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# Social Psychology and Stress Research

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The stress process is a microcosm of the society-individual interface, where structural and cultural constraints are manifest in human thought and action. Macro-level constraints become visible in population patterns of stress exposures as well as in the strategies that individuals use to avoid and respond to potentially stressful circumstances. Proximal social interactions that are embedded in this broader set of constraints serve as the sites at which the meanings of stressful life experiences are constructed, thereby acting as conduits for macro-level influences. The selves that engage stressful experiences participate in, and are shaped by, this process of meaning construction, closing the circle between society and individual. If we accept all this to be true, research on the stress process must invoke the full range of sociological theories regarding the nature of the society-individual interface. In turn, stress research has potential to inform the development of those theories by applying their insights to analyses of specific life transitions and challenges.

We advance these two claims through a critical examination of the current status of stress research within sociology. Stress research is an interdisciplinary field with important contributions from sociology, psychology, and allied mental health disciplines. Sociological stress researchers distinguish themselves by their explicit attention to the macro-foundations of the stress process. Pearlin's influential statement that sociologists are uniquely positioned "to observe how deeply well-being is affected by the structured arrangements of people's lives and by the repeated experiences that stem from these arrangements" (Pearlin, 1989, p. 241) has been embraced by sociological stress researchers, leading to important insights into the nature of social stratification and its implications for individual lives. Complementary statements followed on the heels of Pearlin's, calling for greater recognition of the links between stratification research and stress research (Aneshensel, 1992), for integration of diverse outcomes into stress research (Aneshensel, Rutter, & Lachenbruch, 1991), and for attention to population-based health processes (Schwartz, 2002). Together, these commentators asserted a unique sociological contribution grounded in the "social facts" about which Durkheim wrote (Schwartz, 2002).

While not disagreeing with the importance of analyzing the macro-foundations of individual stressful circumstances, we contend that the "social" in social stress

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is not confined to the macro-world but can be found also in the world of interpersonal relations and self, central concerns of sociological social psychology. If stress research can connect with the concerns of mainstream sociology through an emphasis on the macro-world, it can also do so through an emphasis on meso- and micro-interactions.

In this chapter, we identify new opportunities for stress research that emerge from deeper integration of social psychological principles, especially the tenets of symbolic interactionism. Specifically, we propose a vision for stress research which complements consideration of the macro-foundations of the stress process with equal emphasis on meaning construction as its central dynamic.[1] Inasmuch as meaning construction is an inherently social process, our vision for stress research reveals another layer of social influence in the stress process, both in the construction itself and as the process of construction is shaped by macro- and meso-structural constraints. Our vision encourages greater attention to the interactional basis of stressful experiences and to the centrality of self in the stress process. We illustrate our points by considering traditional and contemporary conceptualizations of social roles in stress research.

## A Brief History of Social Stress Research

Social stress research traces its origins to the foundational works of W.B. Cannon, Adolf Meyer, and Hans Selye. Cannon (1929), a neurologist and physiologist, reviewed laboratory research on animals and case studies of medical patients to argue that emotionally provocative experiences (e.g., fear, pain) produce increases in levels of physiological activity that help animals cope with the experience (e.g., heightened adrenal gland activity). While often adaptive, these increases may promote disease if not relieved. Meyer, a psychiatrist, extended Cannon's work by asserting that normative changes, such as graduating from school or the birth of a child, also have the potential to affect physical and mental health. Selye (1956), a physician and endocrinologist, conducted extensive animal experiments which demonstrated that a variety of physical stressors (e.g., cold, pain) elicited that same syndrome of physiological reactions, which he called the General Adaptation Syndrome. The syndrome is characterized by stages of alarm, resistance, and exhaustion, the last of which follows only if the stressors overwhelm the animal's adaptive capacity.

These foundational works have been elaborated in a sustained program of research concerned with the consequences of life stress for humans. The basic tenet of this program is that stress affects health by overwhelming adaptive capacities.

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[1] Our comments are not intended to deny the existence of obdurate realities (see Fine, 1992). Poverty, oppression, hunger, technology are all tangible features of the social system that have real implications for the lives of individuals. We contend, however, that an exclusive focus on those material realities diverts our attention from much of the "social" in social stress.

Studies by sociologists, psychologists, and allied social and behavioral scientists estimate the physical and mental health effects of diverse stressors—including major life events, chronic strains, daily hassles, and major lifetime traumas—and the determinants of variation in stress responses. As a group, these studies reveal both the vulnerability and resilience of humans, the essential importance of meaningful social relations to human health, and the creativity of human thought and action in the face of threat.

Since the early 1980s, sociological research on stress has followed Pearlin's stress process framework (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan,1981). This framework sees the outcomes of stress as a function of the primary stressors to which persons are exposed (such as job loss), the secondary stressors that follow from them (such as marital tensions), and the resources that mediate or moderate their effects on mental health. The resources that have received the most attention from sociologists are mastery, social support, and coping strategies. Consistent with the stress process framework, much research in the late 1970s and 1980s investigated the role of social support and coping in ameliorating the effects of stressors on mental health. It is in this context that Pearlin published his influential 1989 article in which he urged sociologists to remember that the components of the stress process are not randomly distributed but, rather, "can be traced back to surrounding social structures and people's locations within them (p. 242)."

Two types of studies deriving from this framework currently dominate sociological stress research.[2] The first type of study evaluates social status differences in the components of the stress process framework as a means to document inequitable societal arrangements. Studies of this type collect information on the variety of stressors to which members of general population samples are exposed, and use comparisons of stress exposure across population subgroups to document the individual-level implications of macro-structural conditions. For example, Turner and his colleagues (1995) observed that chronic stressors and life events occurring to self were more commonly experienced by persons with low occupational statuses than by those with high occupational statuses, and that these differences in stress exposure explained approximately 33% of observed differences in depression across occupational groups. Based on that evidence, the authors concluded that systemic stressors importantly contribute to the distribution of depression in the general population. Studies such as this are faithful to the current vision of stress research in that they link concepts from the stress process model to macro-structural phenomena and to individual-level psychological states.

The second type of study uses the stress process framework to understand the implications of specific social conditions or statuses for individual mental health. For example, Aneshensel and her colleagues (1993) used the stress process framework to conceptualize the experiences of family members caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease. Their use of the stress process model led them to

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[2] Within psychology, studies of coping currently dominate the field, with a recent search finding 13,744 published articles concerned with "coping behaviors" between 1967 and 1999 (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000).

ask questions about perceptions of stress among caregivers, the distribution of material and social resources across caregivers, and the implications of those resources for caregivers' abilities to maintain their own emotional health. The goal of studies such as this is to understand socially-patterned variations in the meanings that challenging circumstances come to have for individuals, in responses to those circumstances, and in mental health outcomes. Although studies of specific life events (e.g., divorce) have fallen out of favor among sociological stress researchers, they have similar potential to offer insight into the social origins of stress responses.

## Theoretical Origins of Sociological Stress Research

While stress researchers take an eclectic approach to theory, both current traditions within sociological stress research draw primary inspiration from the social structure and personality tradition in sociological social psychology. The social structure and personality (SSP) tradition is concerned with the relationship between macro-social systems or processes and individual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors.[3] The SSP perspective conceives of the world as a series of embedded circles with the individual at the core surrounded by progressively larger and more complex social groupings, including dyads, small groups, communities, organizations and institutions, and the larger social system. In much the same way that one can peel away the layers of an onion to reveal the inner core, SSP researchers attempt to trace the processes through which components of the social system influence individuals and, less often, through which individuals affect social systems (House, 1981; McLeod & Lively, 2003).

This tradition of research is distinguished from the general macro-micro project of sociology by its adherence to three analytic principles: the components principle, the proximity principle, and the psychological principle. The components principle stipulates that researchers identify the specific components of the social system that are most relevant to understanding the phenomenon of interest. The proximity principle directs our attention to the proximate social experiences through which macro-social structures impinge on individual lives, in particular, micro-interactions and small group processes. The psychological principle involves an examination of the psychological mechanisms through which proximal structures and processes affect individual attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. The application of this framework to sociological stress research is straightforward, with macro-social structures such as socioeconomic hierarchies influencing experiences within proximal social environments that, in turn, affect mental health.

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[3] Among SSP researchers, social structure is defined as "a *persisting* and bounded *pattern* of social relationships (or pattern of behavioral intention) among the units (persons or positions) in a social system" (House 1981, p. 542, emphasis in original).

By attending to these principles, stress research has made important contributions to sociological research on the nature of stratification hierarchies, their implications for daily life, and their effects on individual health and well-being. With respect to the components principle, stress researchers have disaggregated the dimensions of stratification that are linked with stress through analyses that estimate the associations of gender, race, income, education, and occupational status with stress exposure and coping resources (e.g., Kessler & Neighbors, 1986; McLeod & Kessler, 1990; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Turner & Avison, 2003; Turner, Wheaton, & Lloyd, 1995). These analyses reveal that the different components of socioeconomic stratification are related to stressful experiences in different ways. For example, income predicts the risk of marital separation/divorce but education does not, whereas education is a stronger predictor of negative events in one's social network (McLeod & Kessler, 1990). Women report more chronic stress and more negative network events than men, but do not report more events occurring to themselves (Turner et al., 1995). Similarly, stress research highlights the complexity of race as a system of stratification that is enacted within multiple levels of social life by documenting the mental health implications of both obvious and insidious forms of discrimination (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Brown, 2003). In sum, stress research has contributed to general conceptual understandings of contemporary stratification systems by affirming their complex, multidimensional character (Mirowsky, Ross, & Reynolds, 2000).

Stress research has also contributed to many sub-disciplines of sociology through its systematic investigations of the proximal environments through which stratification affects health and well-being. Stressors are defined with reference to the geographic, organizational, and interpersonal contexts in which people live their lives, including the family, work, and neighborhoods (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1992; Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Hill, Ross, & Angel, 2005). The resources with which people anticipate, avoid, and respond to stress are also attached to these contexts and are enacted within them. By defining and measuring major status-based experiences (e.g., financial deprivation), role strains and role conflicts (e.g., marital problems), and contextual stressors (e.g., neighborhood violence), stress researchers have taken from, and given back to, other sub-disciplines by developing tools with which to analyze the structure and content of major social organizations and institutions. For example, research on the stressful aspects of work environments has yielded a highly differentiated conceptualization of those environments that has informed research on work and occupations (Fenwick & Tausig, this volume).

Finally, stress researchers have given careful attention to the nature of psychological experience as well as to the processes through which proximal stressors affect mental health. With respect to the former, sociologists have questioned dominant psychiatric conceptualizations of mental health and asserted the relevance of more generic forms of distress and of positive mental health (e.g., Horwitz, 2002; Keyes, 2002). By so doing, sociologists aim to broaden the realm of psychological experiences worthy of research attention.

With respect to the latter, stress research illustrates the relevance of self-constructs as mediators in the association between stressful experiences and mental health (Pearlin et al., 1981; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000), and the importance of identity to definitions and responses to stress (Thoits, 1992, 1995; Burke, 1991). In their early analysis of the stress process, Pearlin and colleagues (1981) demonstrated that stressors have implications for mental health, in part, because they are associated with declines in self-esteem and mastery. Similarly, Williams and Williams-Morris's (2000) review highlighted the centrality of internalized racism to the processes through which racism affects mental health (see also Brown, Sellers, & Gomez, 2002). Thoits (1992) and Burke (1991) applied different versions of identity theory to the stress process but came to similar predictions: stressors that challenge valued identities have the most profound implications for distress. Research on self and identity in the stress process complements basic social psychological research by providing further evidence that the self is both social product and social force (Rosenberg, 1979) and by specifying the processes through which the self responds to threats.

In sum, stress research demonstrates the profound implications of stratification hierarchies for individuals. These hierarchies have effects that move beyond their narrow domains (e.g., status attainment processes) into the most personal aspects of people's lives. These contributions conform to social stress research's goal "to identify elements of social life that have dysfunctional consequences" (Pearlin, 1999, p. 410) as well as to social structure and personality's traditional emphasis on the macro-determinants of individual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors (House, 1981).

As impressive as these contributions are, they nevertheless yield a surprisingly sterile portrait of the stress process. SSP-oriented research has yielded thorough definitions and descriptions of the components of the stress process, but little understanding of how the process itself works—of the underlying interpersonal and self processes through which stressors come to have meaning for individuals and, thereby, influence their physical and emotional well-being. We believe that integrating the tenets of symbolic interactionism, the other major theoretical tradition within sociological social psychology (House, 1977; Stryker, 1977), into stress research would yield a richer understanding of the social origins of the stress process.

The social structure and personality framework and symbolic interactionism offer complementary insights into the nature of macro-micro relations. Social structure and personality research encourages careful identification of the macro- and meso-structures that are implicated in individual outcomes as well as precise estimation of the relative contributions of these structures to explaining variance in those outcomes. Perhaps by necessity, its tenets bias models of the stress process towards unidirectional causal influences that begin with macro-social conditions and end with the individual (Thoits, 1994). In contrast to the social structure and personality tradition's "top-down" view of macro-micro relations, symbolic interactionism emphasizes meaning construction and creativity in human action—the interpersonal and self processes through which people make sense of their worlds and act towards them.

Following from these basic claims, we offer a complementary, but distinct, vision for stress research which emphasizes the centrality of meaning negotiation to the stress process. More explicitly, we contend that, although the stress process is importantly shaped by broad structural and cultural imperatives, its social origins cannot be revealed by consideration of those imperatives alone. Rather, what makes the stress process "social" is that it is constructed and enacted in interpersonal interactions—in dyads, small groups, organizations, and social institutions—the proximal environments of the social structure and personality tradition. These meso-level interactions—where society meets the self—have received surprisingly little attention from sociological stress researchers. They are important both because they are the sites in which structural and cultural imperatives become most directly visible, but also because they form the basis of meaning construction. Our vision suggests new directions for research that would enhance our understanding of how people respond when confronted with potentially stressful events, and that would contribute to important theoretical debates within sociology.

We begin our argument by introducing three foundational tenets of symbolic interactionism: the centrality of meaning to human life, the interactional basis of meaning construction, and the self. We then turn to a description of how meaning, interaction, and self have been conceptualized by stress researchers in the past and of new opportunities that would arise from taking the insights of symbolic interactionists seriously. Our arguments build on the work of previous scholars (see, for example, Thoits, 1995b; Pearlin, 1999), to present a more general theoretical argument for the integration of diverse theoretical frameworks within sociological social psychology.

## Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism assumes that meaning is central to human life.[4] This central tenet asserts that meaning shapes not only how individuals interpret particular events, but also how they interpret others, their environments, and, perhaps, most importantly, themselves (Heise, 2002; Smith-Lovin & Heise, 1988). These interpretations, in turn, color how individuals respond to events and situations, regardless of the objective reality of the event itself (Charmaz, 1980; 1991).

One of the more enduring insights of symbolic interaction is that meaning is not static. Instead, meaning is expected to change over time as individuals

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[4] There are many different versions of symbolic interactionist thought, which vary with respect to the degree of fluidity they attribute to meaning (Blumer, 1989; Heise, 1977; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1988). Whereas early articulations of the theory that sought to distinguish symbolic interaction from other forms of sociological social psychology emphasized the negotiated nature of meaning and self, later versions (Stryker, 1980) reintroduced the constraining, albeit not determining influence of structure. Stryker, for one, explained the relative consistency of social life by attaching meaning to the self. The self, from this perspective is comprised not only of individuals' social positions but also by corresponding roles that are maintained vis-à-vis interaction with stable and enduring social relations.

develop new understandings of their situations (Blumer, 1969; Orbuch, 1997). New understandings may result from the changing nature of the situation itself or from self-reflection but may also arise out of social interactions with real and imagined others. The interactionist view of meaning as dynamic and negotiated contrasts sharply with more traditional conceptualizations of meaning which treat concepts such as culture and beliefs as obdurate and therefore resistant to individual influences.

Social comparisons play an important role in the process of meaning construction. Symbolic interactionists contend that we routinely gauge our own reactions to particular events against how we believe we *should* react or how we believe others would react in a similar circumstance. Individuals who come to see their reaction as exceeding (or otherwise not adhering to) valued social norms may attempt to change their reaction, either by altering their interpretation of the event (e.g. reinterpreting the event as an opportunity rather than a disaster), or by changing their views of themselves.

In contrast to the static, trait-like conceptualizations of self that characterize social structure and personality research (represented by, for example, measures of self-esteem or mastery), symbolic interactionists conceptualize self as both precursor and product of action and meaning. Whether viewed as a collection of salient social roles that individuals actively pursue and support (Stryker, 1980) or as a cybernetic system of situated identities that individuals are motivated to maintain (Heise, 1977; Burke, 1991), definitions of the self (and its related cognitions and behaviors) are dependent upon the presence, the acceptance, and, oftentimes, the support of others (Stryker & Burke, 2000). As a central meaning system, the self is subject to reinterpretation and reconstruction over time.

Together, these tenets of symbolic interactionism assume an agentic model of human action (Charmaz, 1991; Heise, 1977; Hochschild, 1983; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1994) which contrasts with the more deterministic image of social structure within the social structure and personality tradition (McLeod & Lively, 2003).[5] If we accept the tenet that meaning is constructed by such social processes as making comparisons and seeking and receiving support, it follows that the stress process is, at its heart, interactional. It is here, at the level of face-to-face interactions, that people come to construct and to reconstruct meaning not only about the events in their lives, but also about themselves.

By proposing that stress researchers be more attentive to the insights of symbolic interactionism we are, in effect, proposing a paradigmatic reorientation. Our proposed approach requires a significant shift from stress researchers' over-reliance on an intrapsychic view of self to one that is inherently more social. To

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[5] The notion of human agency found new expression in the structure-agency debate which dominated sociological writings in the 1980s, and remains central to contemporary social theory (Alexander, 1982, 1984; Bourdieu, 1977; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1976, 1984; Sewell, 1992).

make this shift, stress researchers would have to be willing to expand the view of the self as a protective, yet passive, set of predetermined characteristics or roles and adopt a more fluid conceptualization of self as negotiated interpersonally and dependent upon social interaction. By examining how the self and consequent meanings and behaviors are influenced by others, a more interactive approach has the potential to shed light into why some people construct particular life events and situations as stressful and others do not. It would also provide greater insight into how the meanings of identities and life events are constructed and the effects of these negotiations on psychological and emotional outcomes. As we hope our argument demonstrates, stress research and sociological social psychology have much to gain from such a shift.

## Meaning in the Stress Process

Stress researchers agree that the effects of stressors on mental health depend on their meanings to the individual (Brown & Harris, 1978; Pearlin, 1983; Pearlin, 1989; Simon, 1995; Thiots, 1991, 1992; Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1993; see Simon's (1997) excellent review for more details). Traditional approaches to the measurement of meaning depend on the assumptions that the meanings of stressors can be determined objectively, and that better measures of meaning will yield more powerful associations between stress exposures and mental health.

Psychologists have traditionally favored measures of stress appraisals that are based on subjective ratings of threat, controllability, change, and the like (see for example Cohen et al., 1983; Peacock and Wong, 1990). Sociologists (and some psychologists) reject these measures out of hand based on the reasonable criticism that they confound reactions to events with their appraisals (see Monroe & Kelley, 1995 for a review). It comes as no surprise, critics claim, to find that events rated as more stressful or threatening by respondents have stronger associations with psychological well-being than less stressful or threatening events because ratings of stress appraisals depend on the outcome of the event.

In response to these concerns, some researchers have developed elaborate coding systems designed to yield objective ratings of event characteristics. For example, Brown and Harris's (1978) Life Events and Difficulties Schedule elicits a narrative about each reported event or difficulty which is then evaluated by a panel that rates the event for its long-term contextual threat, severity, as well as several other characteristics (see Wethington, Brown, & Kessler, 1995 for a review). Event/difficulty ratings are made without reference to the respondent's subjective reactions or emotional responses to ensure that the ratings are independent of the effects of the stressors on mental health outcomes. Dohrenwend and colleagues (1993) developed the Standardized Event Rating system which follows a similar format, but which deletes all information pertaining to social vulnerability from the narratives in order to permit analysis of how social vulnerabilities modify the effects of stressful circumstances.

Other researchers have inferred meaning from the context in which events occur. For example, Wheaton (1991) demonstrated that the effect of events vary with the sequence of life-course experiences in which they are embedded, thereby inferring variation in meaning from variation in effects (see also Thoits, 1995b). Similarly, Umberson and her colleagues (1992) observed stronger effects of widowhood on depression among women who experienced subsequent financial and household strain. In each case, the context of the event is used to define its meaning for the respondent.

Finally, most in keeping with symbolic interactionist principles, another group of researchers has argued for an approach to meaning that more directly considers identity, beliefs, and values (Pearlin, 1989; Simon, 2000; Thoits, 1992). Thoits (1992) proposed that the meanings of stressors depend on the importance of the identity domain in which they occur. Pearlin (1989) asserted that social values shape the meaning of stressors. Extending that point, Simon (1995, 2000) directed attention to "gender-linked cultural norms, values, expectations, and beliefs (2000, p. 73)" as they influence men's and women's subjective interpretations of potentially stressful role-based experiences. She found, for example, that working women were more distressed by work-family conflict than were working men because women perceived their roles as workers as in conflict with their roles as caregivers whereas men did not.

As these examples illustrate, most analyses of meaning in the stress process have been oriented towards developing better estimates of the effects of stressful experiences on individual outcomes rather than towards the study of meaning itself. As a result, these analyses fail to provide even basic descriptive information about the meanings that people give to stressful circumstances and about their origins in macro- and meso-level experiences. In particular, we know little about whether men and women view the "same" circumstances similarly or differently (with Simon's (1995) research an important exception) or whether meanings vary systematically by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other important status characteristics. We also know little about how meanings change as the stress process unfolds.

Following from traditional conceptualizations of meaning, a social structure and personality approach would encourage studies of the associations of SES, gender, race, and other important social and cultural indicators with self-reported stress appraisals. Studies of this type would allow us to determine whether the "same" event is viewed differently depending on one's social location. For example, we would be able to determine whether persons with lower levels of income rate a significantly greater number of events as "very stressful" than persons with higher levels of income. Analyses of this type would complement prior analyses of the social distribution of stress exposure (e.g., McLeod & Kessler, 1990; Turner et al., 1995) by showing how social location shapes the interpretation of stressors at a particular moment in time.

Such traditional analyses rest on the assumption that appraisals are resistant to change. Integrating the interactionist assumption that appraisals are fluid and dynamic would require that we take a different approach to the study of meaning,

more in line with research on accounts (Orbuch, 1997).[6] Research on accounts analyzes the spontaneous or solicited stories that people present to explain and interpret stressful (or potentially stressful) experiences. The goals of the analyses are diverse, including understanding the content of the account (their temporal form, attributional statements, embedded affect), the conditions under which different types of accounts are given and by whom, and the conditions under which other people accept or reject accounts. Beyond Weiss's (1975) research on divorce, stress researchers have paid little attention to extant research on accounts, perhaps because it is often focused on specific life traumas (e.g., Orbuch's research on sexual abuse (Orbuch, Harvey, David, & Merbach, 1994), Silver's research on incest (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983)).

Analyses of accounts of specific stressful experiences offer several advantages to stress researchers. When abstracted across stressful experiences, they provide answers to general questions about how people make sense of, and impose order on, those experiences. What common forms and themes appear across accounts of different types of experiences? What causal attributions appear and what do they tell us about how the respondent conceptualizes her or his relationship with the world? How are accounts influenced by position in the life course and by important social locations? Answers to these questions address general concerns in research on meaning construction, the self, and social stratification.

In addition, by their very nature, accounts constitute coping strategies. By telling the story of their experience, people are explaining and interpreting the experience in a way that helps them make sense of what happened for themselves and others. Accounts may include descriptions of coping efforts, but are also forms of coping themselves and, thereby, relevant to stress research. As Orbuch (1997) notes, the process of confiding implicit in the construction of an account has physical and mental health benefits (Harvey, Orbuch, Chwalisz, & Garwood, 1991; Orbuch et al., 1994). Thus, accounts can inform our understanding of how people cope with problems in their lives. Because accounts often elicit information about the responses and actions of others, they also offer insight into how people use, maintain, and repair interpersonal relations during times of stress.

Finally, accounts are dynamic. They change over time in response to the individual's changing understanding of the experience as well as based on the feedback of others and collective understandings (Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1990; Orbuch, Harvey, Davis, & Merbach, 1993; Orbuch, Veroff, & Holmberg, 1994). Analyses of changes in accounts over time have the potential to reveal macro- and meso-influences on meaning that are more subtle than those gleaned from traditional survey-based approaches as well as individual acceptance or resistance to those influences. Such analyses straddle the traditional concerns of

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[6] Although the terms "account" and "narrative" are often used interchangeably, Orbuch (1997) offers a useful distinction. The term narrative usually refers to an individual's story as told to someone else; an account may be presented publicly, but may also be represented in private activities such as diary-writing. Accounts also involve causal attributions that are intended to make sense of a troubling situation.

social structure and personality research and symbolic interactionism. In sum, although accounts cannot be used to develop precise estimates of the effects of stressful experiences on mental health, they can be used to understand the *process* through which people construct the meaning of those experiences.

Orbuch (1997) notes one important limitation in extant research on accounts: research has not yet evaluated whether and how accounts are related to subsequent behavior. Stress research is ideally suited for this task inasmuch as it can evaluate the implications of current accounts for subsequent efforts to avoid and cope with stressors.

## The Interactional Basis of the Stress Process

Our discussion of meaning asserted that meaning is fluid and constructed, a result not only of individual perceptions but also of social feedback. In this section, we consider the interactional basis of the stress process in greater depth.

Sociological stress researchers acknowledge social interactions in the stress process through analyses of social networks and social support. Social network conceptualizations emphasize the structural connections—the presence or absence of links—among individuals or groups (see Lin & Peek, 1999 for a review). Common network concepts such as density (the degree of overlap among the links within a given domain), reciprocity (whether exchanges occur in both directions across a link), and multiplexity (whether a given link involves an exchange of more than one function or activity) further specify the nature of the connections among groups of individuals and the possible pathways for the exchange of information and resources. Social network characteristics have inconsistent associations with mental health and are only occasionally found to buffer the effects of stressors on mental health, perhaps, as Lin and Peek (1999) speculate, because their associations with social support have not been fully specified.[7]

The concept of social support highlights the content of social networks and their provision of caring and instrumental assistance (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988; Turner & Turner, 1999). As several other chapters in this volume review, the perception that one is loved and cared for, and the availability of an emotional confidant, buffer the effects of stressful experiences on mental health (Kessler & McLeod, 1985). While the concepts of social networks and social support are distinct, several researchers have studied their interconnections, for example, how the size and density of networks relates to their capacity to provide emotional and instrument support (e.g., Acock & Hurlbert, 1993; Lin, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1989).

Studies of social networks and social support in the stress process have contributed importantly to our understanding of interpersonal resources as moderators of stress

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[7] Or, perhaps social networks not only define the support to which people have access but also influence how effective that support is, a point raised by Bernice Pescosolido.

effects. However, they take us only partway towards appreciating the interactional basis of the stress process because they are embedded in a conceptual paradigm that places the individual actor at the center of the inquiry. When thinking about how people experience stress, stress researchers tend to envision isolated individuals who encounter potentially stressful experiences, appraise and interpret those experiences, make decisions about how to respond to them, and then either become distressed or not depending on the effectiveness of their responses. This conceptualization aligns with dominant rational actor models of human behavior, but is not true to how people understand and respond to complex problems (see Pescosolido, 1992).

In addition, although studies of social networks and social support ably demonstrate the many health-related benefits of receiving information, assistance, and emotional support, they fail to acknowledge that interpersonal interactions also serve as the basis for meaning construction. In other words, supportive (and non-supportive) interactions transmit more than practice and emotional assistance. What we argue for here, then, are the benefits of conceptualizing stress as a cybernetic, interactionally-based process, consistent with Pescosolido's (1992) reconceptualization of help-seeking.

A cybernetic, interactionally-based process refers to a process in which the form and content of communication places limits on the meanings that can be constructed by actors within any given interaction Applied to the case of stress, it implies a process in which individual understandings of stressful experiences are subject to the scrutiny and evaluation of others (real or imagined), and change in response. The scrutiny and evaluation of others may occur through subtle, and even unrecognized, social comparisons or through direct confrontation and conflict.

Symbolic interactionist theory offers insight into both types of processes. Beginning with the more subtle, the meanings that other people hold are invoked when individuals check their own reactions against those of the "generalized other"—the whole of a society's shared values and norms (Mead, 1934). Although this process of construction does not involve direct contact with other people, it is nonetheless social. When individuals compare their own reactions against those of the generalized other, they see themselves as they believe others would see them and gauge their reactions to a particular event against how they believe they *should* react or how they believe other people would react in a similar circumstance (Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1984, 1985).

The ways in which individuals use (and, even, determine the content of) the generalized other in stressful times inform our understanding of how and why people make comparisons more generally. For example, while some individuals may come to define the nebulous "they" as compassionate and kind, others may hold a much harsher or unforgiving view of society's norms. Because stress researchers tend to look at large aggregates of people, and study a broad range of potentially stressful events, they would be advantageously positioned to investigate the circumstances under which individuals adopt or construct different norms by which to judge their behaviors, identities, and or reactions (Smith-Lovin & Douglass, 1992. Thomassen, 2002). Moreover, inasmuch as such views of what constitutes society's values are products of socialization, life experiences,

and interpersonal interactions, the study of social comparisons represents another point of convergence for social structure and personality research and symbolic interactionism.

While the generalized other serves as one point of reference, people also engage in more strategic comparisons with both real and imagined others to pre-serve their sense of self (Rosenberg, 1979). For example, some people make upward comparisons in order to feel better about their futures whereas others make downward comparisons in order to feel better about their present situations (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; Pearlin & Skaff, 1996; Wills, 1991; Wood & Taylor, 1991). People may also look to specific others in order to seek examples of either appropriate ("I'd like to be able to handle this like her") or inappropriate ("please don't let me act like that") responses and then model their actions accordingly. The comparisons that people choose to make are a function not only of how they see themselves in the present, but also of how they would like to see themselves in the future. Social comparisons convey the values and beliefs of both broad (i.e., macro) and local (e.g., meso) cultures *and* serve as primary means for pursuing self-motives such as self-verification (Swann, 1983) and self-enhancement (Tesser, 1986). Stressful experiences threaten the self and trigger social comparisons, making the stress process an ideal site in which to analyze how culture becomes relevant to meaning as well as how social comparisons are invoked to achieve self-motives. Despite impressive research on the cultural foun-dations of psychological experience (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholz, 2002; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997), much remains to be known about the use of general and specific comparisons to enhance or maintain the self in different structural and cultural contexts.[8]

Complementing the extant literature on the link between perceived inequity in the household division of labor and distress (Glass & Fujimoto, 1994; Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994), Hochschild's (1989) qualitative work on the "second shift" demonstrated that husbands and wives managed their anger and resentment over what they each perceived as an unequal division in the division of household labor by making strategic comparisons that simultaneously protected the self and obscured blatant disparities in the division of household tasks. Wives who were committed to having an egalitarian marriage made comparisons with other women who had greater household responsibilities, rather than comparing the work they did against that performed by their husbands. Husbands, too, chose their compar-isons carefully, oftentimes comparing their contributions around the house to those of other men that they knew or to their fathers (also see Bylsma & Major, 1994).

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[8] A full discussion of the role of culture is outside of the scope of this review. Here, we note simply that, although stress research focuses most of its attention on the structural origins of stress, stressors also arise from contradictions among and between cultural ideals and material realities (e.g. the conflict between dominant attitudes against mothers seeking employment and high rates of employment among mothers of preschool children; Treas & Widmer, 2000). Culture also shapes the meaning and emotional significance of stressors and defines the range of coping responses that seem possible (see Simon, 2000).

These strategic comparisons allowed couples not only to better manage their feelings of distress (or unfairness) regarding domestic schedules, but also to construct and maintain a meaning system that supported their idealized views of themselves (as, for example, feminist/egalitarian), their spouses (e.g., egalitarian male/primary caretaker), and their marriages. Hochschild's observations of how comparisons are used to avoid potential conflict within the household have implications for research on stress avoidance as well as for theories of culture, emotions, and self-verification.

Shifting to more direct forms of meaning negotiation, other people become involved when individuals seek or are offered support from friends, family members, or—in some cases—professionals. While social support can be viewed as strictly instrumental, the advice and assistance we receive from others also communicates the social and cultural meaning of our life experiences—whether they are seen as desirable, important, devastating. Thinking about social support as a form of meaning construction offers new ways to understand established findings. For example, research on social support suggests that similar others may be the best source of interpersonal coping (Thoits, 1986). The benefits of support from similar others may reflect their greater ability to offer salutary interpretations of the experience. Similar others may also be better able to neutralize residual feelings, such as embarrassment, shame, or guilt, that exacerbate stress (Lively, 2000; Thoits, 1985; also see Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) by reinterpreting those feelings as normal and understandable.

In sum, reframing the study of stress in terms of interactionally-based meaning construction helps us to ask new questions about how the meanings of life circumstances are created in interaction—which important others (real and imagined) are invoked in definitional processes, in what settings those processes occur, and how their character varies depending on both. It directs us to the flows of interpretation as well as information and resources to and from the individual over time—another component of the "social" in social stress. Perhaps more fundamentally, what it suggests is that the concept of social support, while useful for delimiting an important component of the stress process, is a proxy for much more complex interpersonal processes that are only partially reflected in its narrow and static conceptualization. Interpersonal interactions are a central focus of the symbolic interactionist framework, emphasizing the importance of that framework in the study of stress.

## A Social Self

The linchpin of our argument is that sociological stress research relies on an overly static, individualistic, and (ironically) psychological conceptualization of self. General theories of self acknowledge that self is a social product, created in interpersonal interaction rather than existing as a purely psychological phenomenon (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980). By implication, self and identity are fluid and negotiated, changing across time and space in response to others'

actions and to situational imperatives. Although stress researchers recognize that stressful experiences have implications for self-conceptions (e.g., Krause, 1991; Pearlin et al., 1981), they have been slow to incorporate a fully realized conceptualization of self into their models. Social psychological theories of identity hold considerable promise for this purpose.

Identity theory as proposed by Sheldon Stryker (1980) posits that the self is made up of multiple role identities that are organized in a salience hierarchy; identities at the top of the salience hierarchy are more likely to be enacted in given social situations than identities at the bottom. According to identity theory, identity salience is a function of commitment (ties to other social actors) and will decrease under conditions in which identity claims are not supported interactionally. An individual for whom teacher is a salient identity, for example, may be forced to rearrange his or her salience hierarchy (of identities) if he or she is unable to relate to or with students. Likewise, a man who loses custody of his children may reduce the salience of "father". Losses of, or challenges to, highly salient identities are predicted to cause greater levels of distress than losses of or challenges to less salient identities (see also Burke, 1991; Large & Marcussen, 2000).

Empirical evidence for these predictions is mixed. Thoits' community-based studies (1992, 1994, 1995) find little support for the hypothesis that events occurring in salient life domains have stronger effects on mental health than other events. In contrast, Hammen (Hammen et al., 1985; Hammen & Goodman-Brown, 1990) finds that events that threaten dominant self-schema are associated with higher levels of depression. Simon (1992) observed stronger effects of child problems on parental distress among fathers who were highly committed to the parental role than among fathers who were not, but no difference in effects among mothers. Possible explanations for the different results include the use of different outcomes and different measures of identity salience. As plausibly, people may change their identity salience hierarchies in response to stressors (e.g., Pearlin & Skaff, 1996; Thoits, 1995a) attenuating the association of those rankings with distress. Far from discouraging further research on identity and stress, these results encourage those efforts by pointing to the need for more precise and dynamic measurement of identity in studies of stress (see also Stryker (1980)).

Affect control theory (ACT; Heise, 1977, 2002; MacKinnon, 1994; Smith-Lovin & Heise, 1988) is another theory of role-based identities that has potentially profound implications for our understanding of stress processes. More than most theories within sociological social psychology, ACT integrates elements of social cognition, social structure, culture, and affect to address the question of how meaning influences individual behavior, and attributions about self, others, behaviors (or actions) and settings. It acknowledges the importance of situationally/role-based interaction and culturally shared norms (or sentiments) in meaning negotiation and allows for feedback between actors and objects as they collectively re-shape meaning, behavior, attributions, and emotion. It has the potential to inform our general understanding of the social origins of meaning in the stress process, and of the processes through which meaning can be renegotiated in interaction.

In brief, affect control theory specifies that individuals hold culturally shared sentiments regarding the degree to which social identities (both as actors and objects), behaviors, and settings are good or bad, powerful or powerless, and active or inactive (Heise, 1977; Smith-Lovin & Heise, 1988).[9] Situational events create transient meanings that are juxtaposed against these fundamental sentiments. The difference in meaning produced by a particular event is known as deflection and is experienced as a sense of likelihood: the more unlikely an event is perceived to be in that situation, the more deflection is likely to occur. For example, the event "mother hits child" creates a large deflection because the behavior is inconsistent with fundamental cultural sentiments regarding mothers' behaviors towards their children. Because individuals are motivated to reduce deflection in their own interactions (as well as when witnessing the interactions of others) actors are motivated to either change their own behavior or their definitions of one or more elements of the situation (e.g. change their definition of the event to "mother *disciplines* child").

Although there have been few empirical examinations of the relationship between deflection and stress, Francis's (1997) research on support groups for divorcees and widowers demonstrates that individuals' definitions of situations and resultant deflections have real consequences for emotional well-being. Most ACT research focuses on the ways in which individuals redefine situations (also see Hochschild, 1983). Francis illustrates that some definitional changes are, in fact, motivated by interpersonal interactions (also see Thoits, 1995a). In her analysis, support group members worked together to reduce deflection and its concomitant emotional responses by changing the meanings of their spousal losses through the reconfiguration of actor-behavior-object relations. Specifically, widows and widowers who viewed themselves as being "bad, weak, and inactive," and their deceased spouse as "good, weak, and inactive," were often encouraged to view themselves as "good, weak, and inactive," and their spouses as "bad, strong, and active." In other words, individuals who came into the group believing that they had failed their spouse were encouraged to redefine the event as their spouse abandoning them. Once the survivor saw him or herself in a more positive light (as someone who was guiltless, as opposed to someone who was guilty), the group leader could then encourage the formation of a "survivor" identity, which is characterized as being not only good, but also strong and active. Lively and Heise (2004) have shown, using survey data, that individuals who routinely occupy good, strong, and active identities are more likely to also report experiencing good, positive, and active emotions (e.g., happiness) and less likely to experience bad, weak and inactive emotions (e.g., distress).

These analyses, taken together, ably illustrate the potential of ACT-informed studies to advance research agendas tied specifically to stress research. They

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[9] The social identity "mother", for example, is viewed as being very good, slightly powerful, and somewhat active, whereas a "child" is viewed as exceptionally good, very powerless, and very active.

reveal that social support can work by encouraging identity transformation and that identity transformations may result in reduced feelings of sadness or distress. Following from this example, studies of stress have the potential to contribute to more general theoretical development in sociology regarding how meaning is constructed in social interaction. An important extension of this work would be to evaluate whether individuals who occupy different social locations or have access to different forms of individual and or interpersonal resources define or redefine elements of situations (e.g., themselves, others, behaviors, or settings) using different strategies and in ways that more or less successfully reduce deflection and or feelings of distress.

## Social Roles in the Stress Process

The potential benefits of integrating symbolic interactionist principles into stress research are evident in the revitalization of role theory since the 1980s. Social roles have historically been, and continue to be, one of the primary ways in which stress researchers have defined domains of stress exposure and conceptualized meaning (Pearlin, 1983). Social roles are also a central concept associated with social structure and personality research (House, 1981) and with structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980). Social roles reflect the broad social structure but they are also sources of meaning for individuals. Our review of the revitalization of the concept demonstrates the added value to be gained from drawing on both conceptualizations, particularly as they are related to meaning construction, in stress research.

Traditional conceptualizations of social roles define them as behavioral expectations that are associated with, and emerge from, identifiable positions in social structure (e.g., Merton, 1957). In this view, social roles exist prior to social interactions and serve as constraints on behavior. They are predetermined positions that we enter and exit in patterned ways over the life course (George, 1993).

This conceptualization of social roles has motivated stress research on structurally-based variation in role occupancy and role expectations as determinants of individual functioning, an area of research to which stress research has made significant contributions. Drawing on traditional sociological interests in the fit (or lack thereof) between structural requirements and individual personality, researchers have also studied the implications of role incongruity, role conflict, and role overload for physical and mental health and for deviant behavior (Meton, 1957; Thoits, 1983). There is also a well-established literature on multiple role occupancy and well-being that tests the competing hypotheses that multiple roles offer greater potential for self-actualization (Linville, 1987) and that multiple roles create tension and stress (Thoits, 1983). Sequences of role exits and entries matter for mental health, in different ways for different groups (Jackson, 2002), a finding that bridges role theory and the life course. More generally, role-based stressors serve as a central mechanism through which macro-structures come to have relevance for individual lives (Pearlin, 1983, 1999).

These applications of role theory to stress research can be usefully extended through consideration of more general theoretical developments within role theory. Specifically, traditional role theory has been repeatedly criticized for its lack of attention to individual agency. In response, several attempts have been made to revitalize our understanding of role and, therefore, role theory through the introduction of interactionist principles. The first of these theoretical innovations shifted the conceptualization of role-based human behavior from role-playing to role-making (Stryker & Statham, 1985; Turner, 1962). The concept of role-making emphasizes situational dynamics, meaning construction, bargaining, and personal control in role-based behavior. In essence, the interactionist conceptualization views individuals as creative negotiators of role expectations within specific interactions.

The concept of role-making identifies one strategy through which individuals avoid and respond to stress: renegotiating the meaning of the role. For example, men and women who feel conflict between their roles as workers and as parents can attempt to redefine what those roles mean in order to reduce the conflict, an attempt to "modify the situation" in Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) terms. What is particularly interesting (and uniquely social) about role-making may not be captured by a pure coping conceptualization, however. Role-making represents another point at which macro-social and interpersonal influences on meaning construction can be made visible by the stress process. Role-making is structurally and situationally bound; cultural and structural constraints limit the perceived desirability of role redefinition (e.g., men may feel less motivated than women to redefine the worker role) and draw boundaries around possible role redefinitions (e.g., the definition of the worker role cannot be extended beyond relations involving some exchange of skills for resources). Moreover, not everyone has the same power to assert redefinitions, implying that status-based characteristics enter into interpersonal negotiations regarding the meaning and importance of role-based experiences. In sum, the natural link between the concept of role-making and current conceptualizations of coping responses affirms that the stress process is fluid, flexible, and interactionally-based. It also suggests an alternative way to view coping processes that may yield new information about stress responses and about constraints on role-making processes.

Callero (1994) recently extended the concept of role-making by introducing the notion of "role-using" which begins from the premise that roles are not just bundles of rights and obligations but are also cultural objects that serve as resources in interaction. In addition to their situationally-based realities, roles also have independent symbolic and cognitive realities, named variously "typifications" (Hewitt, 1991; Schutz, 1970) or "gestalts" (Turner, 1978), that transcend specific pragmatic applications. These symbolic realities involve generalized images of what it means to hold specific role positions that can be used by individuals as identity claims (as when a woman asserts her identity as a mother) but also to claim resources (e.g. assistance with child rearing) and to understand behaviors or feelings (e.g., men can invoke the role of mother to explain their nurturing behaviors even if they cannot claim the role).

We use the example of work-family conflict to illustrate the utility of integrating contemporary conceptualizations of social roles into stress research. Several studies document that combining work and family roles can be stressful, particularly for women (Menaghan, 1989; Thoits, 1986). Simon's (1995) research usefully builds upon this work by demonstrating that the *meaning* of the combination of work and family roles varies by sex due to different normative expectations regarding men's and women's roles within the family. Integrating the more interactionally based processes of role-making and role-using into this line of research could add further richness to our understanding the meaning of family-related stress. For example, despite a general tendency for women in Simon's study to be more distressed by work-family conflict than men, some women perceived work and family roles as interdependent and, thereby, avoided distress. Drawing on our understanding of role-making, we might analyze how these women were able to construct their role within the family as a provider, as well as a caregiver, and whether and how members of their social networks supported (or rejected) their constructions (see Hochschild, 1989).

Role-using offers additional insight into the process of meaning construction, one that is particularly attentive to macro-level constraints and which is, therefore, consistent with stress researchers' traditional interests in inequality. Analyses of role-using would direct our attention to individuals' abilities to assert role-based identity claims in order to cope with potentially stressful circumstances. To continue our substantive example, we could analyze the ability of men and women in different structural locations to assert their identities as parents or workers in order to manage the stress of conflicting work-family roles. Consider, for instance, the contrast between welfare mothers' inabilities to collectively assert the priority of their roles as mothers over their roles as workers as compared to middle and upper-class women's abilities to collectively negotiate flexibility in work contracts to allow for maternal leave, flexible hours, and even stopped tenure clocks. In sum, identity claims are resources that individuals and collectives can invoke in their efforts to create a less stressful life, but their success is contingent on culturally and structurally-bound processes of negotiation. Analyses of these processes have the potential to reveal additional pathways through which macro-structures influence the stress process.

## A Call to Action

Over the past fifty years, stress research has evolved from a model concerned with physiological processes of alarm, resistance, and exhaustion (Selye, 1956) into a model that can be applied to understanding the fabric of social life and the consequences of social inequalities for individual well-being (Pearlin, 1989). We have seen a shift from studies that equated stress with the experience of major life events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) to studies that recognize the diversity of potentially stressful experiences through the life course and across life domains (see Wheaton,

1999 for a review). The stress process model has been applied to many different substantive topics, including the transition to adulthood (Gore & Aseltine, 2003), labor force conditions (Fenwick & Tausig, 1994), caregiving for persons with Alzheimer's disease and HIV (Aneshensel, Botticello, & Yamamoto-Mitani, 2004; Pearlin, Aneshensel, & LeBlanc, 1997), immigration (Mossakowski, 2003; Noh & Avison, 1996), and teen parenting (Turner, Sorenson, & Turner, 2000), among others, yielding insights into how people maintain equilibrium in the face of potentially disruptive life circumstances.

Given that progress, how do we justify a paradigmatic shift in stress research? Why should we broaden our image of the social in social stress? What is to be gained from redefining the stress process as meaning construction, from incorporating interactionist models of human action, and from giving serious attention to the social dimensions of self?

There are at least four reasons to consider alternative approaches to stress research. First, from a purely political perspective, sociological stress researchers' disinterest in the determinants of meaning cedes too much to the discipline of psychology by implying that the meanings of stressors are purely intrapsychic constructions. We contend, in contrast, that the meanings of stressors are inherently social and, therefore, amenable to sociological analysis. Research concerned with meaning construction has potential implications that go far beyond our understanding of the stress process to inform core social psychological theories pertaining to the construction of meaning, self as a motive, and power, control, and bargaining in interpersonal interactions.

Second, stress research cannot answer the questions it wants to answer without broadening the scope of its inquiries. As articulated in several recent publications (Aneshensel & Phelan, 1999; Pearlin, 1999), stress researchers are concerned with the consequences of social structures for mental health because those consequences illuminate the dysfunctions inherent in social systems. While one can question the utility of that goal (Schwartz, 2002), assuming that it is reasonable, we miss critical evidence for those dysfunctions if we focus exclusively on the beginning and endpoint of the process. Our common mediators and moderators—social support, coping, and intrapsychic resources—are proxies for much more complex social processes that beg attention as instantiations of the macro-micro nexus. In-depth analyses of these processes have the potential to reveal additional effects of structural conditions that are not evident in simple measures of stress exposures and responses.

Even our more pragmatic goals related to stress intervention cannot be achieved unless we acknowledge the socially constructed nature of stress. The weak observed associations between stressors and mental health have stimulated considerable research on the factors that distinguish those individuals who fare well in the face of stressful life experiences from those who do not, with attention given primarily to social support and coping. Yet, despite over "(t)wo decades of concentrated research," studies of coping and support "have yielded relatively little of either clinical or theoretical value (Somerfield & McCrae,

2000, p. 620)". A recent series of commentaries in the *American Psychologist* locates the problem in an overemphasis on between-person, cross-sectional designs to the neglect of within-person, process-oriented studies, in the failure to acknowledge unconscious processes in stress responses, and in our lack of attention to the needs and goals of individuals (Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000; Cramer, 2000; Coyne & Racioppo, 2000). Each of these critiques orients us towards a deeper analysis of the role of meaning in stress responses, a reorientation that is consistent with the documented successes of cognitively-based stress interventions (e.g., Wolchik et al., 2002, although see Coyne & Racioppo, 2000 for cautions). Sociologists' unique contribution to this endeavor is the recognition that meanings are social products rather than intrapsychic constructions. They cannot arise or be maintained without support from others.

Finally, the future of stress research within sociology depends on asserting its relevance to the questions that dominate current sociological and social psychological theory. These questions challenge the dominant model of stress by invoking a less deterministic image of social structure, by placing social interaction at the center of efforts to understand macro-structural effects, and by taking the self seriously. Whereas we could imagine other interpretations of these challenges, we focus here on their relevance as potential points of expansion for stress research, reaching out into new directions that elaborate the social underpinnings of the stress process. Stress research has contributed importantly to illustrating the dysfunctions inherent in social systems but its analyses are incomplete. Social systems shape not only who is exposed to stress and the resources to which they have access, but also whose situational definitions dominate, how stressors are perceived, and how those perceptions affect emotions. More generally, we cannot adequately describe the nature of our society, now and into the future, without attending to the nature and content of interpersonal interactions and their implications for individual psychological processes (Pescosolido & Rubin, 2000). By orienting itself to this more general disciplinary concern, stress research has the potential to become central, rather than peripheral, to our sociological mission.

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