

Application of the life course perspective in child welfare research



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 April 2014

Received in revised form 23 August 2014

Accepted 24 August 2014

Available online 29 August 2014

Keywords:

Child welfare

Life course

Foster care

Maltreatment

Child development

Permanency

ABSTRACT

Research related to child welfare often suggests complicated relationships between child maltreatment, social disadvantage, program and policy effects, individual development, and population conditions that interact and change over time. New theories and conceptual models that account for this complexity are needed. The main point of this article is that the life course perspective is a useful paradigm for developing and organizing theories, concepts, and hypotheses in child welfare research. The life course perspective also helps researchers tackle methodological challenges common to longitudinal child welfare studies, such as confounding due to age, policy, and cohort effects. This article introduces key principles of the life course perspective, discusses concepts relevant to child welfare using concrete examples from prior research, highlights methodological challenges, and suggests implications for future studies.

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1. Introduction

Child welfare generally refers to the policies implemented and coordinated actions undertaken by federal, state, and local governments as well as contracted agencies to ensure that children are safe and victims of child maltreatment receive protection (Pecora et al., 2009; USDHHS, 2014b). Child welfare research then is scientific inquiry related to the assessment, prevention, and treatment of child abuse, neglect, and dependency and associated social processes (e.g., child-caregiver attachment, child discipline, procedural justice). The three main goals of the child welfare system in the U.S. are child safety, permanency, and well-being (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, Children's Bureau [USDHHS], 2005; USDHHS, 2011). These three goals refer to, respectively, a child's right to be protected from child abuse or neglect; live in a permanent, nurturing family; and experience optimal physical, cognitive, and social development. In order to achieve these three goals, public, private, and non-profit child welfare agencies must communicate and cooperate with numerous other partners, such as advocacy organizations and law enforcement agencies. Further, an array of actions must be undertaken by governmental and contracted agencies to ensure child safety, permanency, and well-being. Such actions include the investigation of caretakers who are under suspicion of child maltreatment, placement of abused or neglected children into foster homes, and referral of caretakers to remedial services such as family counseling or income assistance.

Complex challenges in child welfare have been deemed *wicked problems* by researchers, advocates, and policy-makers (Testa, 2013). A wicked problem is defined as a social challenge that is particularly difficult to address due to incomplete information; confusing, changing, and sometimes contradictory norms and policy goals; multiple, interrelated causes; limited scientific consensus regarding conceptual definitions and measurement; and/or lack of consensus regarding what constitutes problem resolution (Conklin, 2006; Rittel & Melvin, 1973; Testa, 2013). Many difficult challenges in child welfare, such as poor well-being outcomes for foster children (Wulczyn, Barth, Yuan, Harden, & Landsverk, 2005) or instability for older adopted youth with special needs (Berry, Propp, & Martens, 2007), represent wicked problems for several reasons. First, information is often lacking because previous studies have been limited by methodological weaknesses, including the use of cross-sectional, observational, and administrative data and poorly defined constructs (Barth, Courtney, Berrick, & Albert, 1994; Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008; Waldfogel, 2000). Second, the goals, priorities, and resources of agencies involved with child welfare frequently change in response to shifts in the political and policy environment (Allen & Bissell, 2004). Third, understanding problems in child welfare means untangling the influences of numerous interrelated personal, family, community, service, and time factors (Berzin, 2010). Fourth, the imprints of child abuse and neglect may be detected in cascading negative affects across multiple domains for children throughout their entire life span (Avery, 2010; Berzin, 2010; Courtney, 2009; Dodge, Malone, & Greenberg, 2008). Finally, child welfare research involves multiple fields of scientific inquiry such as social work, sociology, public health, psychology, nursing, and neurology (Hutchison, 2005), making coordination of research efforts particularly difficult. Thus, there is growing recognition among scholars in child welfare that new theories and

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conceptual models are needed (Kennedy, Agbenyiga, Kasiborski, & Gladden, 2010; Testa, 2013; Wulczyn et al., 2005), and the life course perspective is a useful organizing research paradigm because of its emphasis on dynamic change, longitudinal effects, physical and psychosocial development, and social context.

2. The life course: overview and key propositions

The *life course* may refer to both a concept and a conceptual framework or perspective. The life course as a concept is the set of age-graded roles, expectations, and norms that individuals encounter as they move through time from birth to death (Elder, 1998; Shanahan, 2000). In contrast, the life course perspective is a conceptual framework, paradigm, or meta-theory for understanding how social forces create biographical patterns in populations and shape human development (Elder & Shanahan, 2006; O'Rand, 2006). Life course researchers are particularly concerned with temporal patterns in individual and social change, as well as the influence of the social environment on human development (Kennedy et al., 2010; Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1992; Shanahan, Hill, Roberts, Eccles, & Friedman, 2012).

Glenn Elder Jr., a sociologist, was a pioneer in life course studies for his longitudinal research on the impact of the Great Depression and World Wars I and II on the lives of adults in the United States (Elder, 1998). Although the life course perspective originated in sociology it has been extended and adapted to numerous disciplines, including epidemiology (Kuh, Ben-Schlomo, Lynch, Hallqvist, & Power, 2003), medicine (Braveman & Barclay, 2009), and social work (Hutchison, 2005). In psychology, the *life span* perspective is also influenced by, and shares some similarity to, life course sociology. However, life span research is typically more focused on understanding individual behavior and change, and less focused on the influences of social contexts than life course sociology (Baltes, 1987). Contemporary life course studies are often interdisciplinary, and life course research continues to evolve and emerge through the independent and collaborative work of sociologists, anthropologists, demographers, social historians, and others (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004; Levy, 2005). For an accessible review of the life course perspective in sociology see Elder et al. (2004), and for a general overview of the life span approach in psychology see Baltes (1987).

The life course perspective is marked by several key propositions. First, historical, geographic, political, community, and family contexts influence human biographies across the life span (Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Elder, 1998). In this regard the life course is similar to Urie Bronfenbrenner's *ecological perspective*, a conceptual framework that also recognizes the influence of social context on human behavior and development and is often used to inform child welfare concepts and theories (Belsky, 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1977). However, the life course perspective takes into account not only individual and social change over time (i.e., longitudinally), but also how the timing of change creates differential impacts on human biographies. For instance, a life course researcher in child welfare may be interested in not only the relationship between adolescent pregnancy and academic achievement into young adulthood (Kerr, Leve, & Chamberlain, 2009), but also the extent to which an early onset of adolescent pregnancy (e.g., younger than age 16) leads to different impacts than a later onset, or the impact of adolescent pregnancy across different birth cohorts.

Societal institutions play significant roles in shaping the life course, while at the same time the choices and actions of individuals within societies also form and shape institutions (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Moen, 2012; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). For example, the life course patterns of individuals involved with the child welfare system in the United States impact, and are shaped by, the public education system, religious organizations, and family courts. In addition, *agency*, or the capacity of individuals to make choices, and *structure*, or the organizations and patterns of human societies, both influence human

biographies (Cockerham, 2005). Further, agency and structure may interact in complicated ways over the life span. As a case in point, foster youth in the U.S. may experience that educational structure constrains agency because they are more likely than non-foster youth to attend schools with limited opportunities or resources to move out of low-achievement academic tracks (Stone, 2007). However, foster youth may also, to a certain extent, exercise agency within educational structures by choosing low-achievement academic tracks, even when other tracks are available, simply because they want to remain in classes with culturally-similar peers or perceive that they are incapable of being successful in higher-opportunity tracks (Yonezawa et al., 2002). Finally, the concept of *linked lives* is foundational to the life course perspective (Elder, 1998; Parker et al., 2003). Linked lives simply means that humans are socially connected and interdependent. Social actors move through life as members of dyads, groups, and communities, and thus, the life courses of individuals are shaped by parents, children, relatives, partners, and peers.

3. Life course concepts in child welfare research

Although a comprehensive review of life course themes, theories, and concepts is beyond the scope of this article, there are four concepts that merit deeper consideration and more use in child welfare research. These are: 1) trajectories 2) pathways 3) transitions and turning points and 4) cumulative disadvantage and advantage.

3.1. Trajectories

Child welfare researchers are often interested in dynamic independent or dependent variables that relate to children's safety, permanency, or well-being. The life course concept of a *trajectory* is helpful for conceptualizing dynamic variables, and refers to changes or patterns in a continuously measured trait or state over time (Hutchison, 2005). Numerous variables of interest in child welfare are best conceptualized as trajectories across the life course. For example, researchers may be interested in permanency trajectories, such as the number of child placement changes per month or year for children in foster care (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000). Or researchers may want to examine well-being trajectories related to physical or mental health, educational achievement, delinquency, or interpersonal violence for children who have experienced a maltreatment investigation or foster care, adoption, or guardianship placement.

Fig. 1 graphically depicts three well-being trajectories generated by the authors for illustrative purposes (the figure is not based on actual data). The figure shows how three children might display completely different trajectories in a measure of well-being, such as self-reported depression or educational achievement, over a two year study period but look exactly the same on the measure if observed at only one point in time. In the figure, all three youths have the same well-being

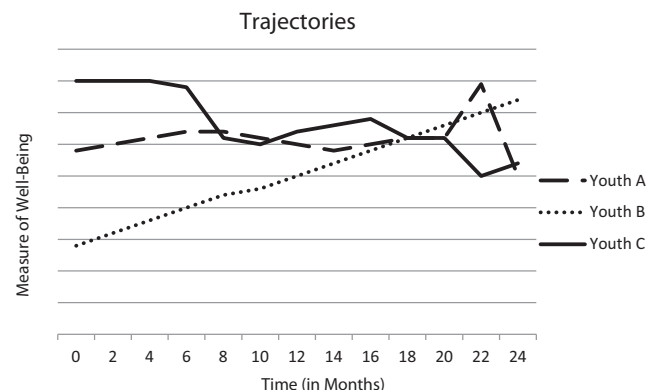


Fig. 1. Trajectories of child well-being.

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