, as women's lives change, so do men's. As married women share their husband's role as breadwinner, men may come to share the housework with their wives. Both may find more time for leisure together, or for their children.

As current cohorts of young couples both engage in the paid labour force, many are now torn between the competing demands of work and family. One set of options available in the future is the familiar one: to choose either work or family and to abjure the other for the remainder of life. But the future, because of the remarkable increases in longevity, may bring an alternative set of options: to postpone either work or family for a period of time, then to engage subsequently in the other. This would comport with the flexible life course of age integration, in which individuals are free to intersperse periods of education, work, family time, and leisure over their long lives. Indeed, if future cohorts of women and men alike were to comprehend the unprecedented length of their lives, millions of individuals might well opt for this flexibility. Gradually, they might realise that they have time to re-phase their lives: either to devote to family formation before working, or to engage in work before starting a family. As the interplay continued, work and family structures might change in predictable ways in response to the flexible lives. Parents of young couples, and legislators concerned with welfare, might become more tolerant of those who raise children before they can become fully independent financially. And employers might come to respect the maturity of those others who start work late. Age would no longer restrict opportunities either in work or family life.

Whether these or many future changes will occur, they can be explored, not only through legislative or administrative regulations,

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but also through the interplay between lives and structures. Individual behaviours and attitudes that develop in particular cohorts can become institutionalised as altered structures and new norms that affect both genders and all ages.

In conclusion, our analyses of small parts of the research legacy suggest that sociologists interested in the study of ageing and society are poised to confront the challenges of the future. Predictable new developments will surely extend far beyond structural lag, age integration, and understandings of cohort norm formation. They will ensure a broad array of contributions to the ever-accumulating legacy of sociological research on age.

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NOTE

1 Though research cannot be separated from theory, a related paper at this RC 11 session dealt with the 'theoretical heritage' (Bengtson *et al*. 1998).

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