Overview: Special Issue on the Helping Process

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This issue presents eight studies of the process by which people utilize the helping resources within their environments to accomplish successful adaptation. We were interested in identifying these resources, both formal agencies specifically structured to provide assistance and the informal social networks that may play a crucial role in adaptation. The studies were designed to analyze the major events and changes in the lives of adults that require coping effort. Inquiry into the area of help-seeking involved the identification of relevant institutions in society, both formal and informal, that are contacted by persons seeking assistance in coping with stressful life situations. The research also involved the isolation of social factors that are associated with effective resource utilization such as the person's place and role in society. Other major considerations involved the differences between people who are able to effectively use society's resources for coping and those who are not, and the characteristics of resource systems that enable them to provide effective services for various groups in our society.

These eight studies represent the efforts of two interdependent research groups who coordinated their work around one large probability sample of adults ages 18 to 70 from the Chicago metropolitan area. One group, led by Morton A. Lieberman, including Benson Bradford Brown, Nancy Gourash, Grace Lieberman, Elizabeth Menaghan, and Joseph Mullan, directed its major analytic attention to information contained in the survey. Their intellectual

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heritage emphasized developmental or life-span issues drawing heavily from a stress-coping framework. The other group, led by John C. Glidewell, composed of Eliot Asser, Jim Laffey, Sherry Schreiber, and Catherine Strong emphasized psychosocial perspectives and explored the helping process through a social interaction model. Their interest was to link survey research and analytic statistics to qualitative analyses.

In concert, these two groups addressed the help-seeking and help-obtaining of a normal population of Chicago adults using a variety of methods based on large scale survey. They also conducted intensive repeated interviews with a select subsample both of respondents who were helped and of help providers.

THE SAMPLE

This project has been underway since 1972. In that year, under the direction of Leonard Pearlin, scheduled interviews were conducted with 2,300 people representative of the adult population of the census-defined urbanized area of Chicago. A cluster technique was used to draw the sample, each cluster consisting of four households per block. Interviews were conducted on 575 blocks. Based on the 1970 census, in a total number of blocks required, 3,716 was the skip factor for the selection of households. The sex of the person to be interviewed in each household was predesignated in order to have as equal a number of males and females as possible, and only those persons between the ages of 18 and 65 were included.

In the 1972 (Time 1) interviews, respondents were asked if they would be willing to be reinterviewed in the future; 88% agreed. The demographic and personal characteristics of the 88% who agreed did not statistically differ from the 12% who did not agree.

In 1976–77 (Time 2), under the direction of Lieberman, Glidewell, and Pearlin, the sample was reinterviewed. All the respondents who could be relocated and who had consented to a second contact, were interviewed. Except for their lower socioeconomic status, the 19% who refused to participate a second time were not significantly different from the remaining 1,106 respondents. However, compared to the 1,193 members of the original sample who were not reinterviewed (because they had died, refused, or could not be located), the Time 2 sample was disproportionately female, white, married, and from higher educational and income brackets; they also reported higher happiness, lower economic and marital strain, and fewer psychological symptoms. In short, the follow-up sample was biased towards the more stable, satisfied, and moderately stressed portion of the original sample. Specifically, the Time 2 group contained 5% fewer nonwhites, 4% fewer nonmarrieds, 6% fewer respondents with an educational level below high school, and 3% fewer unskilled workers. There was also some difference in the economic make-up of the Time 2 sample. In 1972, 29%

of the Time 1 group had annual family incomes of $8,000 or less; but only 21% of the Time 2 respondents were drawn from that category, resulting in a corresponding increase in the higher income brackets. Finally, there was a slight reduction in the number of respondents in the youngest age group; whereas 15% of the original sample should presently be in their 20s, only 11% of the Time 2 sample were actually in that age range.

The qualitative data were based on 42 intensive interviews that probed the history of a problem and an associated helping interaction identified by the respondent. These included detailed histories of the course of events, expectations, and outcomes. In selecting the sample, an equal number of middle, working, and lower class subjects across race (white and black), age (broken into four age groupings: 20–34, 35–44, 45–54, and over 55), and sex were sought. The interviews of the 1,106 respondents surveyed in 1976 were screened with three criteria in mind: first, the presence of some problem or situation which had led to help-seeking behavior; second, the presence of a minimum degree of articulateness; and last, willingness to be interviewed still further. Twenty-seven of the 48 cells were filled in this manner; 15 respondents were solicited through other channels; and 6 cells were unfilled.

The survey interview schedules for both 1972 and 1976–77 studies share three major foci. The interviews were designed to assess a wide range of problems and hardships people experience as workers and breadwinners, husbands and wives, and as parents. A second focus involved the identification of resources and reactions they used in coping with life-strains; and finally, the third emphasis was on enumeration of symptoms indicative of emotional stress and psychological disturbance. The 1976–77 follow-up was enlarged to include both the life-cycle transitions through which people had passed and the crises they had confronted in the 4 years following the first interview as well as the processes of help-obtaining they had employed in their efforts to cope with these events.

THE INTERVIEW AND MAJOR ANALYTIC CONCEPTS USED IN THE SURVEY

The survey interview was conducted in the respondent's home and took approximately 2 hours to complete. It was structured along four major role areas of adult life: work, economics, parenthood, and marriage. For those falling outside the traditional role definitions, alternative interviews were conducted around retirement, being a homemaker, unemployment, and single status. Within each of the role areas, information was gathered on three types of events. The first category, nonnormative events, the relatively unexpected and occasionally eruptive crises of life, included nine events: separation; divorce; unemployment; demotion; decline in living standard; the death of someone

close; spouse's health problems; one's own health problems; and the health problems of one's own children. The second type involved eight normative events, those bound to life-cycle changes and attendant role transitions: entrance into the work world; birth of a child; children starting school; children's entrance into adolescence; their departure from home, and/or marriage; widowhood; and the aging of one's parents. The last group of events included the more persistant problems embedded within roles or role strains. The first two categories comprise sets of discrete events, while the last is a measure of the day-to-day behavior of individuals within the major role areas. The latter measure involved a series of scales based on factor-analytic procedures derived by assessment within each role area. In all, there were 11 dimensions of strain. Four were found in the occupational area: job pressure or overloads, inadequate rewards, depersonalized work relations, and noxious work environment; and three were located in the marital area: nonfulfillment of expectations, lack of reciprocity, and nonacceptance by spouse. The parent strain scores were based on different sets of items according to the ages of their children – under 5, 6–15, and adult children – and included three dimensions of strain: unacceptable general comportment; failure to act towards goals; and inattentive, inconsideration of parents by chilqren. The measure also included the dimension of economic strain.

For each episode in the three categories of events, transitions, crises, and role strains, a series of questions was asked of each respondent to ascertain the following information: (a) degree of perceived stress; (b) current preoccupation with the event; (c) perception and extent of personal change resulting from experiencing that event, and (d) the occurrence of an event within a particular life-stage in comparison with other people's experience of the timing of that event in their lives. Finally, an additional measure of perceived distress was developed based on a series of adjectives, using a 4-point Likert scale.

When an event occurred (between the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews) and troubled the person, a series of questions about help-seeking behavior was asked: Did you seek assistance or talk to anyone about the episode? What specific persons did you approach? (The respondents were asked to indicate both the members of their social network as well as the professional helpers that they contacted.) What transpired in the helping situation? (Responses included: listened to me; asked questions; told me who else to see; showed me new ways to look at things; took me to see someone who could take action; took some action about the matter; suggested what action to take.) Finally, how satisfied did you feel with the help you received? If the respondent was troubled by an event but did not seek help, he or she was asked the reasons for not seeking assistance. Responses included: I could handle it myself; no one would be able to help; no one would be interested in helping; I didn't know anyone to talk to; the problem was too personal; and it took too much effort to look for advice or assistance.

The survey also included three measures of personal resources: coping strategies, mastery, and level of self-esteem. Adequacy of coping strategies was

assessed by asking respondents a series of role-specific coping items. In the occupational area, the respondent was asked about different things that people do to help themselves get along on their jobs, such as: "try to pay attention only to your duties in order to overlook difficulties in the work situation"; "tell yourself that difficulties in your work are not important in your life"; "take some action to get rid of the difficulties in your work situation"; and so forth. In the parenthood area, a related set of questions was asked. Typical responses were: "just try to ignore what is going on"; "try to notice only the good things"; "take away privileges"; and so forth. Responses about coping strategies in the marital area included: "try to ignore difficulties by looking only at good things"; "yell or shout to let off steam"; "wait for time to remedy the difficulty"; and so forth. The series of items in each role area was subjected to separate factor analyses and a set of dimensions representing coping strategies were developed. In all, there were 18 coping scales: four in the occupational area (substitution of rewards, positive comparisons, action, selective ignoring) and four in the economic area (devaluation of money, selective ignoring, positive comparisons, and optimistic faith). The six marital coping scales were self-reliance, emotional discharge, positive comparisons, negotiations, passive forebearance, and selective ignoring; and measures of coping strategies in the parental area involved the five scales of selective ignoring, discipline, advice-seeking, positive comparisons, and helpless resignation.

Mastery was measured by a Likert scale of seven items such as: "I have little control over the things that happen to me," and "I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do."

A scale of ten items was used to assess level of self-esteem. This scale, developed by Rosenberg (1966), measures the positiveness of respondents' attitudes towards themselves. Items on the scale include: "I certainly feel useless at times"; and "I feel that I am a person of worth."

The eight studies reported in this special issue center on the reaction to and use of resources external to the person in coping with some crises, transitions, or alterations in the way life is experienced in the major adult roles. Central for all these studies is an explication of such life circumstances. What are the major events and changes in the lives of adults that require adaptation? What are the mechanisms through which events come to result in emotional distress? How are life-strains distributed in a population?

THE RELATIVE IMPACT OF DIFFERENT LIFE–STRAINS

The most potent of the occupational events tend to entail nonnormative loss: being fired or laid off; exiting from work because of health; and being demoted. It is the combination of unexpectedness and loss that is most productive of emotional distress. Of all the role areas, events within the occupational area produce the most emotional distress.

In the marital area, loss of a spouse, either through divorce, separation, or death, is, as could be expected, quite distressful. It is perhaps less expected that key problems persisting within intact marriages are even more likely than the disruption of marriage to produce distress. The transition into marriage does not show any upsurge in anxiety or depression.

Some of the events commonly viewed as representing trials and vicissitudes of parenthood turn out not to be distressful. The illness and death of children are indeed distressful events, but the normative transition events of parenting generally have a trivial effect on the symptoms of distress. It is a somewhat different story with the more durable problems of child-rearing: the greater the intensity of the day-to-day problems encountered in this domain, the higher are the levels of anxiety and depression.

SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF LIFE-STRAIN

By and large, the events, transitions, and persistent role problems are not scattered helter-skelter throughout the population, but tend to be more or less prevalent among groups having distinguishing social characteristics. In general, women, the young, and — most clearly in the occupational area — those of low socioeconomic position, are most vulnerable to the severest life-strains. This suggests that the sources of strains may reside in conditions that vary for different groups and collectivities, and furthermore, indicates that once strains are generated, whatever their source, some groups and collectivities are more likely than others to suffer their consequences.

HOW DO EVENTS COME TO MATTER?

A rather accepted view of social life and of adult development is one of people being psychologically bombarded by a parade of changes. According to this view, changes of all kinds impose an inner need for readjustment; whenever and however it occurs, it is likely to produce in people, the signs and symptoms of distress. Evidence was presented (Pearlin & Lieberman, 1978) drawing from this population, that events and transitions affect people by altering the more enduring circumstances of their lives. Emotional disturbance is most likely to surface when events adversely reshape important life circumstances with which people must contend over time. Thus, the event does not solely or directly disturb inner life, but creates disturbance indirectly, through the reordering of more enveloping circumstances. The impact of events is largely channeled through the persistent problems of daily life.

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