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Relative prospects of children as they age: Canadians and Americans in midlife in the great recession frame future generations

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ABSTRACT

Studies of intergenerational relations in aging and changing families often focus on the present, how generations interact, relate or depend on each other in families. Less often is the focus on the prospective, on projected perceptions of life course prospects for future generations as they age. In this paper, part of a large multi-method project, we adopt this focus. We rely on interviews conducted in 2013 with midlife respondents in two socioeconomic classes in comparable cities in the United States and Canada. We specifically explore whether and how Canadians and Americans in midlife discuss life course prospects for their children (or younger relatives) in ways that map onto wider discursive frames of aging. Through a combined discourse and frame analysis of our interview data, we find that frames of “The Dream” and “Intergenerational Contract” construct and reflect competing models of intergenerational shifts in life course spaces as well as suggest intergenerational changes in mobility and opportunities.

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Introduction

The current literature on aging and family relations is replete with life course studies of how people interact, relate or depend on one another through inter- or intra-generational relationships. These studies commonly adopt a retrospective perspective, reflecting on past events and transitions, for example, the birth of a child, divorce, or retirement, and the impact on present circumstances. We know less, however, through a prospective life course perspective, one that looks at how people anticipate the future life course prospects of their children as they age. We also know little about these prospects in the face of economic turbulence. The comparative context of neighboring countries, Canada and the United States, which

experienced the economic downturn of 2008 differently provides an additional dimension. While the economic shocks of the Great Recession of 2008, including record high unemployment and house foreclosures, may have lessened in both countries, the longer-term economic and social impacts for younger generations may be yet to come.

The need for prospective life course research is suggested by widening income inequalities that show no signs of lessening, and also changing family structures and relations, growth of an aging population, and weakening social policy supports. For example, Canadians and Americans now aged 64–66 years were the first to experience as young adults the “neo-liberal turn” in social policy support, the weakening or hollowing out of both “liberal” welfare states (Esping-Anderson, 1990), set in motion by the early 1980s. Those in midlife are familiar with the neo-liberal policy agenda of placing responsibility for social and economic well-being more squarely on individuals and families than on the state.

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In this paper, we adopt a prospective life course approach. Our interest is how, in the wake of the Great Recession, Canadians and Americans in midlife foresee the future for their children (or younger relatives) as those children enter their own later years. The Great Recession created new challenges to those in midlife, a time when income security and care must be managed for dependents young and old, and often for the midlife adults themselves. Through qualitative interviews, we located respondents in the anticipated life space of their children's life courses as the children themselves reach their later years. Through combined discourse and frame analysis of midlifers' prospective perceptions for their offspring, we glean a sense how current political and economic circumstances are seen to shape the future life course trajectories of the younger generation in ways that may not map onto existing discursive frames of aging. From these findings, we extrapolate future intergenerational relations, including intergenerational change and conflict in economic opportunities and overall health and well-being. Our paper demonstrates the utility of a prospective life course approach: through midlifer's perceptions of future generations' prospects in their specific social context, we learn that deviations from wider discourses of aging are suggestive of future life course challenges.

Generational expectations

As conceptualized by Elder (1994), the life course perspective presumes that there are key events or transitions in individuals' lives, such as high school or university graduation, the start of a career, beginning a family, and retirement. The timing and sequencing of events are understood to connect both to individual choice and institutional processes and structures and to be contextualized socially and historically. Central is the assumption that individuals' lives are intimately linked with those of others (McDaniel & Bernard, 2011). Overall, researchers' use of the life course perspective is driven by a quest to organize and make sense of the complexities of social life among interdependent actors (Carpentier & White, 2013). As Hareven (1994) observes, there is an additional assumption that historical changes in generational relations are not linear but are instead uneven and complex. Thus, individual life courses are thought to unfold in different ways and in constantly changing sociohistorical contexts.

Research from the life course perspective often relies on the use of qualitative interviews as the means by which respondents construct and share their life stories. In their analysis of how older persons make sense of their life courses in the United States, Nouri and Helterline (1998) found five common story lines: *The American Dream*, *Life as a Struggle*, *Life is Simple*, *God Determines*, and *Life is Shared*. *The American Dream* frames the life course as a struggle over adversity to achieve success and connects the notion of social mobility, particularly intergenerational mobility, with hard work. The idea that you "win some, you lose some" sums up the narrative of *Life as a Struggle*. In the common story of *Life as Simple*, there is little recognition of agency and more of a sense that one's life path is determined by outside events and structures. By contrast, a spiritual being is thought to determine one's path in the *God Determines* storyline. Finally, the idea of *Life is Shared*, which is more common among women, centers on how lives are

interconnected and determined through relationships with others (Nouri & Helterline, 1998).

Nouri and Helterline's (1998) research illustrates how the life course perspective can be used to understand micro-level interactions within families as contoured by larger discourses about aging, generation, and families. As Gullette (2003) explains, culture defines narratives of aging: "comprehensible stories—prospective and retrospective, about moving through all ages of life which supply the meaning of what people normally call aging" (p. 102). People draw on culturally sanctioned scripts in presenting their stories (Järvinen, 2000; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986; Tabatabai, 2012). Gullette (2003), like Nouri and Helterline (1998), emphasizes the American Dream as a common story of the life course in capitalist society, one that tells of individual and generational economic success through their relations with the material world, which are further textured by personal and structural opportunities and constraints (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender, class, ability; access to education, unionization). Extending the concept beyond its American context, *The Dream* is applicable to other capitalist nations, including Canada.

There are other common discourses about intergenerational relationships and expectations, often interconnected, to which Canadians and Americans seem to collectively ascribe:

- The young will support the old.
- Adult children will leave the family home and embark on their own lives.
- Younger and older family members support each other.
- Older people will save and retire and therefore make room for younger people in the labor market.

Recent social and demographic trends, however, suggest that intergenerational expectations may be shifting.

The young will support the old

For Etzioni and Brodbeck (2012), the idea that the young support the old is an *intergenerational contract* more moral than material and rests on the assumption that future generations will continue the contract: "[Y]ounger generations will only see benefits if future generations remain committed to the same responsibilities" (2012, p. 113). Members of the younger generation of the millennium, however, are taking longer periods over their life courses to develop income security, buy a home, or start families (Geobey, 2013; Mitchell, 2006; Seltzer & Bianchi, 2013). Young adulthood has been labeled as "on hold" because life course transitions are taking place late into their twenties or in their thirties (Mitchell, Wister, & Gee, 2000). These delays in major life course transitions are at the heart of Arnett's (2000) conceptualization of emerging adulthood, a developmental theory that captures the transition to adulthood of those in their late teens through their 20s.

Some of this delay is attributable to poor labor market prospects for young adults. Following the Great Recession, the overall unemployment rate dramatically increased in the United States and more moderately so in Canada, as shown in Fig. 1.

In 2015, some years after the Great Recession, the youth (aged 15–24 years) unemployment rate in Canada was 13.6% compared to 6.8% for Canadians 25 years and older (Statistics Canada, 2015). In the United States, youth unemployment has

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