



Flux: Insights into the Social Aspects of Life Transitions

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Life transitions are often conceptualized and studied as individual experiences. But in reality, transitions are rarely individual: they are relational. We offer a set of insights into the social aspects of transitions. Transitions are experienced with and alongside others in states of interdependence. Family and other relationships can be key sources of support for transitions but also create risks. Changes in the transition patterns of cohorts are fertile ground for intergenerational tension in families and societies. Much of the action relevant to understanding life transitions is also found in the mind, in processes related to inequality, and in invisible forces related to history, demography, and institutions. Illustrations reinforce the principle that to understand the personal, we must look beyond the personal. Because transitions have strong social aspects, they can be strengthened through interventions, institutions, and policies.

Transitions are at the heart of human experience. All of human life occurs in time; time brings change; and, as the saying goes, there is nothing more constant than change. As we grow up and older, our individual motivations, desires, aspirations, expectations, personalities, and social personae change. Our lives join with and are challenged by changing environments: as we move through family settings, schools, communities, workplaces; generations in families, age groups in the population, and a slice of national and world history.

The world outside also seems to be changing even faster than we are. We feel as if we cannot keep pace with and are unprepared for these changes, and we feel unsettled at our core—a hallmark of human experience that American writer and political commentator Walter Lippmann (1914) observed more than a century ago. In expressing this idea, Lippmann could not have possibly imagined the degree and types of change, for better and for worse, that human beings would experience in the 100 years to come.

All of these things leave the circumstances of our lives, and our identities, in flux. Life transitions are often conceptualized and studied as individual experiences, with a strong focus on psychological aspects. But in this article, we put forward nine insights to illustrate that many of the most important, but often invisible or taken-for-granted, aspects of life transitions are instead social in nature. Transitions are inherently social experiences, with social determinants

and social consequences. Because of this, they are also malleable and can be strengthened through interventions, institutions, and policies.

1. “Individual” transitions are rarely individual. They are relational, social experiences.

Most “personal” experiences are actually interpersonal. That is, they are not ours alone but involve other people. To be provocative, one could even argue that there is no such thing as an “individual” life course. Each of us is literally on this planet because of the decisions and actions of others and, until the moment we die, life’s big stories are about “we” and “us,” intimately entangled with other people.

Chief among major life transitions are changes in relationship statuses—forming a partnership or marriage, becoming a parent, getting divorced, being widowed. Even the statuses of “single” and “childless” signal times when people are without or not yet in relationships that are culturally or statistically normative. The departures of children and the deaths of parents trigger movement into new life phases. All of life’s major milestones occur alongside others or are the result of contributions or actions of others—whether graduating high school, pursuing higher education, leaving home, being promoted or demoted, experiencing unemployment, retiring. Births and deaths, too, are deep transitions for other people.

Some transitions even require actions on the part of others before we, in turn, move into a new status—what Riley, Foner, and Waring (1988) called “counterpart transitions.” Marriages create “in-law” relationships, and divorces create “ex” relationships, throughout the family matrix. Parenting prompts transitions into grandparenthood or great-grandparenthood and turns sisters and brothers into aunts and uncles.

Many life transitions involve other types of role or identity shifts—reemployment, job or school transfers, residential moves, changes in faith or political party. These transitions require us—and the people attached to us—to adjust to new roles and identities, form new relationships, and be incorporated into new networks.

Many life transitions are socially recognized or subject to social rituals and reinforcements. In the classic anthropological account, Arnold van Gennep (1908/1960) described *rites de passage* associated with major life transitions. These rites involve a process of “ceasings and becomings” that involve an individual’s separation from an earlier status and initiation into, and eventually the full incorporation of, a new status. A key feature of these rites of passage is that they are communal. As these thresholds are crossed, it is not just that individuals think of themselves differently; it is that others see and treat them differently too. Marriages and childbirth are good examples of rites of passage that create new statuses through what Elder (1994) called “linked lives.” Of course, some transitions may be socially contested or negatively sanctioned, such as cohabitation or gay marriage or parenting.

Many life transitions, however, relate to what we might call “unlinked lives” and the messy business of managing endings. Some of our biggest points of embarrassment, shame, and regret are found in how poorly we handled conflicts, the dissolution of relationships, and departures from family, work, school, and community environments. Divorce is an obvious example. Although these relationships may be severed or regulated legally, they generally do not vanish socially, psychologically, or economically. At a minimum, the “ex” label lives on in the identities of those who were once attached, even long after the relationship is dissolved.

Other life transitions can significantly alter social networks and reference groups. For example, long-term couple friends may back away from a new widow or widower. Individuals who become seriously ill at an early age may feel disconnected from the lifestyles and preoccupations of their age peers. Staying single when friends are married, or getting married before others do, may put individuals in different social networks. Upwardly mobile individuals feel caught between the social worlds they come from and those they are joining.

We organize our lives around other people and ask them to organize their lives around us. Big life decisions are generally made jointly, not singly—where to go to school, where to work, where to live, with whom to partner or parent, what kind of work to take, hours and years worked, when to have children, how many to have, or how they are spaced. These and many other life experiences are carefully negotiated and compromised within the context of relationships. Many life transitions not only bring new relationships, but also require the people attached to us to get ready for these changes.

Relationships help us judge our progress in life. We compare our transition experiences to others our age, to our social groups, or to our parents when they were our age. We gauge the transitions we are experiencing, or those we are seeking, in terms of whether they are typical at a particular time in life for people like us.

Relationships can free us up or give us courage to envision transitions we might otherwise push aside or fear. Other people—a family member or a teacher—can help us think and live in new ways, offering support or an example for doing or being things we might not otherwise attempt. Even people we do not know can offer such inspiration: Social activists can forge models of life and legal protections for groups of people who have been marginalized or invisible, such as the civil rights movements for African Americans; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT); and immigrant communities.

Gatekeepers of various kinds can also open or close life pathways. Teachers and administrators in schools, supervisors and managers in workplaces, magistrates and judges in courtrooms, clergy in religious congregations, and others give direction to our futures and choices—just as we judge and give direction to the futures and choices of others. More generally, one's social origins (e.g., social class, race, gender) affect life outcomes through expectations and the allocation of opportunities that restrict or promote social mobility.

Finally, transitions are also collective in nature. Incoming cohorts in schools, or training cohorts at work, may identify as a group and be subject to common expectations about what they are to accomplish, and at what pace they are to do so, as they progress through the institution or exit from it. The lives of whole populations can be altered amid large-scale changes in political administrations (think of the discord and disruption associated with voter approval of Britain's exit from the European Union or the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president), recessions and depressions, wars, or events like 9-11. Lives are swept up in changes that are not desired or expected. What we took for granted is suddenly in question, how we understand and see the world is undermined, called into question, or ruptured, marking our lives in before-and-after terms.

2. Transitions are rarely discrete events, but are often long processes. Similarly, transitions are rarely standalone experiences, but often come in bundles or must be understood in relation to other events or transitions.

That transitions are rarely discrete events is inherent in the term *transition* compared to *event*. A transition is a longer process that may be punctuated by multiple, discrete events. Much life-course scholarship is focused on events because they are more easily documented or gathered, especially retrospectively. We can fill in life history calendars with the dates at which marriages, childbirths, residential, or job changes occurred. These events often mark the “objective” start or end of a transition, but they must be placed within longer stretches of experience before and after the event. An engagement marks a change from boyfriend or girlfriend to fiancé; a wedding marks a change from fiancé to husband or wife. Birth marks a change from “pregnant” to “parent.” Death turns a spouse into a widow or widower. These longer processes often involve a period of preparation and a phase of adjustment. We move from “becoming” something to now “being” that thing. Some of these changes have ceremonial or ritual aspects, such as graduations, engagements and weddings, baby showers and baptisms, and funerals or celebrations of life.

Institutions also move people across categories and statuses. Incarceration marks the end of “civilian” or “free” and the beginning of “inmate.” “Reentry” marks an inmate’s or soldier’s return to “civilian” life. Migration or refugee status marks the end of a connection to one country and the beginning of “migrant,” “refugee,” or “alien.” Retirement marks the transition from “worker” to “retiree” and any number of statuses, depending on how the later years are viewed or actualized. These are examples of the fact that some kinds transitions can be reversible, as individuals move in and out of partnerships, pregnancies, employment, housing, poverty, or other states. But in “returning” to a prior state, we do not usually have the same experience. Each occasion is set within a new constellation of people, environments, and resources that make the transition and its outcomes different. Similarly, some roles are not, technically, reversible: Giving birth to a child, for example, cannot be undone. The role of parent remains present thereafter, but changes dramatically as children—and parents—grow up and older. And even in the case of estrangement, adoption, or the death of a child, the role of parent may nonetheless be central to one’s identity, even in the absence of the relationship itself.

These changes reflect not only objective changes in life circumstances, but also subjective changes in identity and in how others see and respond to us. For example, the legal age of adulthood is 18 in most countries. But most 18 year olds are “not quite adults,” to use Settersten and Ray’s (2010a) term, using most traditional social, economic, and psychological markers—and indeed some legal markers of adulthood, such as drinking alcohol, do not come until age 21. Young people are in the process of becoming “adult.” The same kind of dynamic occurs on the other end of life, where age 65 has traditionally been the age of eligibility for Social Security and other “old age” policies and programs, with slightly later ages being gradually phased in for younger cohorts. Most 65 year olds, however, would say they are not yet old. Many will not completely fully retire until much later. Even more, it is declining health and the accumulation of illness and illness episodes that will emerge as the most potent markers of old age. Reaching legal ages like 18 or 21, or 65, often marks the beginning of a process not the completion of it. These thresholds do not suddenly alter one’s sense of self but shuttle us from one social category to another.

These examples also illustrate the fact that transitions are rarely standalone experiences but instead often come in bundles or must be understood in relation to other events or transitions. Life-course transitions are often analyzed using two key parameters—timing (when it occurs, usually conceptualized in terms of age) and duration (how long one spends in a given role or status, such as the length of time as a student, in a job, or married, divorced, childless, or widowed). Matters of timing and duration are often about single transitions and can be accompanied by social expectations: for example, what Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965) called an awareness of being “on-time” or “off-time,” or what Hagestad (1996) labeled as a sense of “running out of time” or “falling out of time,” with respect to, say, getting married or having a first child, or being in college or staying at home too long.

Other parameters explicitly take into account multiple transitions. One such parameter is sequencing. This is nicely captured in the fact that “the” transition to adulthood is not a single transition but a package of transitions. Here, the traditional order of what we might call the “Big Five” markers of adulthood is leaving home, finishing school, finding work, partnering, and parenting. Another parameter is spacing—how much time there is between status changes, such as between dating and engagement, engagement and marriage, marriage and a first birth, first and subsequent children, divorce or widowhood and remarriage. A final parameter is density, or the pileup of changes in a bounded period of time. These have especially been of clinical concern and are the subject of intake interviews, especially in probing whether any number of “critical” or “stressful” life events have occurred in the prior months or year. Here, the assumption is that there is a maximum amount of change that any individual can manage before they are prone to breakdown. One example is a doctoral student who graduated, moved, bought a home, started a new job, and had a child—all in a 4-month period. Like timing and duration, the sequencing, spacing, and density of life transitions are accompanied and regulated by social expectations.

Although research and clinical practice may focus on particular events, it is the larger process that should be of greater interest. This is not just about describing a process “objectively” from the outside, but also “subjectively” by the person or people going through it. Subjective experiences are important because it is often not what happens to us, but how we interpret and we respond to it, that matters most in determining its meanings and consequences. In addition, some transitions are invisible from the outside—for example, the personal hardships of members of marginalized or stigmatized groups may not be shared with others for fear of social or legal repercussions (as in the case of immigrants without documentation, or LGBT families); employees, too, may draw a firm line between their personal and professional lives for fear that what is happening in their private lives will affect their evaluations or chances for advancement.

3. Much of the action related to transitions is in the mind – it is imagined in advance and reflected on later.

As we have already noted, many transitions are influenced by cultural ideas and regulated by social expectations about what is to happen in life’s seasons. Normative experiences like this involve some anticipatory socialization—instilling a sense of what may lie ahead, even many years into the future, and providing a chance to get ready. Of course, for some people, these normative experiences will not occur and may be actively rejected. Because normative experiences are so valued and desired socially, not being able to achieve them, for whatever reason,

can make their loss difficult—such as an inability to find a life partner or to have children. Actively rejecting these statuses can leave individuals feeling marginalized or ostracized. The point is that when social scripts are strong, people are aware of their departure from the it and others recognize it too. Support groups, for example, are often designed for people who find themselves in non-normative circumstances.

Developmental psychology has a rich history of attention to individual goal setting: goal expectancies and values, goal engagement and disengagement or adjustment, goal levels, the management of multiple goals. This is perhaps no surprise because, in the Western world at least, there is an obsession with planning. In primary and secondary schools, students and parents are consumed with planning for higher education and training. In higher education and in job training, individuals are consumed with planning coursework and careers and are judged on the basis of whether their progress is “timely.” In forming families, couples are focused on reproductive planning and coordinating fertility with other family and work responsibilities to minimize spillover. During work life, employees are focused on retirement and health care planning. Retirees are focused on estate planning and funeral planning. So often, then, we are preoccupied in one period with what might happen, or is likely to happen, in the next.

The emphasis on planning meshes well with the ethos of liberal market welfare-state regimes like the United States, which views life outcomes as personal choices and responsibilities. This is dangerous because many things in life cannot be planned or controlled, and outcomes are heavily determined by social and economic resources. Even more, the very act of planning rests on the assumptions that life can be counted on and that social and economic worlds are reasonably predictable. A long life is a relatively recent historical phenomenon, and in many parts of the world—even for subgroups in privileged nations—life itself cannot be counted on, let alone a long one. Examples abound of the social and economic instability of the world today.

The point is that the shadow of the future is always on the time horizon. We orient much of our behavior today around what we want to happen, or what might happen to us, in the future. Anticipating death of parents, loved ones, and even our own deaths, are good examples: We do not know when these deaths will happen, and we probably overestimate how long we and the people dear to us will live. Still, age may prompt us to think in more conscious ways of how much time might be left and change our behavior now. Aging couples imagine their own ends: Who will go first? How will the survivor manage? Children wonder these things about their aging parents as well, envisioning various scenarios depending on the order and timing of their parents’ deaths. Parents of adolescents, too, may be acutely aware that time with children *as* children is quickly diminishing.

How much time we imagine being left in one relationship may also change what we do in another relationship. For example, couples may move more quickly into marriage or parenthood so that a parent or grandparent can be part of the process. The anticipation of inheritance, too, may similarly alter the current behavior of children and parents. Inheritance is particularly interesting in that parents may set conditions for inheritance as a way to control the outcomes of their children long after they have died.

Many anticipated transitions may not come to fruition but may nonetheless be significant to identity. The spouse or child never had, or the degree not gotten. These nontransitions are still transitions of sorts because we must come to terms with things that never were. Even if we continue to long for them, we must try to adjust to the loss.

4. The nature of transitions is inherently different at the beginning, middle, and end of adult life.

Transition experiences differ depending on when they are experienced in life. This is not just about the specific timing (age) differences that have long been the focus of research literature (e.g., getting married or having children at age 17 or 18 vs. 25 or 30). There are some inherent differences in the experience of transitions across broader life periods. Consider transitions to adulthood, for example. Relative to other periods of life, early adult transitions are more heavily scripted in social expectations and reinforced in the organization of institutions. Individuals undergo a great deal of change in a relatively short time frame, as they move out of old institutional environments (such as graduating high school or leaving home, which may include formal ceremonies or informal gatherings to acknowledge the change) or into new institutional environments (such as college or work, which may include orientations and other supports that are meant to facilitate movement into these roles). Even if young people realize that their lives may not or will not unfold in traditional ways, the Big Five markers we described earlier are nonetheless alive in their minds and those of others as they evaluate progress. Early adult transitions may also feel heavier because they are being experienced for the first time. This time in life is characterized by themes of being exposed to relatively dramatic changes in self and social life.

Being able to imagine a future, and to anticipate what lies ahead, is part of what makes human life so special. The shadows of the future and of the past shift as we grow older. So much of the early life course is anticipatory because there is a long time horizon in front of individuals and little time behind them. Children, youth, and young adults are often eager and waiting to make leaps ahead. Waiting can be overwhelming and frustrating (such as waiting to learn about college admission or for a job opportunity), but it can also be exciting and exhilarating (such as when an admitted student cannot wait to get to college or graduate school, or an engaged couple to get married or become parents). Having adequate time to prepare is often helpful in making transitions, but having too much time, or too little of it, can be difficult — a kind of Goldilocks principle of transition time.

In midlife, transitions are much less scripted. There is no expected or predicted course of change, there are no clear signposts to signal that we have arrived or what will happen to us. Midlife is characterized by themes of managing transitions: changes that create personal instability (like divorce or job loss), involve the pileup and peaking of work and family responsibilities, or are rooted in transitions of others (such as those of children as they grow up, or the care and death of parents as they grow older). The lives of people in the middle, too, are characterized by themes of waiting—waiting for things to happen in the lives of others (such as children getting launched or settled into adulthood) or for a change in one's own life (work, leisure, relationships) but feeling constrained by responsibilities to others. Although transitions in the middle are heavy, by midlife we have experience with life's changes and hardships—experience that brings a repertoire of strategies for handling the challenges life throws our way. We have the sense that we have been here before and gotten through. Midlife also brings an acute awareness of a body that is changing in function and appearance and, for women, menopause. What is normative about this time in life is what Neugarten (1979) once called the “changing time perspective” of middle age: the growing recognition that our time left to live is shorter than time since birth. Our heightened awareness of finitude affects the goals and priorities we set.

Finally, later life can be a phase characterized by minimizing transitions that are difficult or limiting. Popular models of “successful” aging (e.g., Rowe & Kahn, 1998) see the later years as a time for maintaining stability in functioning, avoiding illness, remaining socially engaged, and aging “in place” (staying in one’s home and community) as long as possible. This latter point—which is ultimately about delaying entry into assisted living or nursing homes—provides an “institutionalized” aspect to later life health transitions as declining health status may trigger movement into new care environments. Retirement adds an institutional element to later life too, as individuals separate from work organizations they have been part of or move through a succession of “bridge jobs” en route to retirement. But what is ultimately normative about old age—declining health and death—is not generally welcomed. Life becomes more precarious. One or two key transitions—such as a major health incident or the loss of a spouse—can create a cascade of hardships that restrict life.

And yet, there are many more messages associated with successful aging that emphasize the possibilities of the later years: embracing what Moen (2016) calls an “encore” adulthood, reclaiming lost identities and interests, finding whole new kinds of work and volunteering, continuing education, completing a bucket list. These symbolize the fact that old age—or at least the initial part of it, what historian Peter Laslett (1989) called the “third age”—is a time for continued growth and development. At first glance, these messages seem to contradict our prior point about minimizing transitions. But in fact, it is in minimizing negative transitions that older people are able to postpone a more difficult “fourth age” characterized by decline and dependence. Old age is full of great potential that is conditioned by what we might call some Big Ifs: if we have our health, each other, or enough resources. A dwindling time horizon, coupled with these contingencies, creates a premium on time. Like midlife, the later years bring the benefit of a broader and richer repertoire of coping strategies that have been built up over decades. But functional losses in body and mind also threaten or undermine one’s ability to manage transitions. They heighten personal vulnerability. These things, too, generate themes of waiting, but in later life these themes are about waiting for things to come undone and, ultimately, for the end.

5. Families are key sources of support for transitions, but they also create risk.

Families are a primary site in which transitions are experienced. In liberal market welfare states like the United States, there is little government support for transitions in adult life. There is a heavy infrastructure of programs and policies built around childhood and old age, largely because of the reality of dependence on others in the front end of life, and the prospect of losing independence, or the recognition of prior contributions to society, in the back end of life. During the bulk of adulthood, people are largely on their own to manage and absorb the risks they face, except for temporary support in special circumstances—like unemployment and its consequences for finances or health insurance. Life’s changes are to be managed using whatever resources and supports one can marshal. Those resources and supports, when found, often come from families. When families have limited resources and supports to offer, the risks that people face are accentuated.

It is important to not have overly romanticized notions of what families do: Many of the risks that people carry, and the negative transitions they experience, can occur precisely because family relationships have been absent, neglectful, or abusive. Many of the problems of children and youth, for example, result from the poor transitions or outcomes of their parents in intimate relationships, in school or in work, in housing or in their communities.

The significance of family support is nicely illustrated in the transition to adulthood, as young adults have very different experiences depending on their family backgrounds (see Settersten & Ray, 2010a, 2010b). The financial and emotional support of parents is so important in predicting the success of young adults in the United States because there is limited government support to children once they reach the legal age of adulthood. Much of the well-being of young people rests on the investments that parents have made in the two prior decades, and on the assistance that parents continue to provide their children in higher education, first mortgages, insurance, and childcare during their twenties. This is a reminder that foundational support for future transitions is often put in place well before the transition itself occurs.

It is also a reminder that inequality creates different transition experiences. Parental support to young people is not a new phenomenon for better-positioned families in the United States. What is emerging today is that low-income parents also know that their children need support to do well and are doing what they can to help their children. This is not just about money, though the differentials across income brackets are expectedly sizable. It is about emotional support, mentorship and guidance, some of which less-privileged families are less able to provide. These social class differentials are very apparent even in early childhood, in terms of spending on enrichment activities music lessons, sports, summer camps, computers, and family vacations. If one wants to see just how much involved and resourced parenting matters in the United States, track the lives of young people who do not have it and do not find substitutes for it.

Because families are webs of interdependent relationships, extended support to young adults affects the transitions of people in midlife and later life too. In providing significant financial assistance to young people for higher education and other purposes, for example, parents may have to deplete savings and delay retirement. What is happening in one generation affects the flow of time, money, and effort to other generations. For example, grandparents may do things to help their middle-age children, which in turn allows those parents help their young adult children; grandparents may also help grandchildren directly. As another example, midlife adults can find themselves simultaneously needing to support their children's transition into adulthood as well as the health or residential transitions of aging parents. The transitions of generations on both sides may bring significant strain and disruption to the lives of the "sandwiched" generation, who in turn may need to make changes in work or other family roles to accommodate these responsibilities.

Chains of support are also affected by the deaths of members of older generations, as inheritance can alter one's life circumstances and future possibilities. The allocation of funds may come with contingencies that regulate the lives of the beneficiaries—say, requiring that the person be in school, have employment, be present in a particular relationship, or use the funds for particular purposes. Through inheritance, those who have passed are able to continue influencing the choices and behaviors of the living. It is also important to remember that the transmission of resources from upper generations to lower ones is in part made possible by the presence of old age programs like Social Security and Medicare, as well as regulated by tax policies that open or close the types and amounts of resources that flow in either direction. Other policies, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act, sick leave, flextime, parental leave, or unemployment affect just how much middle-age people are able to stretch their lives in an effort to support other generations.

6. The changing transition patterns of cohorts can be fertile ground for intergenerational tension in families and in societies.

Generations in families are members of different cohorts, with distinct worldviews and life experiences because of their unique historical locations—thereby creating generation gaps. A changing life course means that family members often do not know how to relate to one another in different life stages. For this reason, families can be sites of resistance or opposition where the transitions of generations are concerned. For example, older generations may disagree with the values and behaviors of a younger generation, reflected in, say, partnership and parenting choices, just as younger generations may oppose the divorce and subsequent cohabitation or remarriage of parents or feel that their parents or grandparents need to “let go” of antiquated values and beliefs.

Intergenerational relationships matter in society too. For example, in the United States, older cohorts often point their fingers at cohorts of current young adults, complaining about their slower movement into adult roles and responsibilities, and attributing to them an avoidance of commitments or blemishes of character. But they sometimes fail to recognize that the worlds young people are now navigating are markedly different from what they knew when they were young. In focusing on (and often demonizing) the generation of people who are currently young adults, they cannot see that the period of life itself has been restructured due to mass pursuit of higher education, an economy that prizes knowledge and technology, growing inequality, limited support of government after ages 18 or 21, and an ethos of parenting and schooling that places a premium on children’s growth and development, to name a few of the most powerful sources. They sometimes fail to see that the period of life they are in or moving toward—old age, if we even allow ourselves to believe that we become old today—is being similarly ruptured relative to what generations before them knew. They sometimes fail to recognize, too, that new generations of parents have actively produced new kinds of young people.

Similarly, with respect to older adults, policy debates in the United States have sometimes pitted the young against the old, creating age divisiveness. The “generational equity” debate rears its head from time to time and will surely reemerge as Boomers age. This debate is that the growing numbers of older people and their length of life are taking public resources away from the young, requiring the rationing health care and other resources. Of course, younger generations in families may not see their elders in this way. But it is another thing when the frame shifts to the societal level.

7. Transitions can be fostered by strengthening particular personal capacities, especially “soft skills.” These are at least partially learned through social processes or involve the care and maintenance of social relationships.

A number of capacities leave people better able to make transitions—for example, being adaptive and resilient, planful yet flexible, comfortable with ambiguity, and persistent in the face of failure or disappointment. Also helpful are what behavioral and social scientists call “soft skills”—for example, self-reflectiveness, self-regulation, communication, critical thinking and problem solving, or knowing how to lead and work in teams. The loosening

of social norms and increased variability in behavior have brought new freedom in the life course; these conditions have made personal skills like these increasingly important for successful transitions. Your life is your own to make, for better or for worse. It is during transitions that individual choice and motivated behavior have the greatest impact on developmental and life-course outcomes (see also Heckhausen & Buchmann, *in press*). But it is also during transitions that “do-it yourself biographies,” to use Ulrich Beck’s (2000) phrase, are prone to breakdown.

One can argue that skills like these are inherent in individuals, but there is good evidence to show that many can be modeled and cultivated, which makes them at least partially social phenomena. Some are explicitly social in nature, such as having the capacity to make and maintain intimate relationships, as well as to form relationships that cross social boundaries related to race, ethnicity, social class, politics, and other dimensions of social identity and organization. These types of skills can also grow out of transitions, equipping us with important lessons for the future. This can even be true of traumatic experiences, which can prompt positive outcomes through processes related to posttraumatic growth.

There is evidence of social inequalities in these skills and skill levels too. For example, many of these skills are actively fostered in children who come from more privileged families and school environments, via parenting strategies and curricula that emphasize social and emotional learning. Given how important these skills are for managing transitions, it is important to develop interventions that foster them in vulnerable populations, and to do so early in life—or else they become mechanisms that further reproduce inequality in ways result in cumulative advantage and disadvantage across the life course.

8. Much of the relevant action for understanding transitions can be found in “macro” social forces.

These forces—which include historical and social change, demographic conditions, and institutions and the welfare state—are often invisible in research and practice on life transitions. Let us briefly consider each in turn.

Historical and Social Change

Historical and social change alter life’s possibilities. In the last half century alone, the life course has been radically transformed by dramatic changes in family formation, gender roles, access to higher education, the nature of work, civil rights, the digital world, and globalization. Some of these are about relationship transitions—such as leaving and returning home, increasing rates of cohabitation or divorce, or legal recognition of LGBT couples and families. Others of these changes, such as women’s greater educational attainment and labor force participation, or men’s more precarious work or investments in fathering, mean that new types of transitions are being managed or old ones being experienced in new ways.

When a society experiences rapid change, it throws individuals and families into chaos. In recent years, people around the globe have experienced upheaval in political and economic systems, war and violence, and the abuse of women and children and violations of human rights. Widespread patterns of migration and immigration affect families as they are united or

separated by long distances. The recent recession created vulnerability and loss in employment, which sent many people into higher education.

Macrolevel changes of these kinds may affect individuals directly, but the family is a key institution through which their effects are mediated—as Elder’s historical research, beginning with *Children of the Great Depression* (1974), so powerfully demonstrated. It is through family life that macrolevel changes are personally experienced and given meaning by its members, again reinforcing the reality that transitions are social experiences.

Demographic Conditions

Revolutionary demographic changes in mortality and morbidity in the last century have altered the very terms of life, illness, and death. We earlier noted the fact that planning is made possible because we can count on a long and relatively healthy life. The life course as we know it is made possible by this fact, coupled with the fact that people have fewer children. Lower mortality and morbidity mean that serious illnesses and death are now largely the purview of old age, and we are caught off guard when they occur earlier. Longstanding gender differences in mortality, morbidity, and partner ages have resulted in sharp differences in the life transitions of older women and men (Hagestad & Settersten, 2017). For example, men are more likely to die suddenly, with a spouse at their side, whereas women are more likely to die widows after years of managing chronic illnesses. This is a reminder that transitions are also gendered. Historically unprecedented proportions of permanently single and childless people will also have wholly different life-course experiences relative to their peers who are partnered and parents and relative to generations past.

Indeed, individual and cohort transitions are rooted in or influenced by two distinct demographic transitions (e.g., Lesthaeghe, 2014). The “first” or “classic” demographic transition refers to the historical declines in mortality and fertility, as witnessed from the 18th century onward in many western populations and continuing at present in most developing countries. The second demographic transition, from the 1970s on, has been characterized by subreplacement fertility, a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage, a disconnection between marriage and procreation, and populations with unstable fertility rates.

Institutions and the Welfare State

Social institutions are key sites in which transitions are experienced and regulated: primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, work places, the military, care institutions. Institutions often reinforce—and can be leaders in revising—cultural ideas about how life course and its transitions are to be organized. We especially appreciate Levy and Bühlmann’s (2016) recent conceptualization of five types of institutions with distinct functions: phasing, relating, supporting, normalizing (or repairing), and background. Phasing institutions propel people forward along a pathway—for example, across grades within a school or across junctures from elementary to middle school, to high school, and to higher education; or across work organizations as people build careers or move into retirement. Relating institutions link lives together—for example, schools connect parents, teachers, and children. Supporting institutions bolster social roles, such as childcare and schools, which allow parents to better manage work and family. Normalizing or repairing institutions come into play when some sort

of life-course turbulence or accident takes place, such as health systems, unemployment services, or juvenile or criminal justice systems. Background institutions are often taken for granted but permit much of life as we know it, such as the infrastructure of roads and transportation, public utilities, and public health agencies.

Welfare state regimes, and the policies and programs that comprise them, are central in providing or withdrawing support at key times in life. Every nation has its own ethos about the supports that all people should receive and the conditions under which special supports are permitted. These ideas undergird the life course, reinforcing expectations of the transitions that should or should not occur in different periods of life, and signaling which transitions (and therefore which populations) are or are not worthy of state support. Examples include social programs related to parenting education, parental involvement, or promoting or strengthening marriage. In the United States, programs like Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Medicare, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or the Earned Income Tax Credit are meant to support people who are deemed vulnerable and create more stability in their lives.

9. It is imperative to look to factors outside of individuals if we are to understand and strengthen life transitions.

In conclusion, much the action related to transitions stems from the social world. It is found in the flux created by the rapidly changing contexts and relationships close to us. It is found in the flux created by changes in population, government, history, and global interdependencies. It is found in the skills we have for managing life's changes, and in our minds as we anticipate and prepare for those changes—these things, too, are products of the social world. Transitions are also social because how we “do” transitions (and interpret them) reflects the meanings, values, and expectations of a society and its social groups.

For all these reasons, it is dangerous to assume that transitions are purely individual experiences, for we overemphasize personal strengths and shortcomings, and we blame people for negative outcomes or their “failure” to respond in adaptive, healthy ways when many of the primary sources of their struggle—and solutions to their struggle—lie outside of them. Because life transitions have many social aspects, they are malleable: interventions can be developed, institutions can be reworked, and policies can be made to foster stability, reduce strain, and promote the health and mental health of individuals and families when their lives are in flux. And because life transitions have many social consequences, such efforts, in aggregation, bring significant dividends for societies—in a world which so often seems to be changing faster than we are, for which we so often feel unprepared, and which so often leaves us unsettled to our core.

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