

SESSION 2205 (SYMPOSIUM)

CUMULATIVE ADVANTAGE IN CHANGING ECONOMIC TIMES: STRESS, DISTRESS, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR AGING COHORTS

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Processes of cumulative dis/advantage operate within cohorts and across historical time. In the ongoing dance of age, cohort and period, each cohort encounters distinctive social and economic environments at particular ages that may ameliorate or exacerbate the cumulative and systemic processes of inequality production that operate over its collective life course. We explore issues of current and future late-life inequality and its consequences. As overall income inequality has grown, what are the likely consequences for late-life outcomes? How have cohorts currently in midlife been affected by the Great Recession of 2008 and subsequent recovery? What are the mental and physical consequences of these developments, and to what extent can they be ameliorated by interventions in middle and later adulthood? This symposium addresses how variation in economic circumstances and social and psychological stresses may affect outcomes over the life course, and how these complex, interacting processes can be best conceptualized and examined. One paper examines the impact of the Great Recession and subsequent events on the intracohort distribution of income, suggesting inordinate setbacks during the Recession with likely long-term effects for economically vulnerable subpopulations. Another explores the role of psychosocial stressors in the process of cumulative dis/advantage, focusing on linkages between functional limitations and psychological well-being in later life, and how these linkages are amplified by diverse dimensions of disadvantage (e.g., education, employment; coping strategies; caregiving). A third paper examines the intergenerational dimensions of cumulative advantage processes. Finally, contrasting theoretical frameworks for apprehending life-course processes and historical change will be explored.

LATENCY/PATHWAYS, FUNCTIONALISM/MORPHOGENESIS: CONTRASTING PARADIGMS OF LIFE-COURSE INEQUALITY AND CHANGE

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Attention to dis/advantage during childhood has become a major interest of life-course studies. It has been a force in advancing attention to inequality over the undifferentiated “normal aging” versions of life-course and gerontological research, making clear the irreducible importance of the presence/absence of key resources in accounting for life-course outcomes, from early onward. Explanatory strategies set forth within this work often contrast “latency/early origins” models (with explanation anchored in the early years) with “pathways” models (which examine the independent effects of adult life-course circumstances). This paper argues that

these two types of models actually are aligned with distinct conceptual paradigms that imply fundamentally different understandings of aging in society (“functionalist/organismic” and “systemic/morphogenetic”). The differential implications of these two models for the relation of cumulative dis/advantage and social change is explored.

CUMULATIVE DIS/ADVANTAGE, COHORTS, AND ECONOMIC SHOCKS BEFORE AND AFTER: LIFE COURSE INEQUALITY AND THE RECESSION

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We examined age/cohort profiles of income inequality in the Survey of Consumer Finances for 2007, 2010, and 2016. Overall, the Gini coefficient decreased somewhat following the 2008 onset of the Recession, but rebounded by 2016 to a higher level than the 2007 baseline. Within-cohort inequality trends from 2007-2016 differed considerably across cohorts. For late baby boomers and millennials, inequality increased sharply – from .56 to .67 for the 1963-1972 birth cohort and from .49 to .60 for the 1973-1982 birth cohort. Inequality was higher at baseline for early baby boomers than later cohorts but did not increase as they moved into midlife and early late life. The Great Recession, with its large drops in asset values, initially led to slight reductions in inequality, but this effect was temporary. Late boomers and millennials experienced sharp increases in inequality following the Recession, presaging a very high-inequality late-life experience for these cohorts.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF STRESS PROCESSES IN CUMULATIVE DIS/ADVANTAGE PROCESSES

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In my book *Golden Years* (2019), I argue that the psychosocial consequences of normal biological processes of aging are intensified for those who have had lives of disadvantage, just as the harmful consequences of life-course disadvantages are particularly acute for those experiencing age-related physical health declines. In this paper, I discuss the role of stress processes, including stress proliferation and amplification, as possible mechanisms contributing to cumulative dis/advantage. I evaluate these ideas empirically by focusing on the linkages between functional limitations (an indicator of normal biological aging) and psychological well-being in later life, and explore the extent to which these linkages are amplified diverse indicators of life course disadvantage including low education; poor-quality employment; avoidant coping strategies; and family-related strains including intensive caregiving. Analyses are based on data from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study. I discuss the implications of incorporating stress process models in cumulative dis/advantage research.

CUMULATIVE DIS/ADVANTAGE IN HEALTH AS AN INTERGENERATIONAL PROCESS

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Empirical applications of cumulative dis/advantage primarily focus on accumulative processes within an individual