CALL FOR ARTICLES

RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences

BIOSOCIAL PATHWAYS OF WELL-BEING ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Edited by

Thomas W. McDade
Northwestern University

and

Kathleen Mullan Harris
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Background and rationale

Social, cultural, economic, and biological factors are widely recognized as critical determinants of well-being across the life course. In the social and behavioral sciences it has long been fashionable to claim that the nature-nurture controversy has been laid to rest, or to point to the fallacy of mind-body dualism. Yet an integrative understanding of the multilevel biosocial pathways linking society, biology, health, and socio-economic attainment remains elusive.

Why should social and behavioral scientists care about biology? While we recognize that most, if not all, of the social and economic outcomes we study have some biological component, social scientists—with a few notable exceptions—have generally not considered biological processes with specificity or depth. This position does not always derive from theoretical or epistemological stances, and is often due to gaps in data or training, gaps that are now closing. When scholars do not consider how biological mechanisms shape developmental outcomes, or interact with social environments to influence social stratification across the life course, models may be incomplete or mis-specified, parameter estimates of environmental effects overstated, and results biased. Getting this right is critical given that social and behavioral research forms a solid foundation upon which scientifically informed social policy should be based.

Humans are biological creatures, embedded in families, social networks, communities, and cultures. Research engagement with biological concepts and measures has the potential to illuminate the mechanisms through which socioeconomic, demographic, and psychosocial factors shape human development within the contexts of everyday life. Understanding biological processes and their interactions with social and behavioral processes can help identify which aspects of social and physical environments are most detrimental to health and socio-economic well-being, as well as point toward resiliency and protective factors that buffer groups of individuals from the adverse effects of these environmental exposures. Moreover, biological processes may influence social and educational attainments, shape individual life course trajectories, and inform selection into various environments. Lastly, the integration of social and

biological approaches to the study of health and socio-economic well-being may be particularly effective in mobilizing the attention of policy makers and informing interventions around important social issues.

For these reasons, scholars, expert committees, and recent funding initiatives have advocated an integrative, multi-method, multilevel interdisciplinary approach to research on human development and social inequality that draws on the biomedical as well as social and behavioral sciences (e.g., Halfon and Hochstein 2002; Harris 2010; Institute of Medicine 2001; National Research Council 2000, 2007; Singer and Ryff 2001; Wolfe, Evans and Seeman 2012; Zerhouni 2003). The recent expansion of methodological options for collecting biological samples in non-clinical settings has facilitated this effort, and innovative biological measures are increasingly being incorporated into social science research designs and data collection efforts. A new generation of biosocial research is poised to bridge the gap between community- and clinic-based approaches to understanding the dynamic interplay of biology and social stratification across the life course.

Issue objectives and potential topics

The objective of this issue is to showcase research in the social and behavioral sciences that embraces this complexity, and that integrates theory, data, and methods from the social and biomedical sciences to advance our understanding of social and biological processes that contribute to, or derive from, social stratification across the life course. We encourage scholarship that utilizes multilevel, longitudinal data to illuminate these biosocial pathways. Social and economic inequalities are fundamental determinants of mental and physical health outcomes, which, in turn, play important roles in perpetuating social stratification. Thus, to fully achieve a biosocial perspective on how social inequality emerges as a result of both intra- and inter-generational processes, it is necessary to study both how biological mechanisms influence social and economic outcomes, and how social and economic contexts and processes shape biological function and the emergence of health inequalities. The focus of the issue will be on these processes and not specific disease outcomes in order to promote research that can inform policies that reduce social and health inequalities more broadly. We have arrived at a unique intellectual moment when research in this area is advancing quickly, and an issue dedicated to *Biosocial Pathways* has the potential to lay the foundation for a generation of innovative scholarship.

We envision assembling an issue with contributions from a combination of junior and senior scholars, with empirical papers related to the following potential themes:

Developmental perspectives on biology, health, and social stratification Development matters. Human biological systems exhibit impressively wide ranges of plasticity and environmental sensitivity, and exposures early in life—in infancy and childhood—have lasting effects on adult functioning. How do aspects of health in infancy and childhood influence psychosocial and socio-economic trajectories across development? Do socially patterned exposures in utero, in infancy, or in childhood contribute to social disparities in adult health and/or educational outcomes? How do early social environmental exposures and biopsychosocial processes interact and change with subsequent exposures, and shape biopsychosocial processes throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to impact adult well-being, broadly defined?

Intergenerational processes The reproduction of social inequalities is a large area of social science research that has been relatively uninformed by biological perspectives or data, yet biological mechanisms are fundamental in reproductive behavior and outcomes, and in intergenerational linkages in health and development. A small body of research exists on how mother's behavior during pregnancy is related to birth outcomes of children, but because of strong path dependence in health trajectories, it is clear that pre-conception health may be more important for gestation, birth, infant, and early childhood outcomes. We welcome contributions that exploit longitudinal and intergenerational multilevel data to investigate the social, behavioral, and biological processes and contexts that underlie intergenerational linkages in socio-economic status, social mobility, and well-being.

Social stratification, biology, and health in the context of culture Culture represents shared systems of meaning that motivate action, facilitate interpretation of behavior, and structure exposure to opportunities and constraints in the local environment. Advances in theory and methods have moved well beyond the "culture of poverty" frame, and allow the investigation of cultural factors in relation to biology and health, at the level of the individual as well as the group. How do locally defined markers of social status, or sources of psychosocial stress, relate to biological processes that create social stratification across the life course? Do culturally specific measures outperform standardized demographic, epidemiological, or psychological measures in defining environmental exposures in biosocial pathways of social stratification? How do conceptualizations of the life course inform reproductive decision making, child rearing, or investments in health-promoting behaviors that impact social stratification or developmental trajectories of the next generation? What can neuroscience reveal about the impacts of social and cultural environments on the brain as a product of, and potential contributor to, social stratification pathways?

Social genomics The human genome contains less than 23,000 genes—comparable to the common mouse and less than the tomato. The origins of social stratification—and other complex human phenomena—cannot be found in the genome alone, and social science research has the potential to elaborate how genes interact with social environments over the life course. How does inherited genetic variation inform selection into environments and social relationships, or interact with experience to influence social, economic, or health outcomes? How do social contexts amplify, or attenuate, the impact of genetic variation on social and behavioral outcomes? What can studies of gene expression and epigenetics tell us about the mechanisms of developmental plasticity and the regulatory pathways through which social environments have durable biological effects?

References

Halfon, N. and M. Hochstein. 2002. Life course health development: An integrated framework for developing health, policy, and research. *The Milbank Quarterly* 80(3):433-479.

Harris Kathleen Mullan. 2010. An integrative approach to health. *Demography* 47(1):1-22.

Institute of Medicine. 2001. *Health and Behavior: The Interplay of Biological, Behavioral, and Societal Influences*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

National Research Council. 2000. *Cells and Surveys: Should Biological Measures Be Included in Social Science Research?* Committee on Population, C. E. Finch, J. W. Vaupel, and K. Kinsella (Eds.), Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

National Research Council. 2007. *Biosocial Surveys*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Singer, B. H. and C. D. Ryff (Eds.). 2001. *New Horizons in Health: An Integrative Approach*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press

Wolfe, Barbara, William Evans, and Teresa E. Seeman, eds. 2012. *The Biological Consequences of Socioeconomic Inequalities*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Zerhouni, E. 2003. *The NIH Roadmap*. Science 302:63, 64, 72.

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) **no later than 5 PM EST on September 15, 2015 to:**

https://rsfjournal.onlineapplicationportal.com

All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to https://rsfjournal.onlineapplicationportal.com will be considered. Each paper will receive a $1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. Thomas McDade (professor and director of the Laboratory for Human Biology Research, Northwestern University) and Kathleen Mullan Harris (James Haar Distinguished Professor of Sociology and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) will edit the journal issue. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journals@rsage.org and not to the email addresses of the editors of the special issue.

A conference will take place at RSF in New York City on March 4, 2016. The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due on February 5, 2016, a month prior to the conference) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts. The papers will then be sent out to two additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers. The full and final issue will be published in early 2017. Papers will be published open access on the RSF website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.