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Networked Lives: Probing the Influence of Social Networks on the Life Course

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Abstract

Social network research is well-equipped to help life course scholars produce a deeper and more nuanced approach to the principle of “linked lives,” one of the cornerstones of the field. In this issue on *Networked Lives*, the contributions of nineteen authors present new theories, empirical findings and methodological applications at the intersection of the fields of social networks and life course research. In this article, we reflect on these advances, highlighting key findings and challenges that await scholars in building more robust synergy between the two fields. Social networks emerge as key structural forces in life courses, yet there is much to learn about the mechanisms through which their effects on people’s lives come about. There is a need to study further how networks evolve through the rhythm of life events, and to analyze broader and more complex networks that capture the roles and influences of relations beyond intimate or family ties. These papers also suggest that there is much to be gained in probing not only how we are linked to others, but also how we “unlink” from others through choice or circumstance, as well as carrying conceptual and methodological advances in social networks research over to life course research (and vice versa).

Keywords

social networks; life course; linked lives; life transitions; social relationships; social capital

In recent decades, both the interest in understanding the influence of social networks and the tools for analyzing them have grown across an array of disciplines. “Linked lives” (e.g., Elder, 1994, 1998; Settersten, 2015) is often recited as a key principle of life course research, but there is much to learn about those linkages to gain a more systematic understanding of the causes, content, and consequences of relationships over the life course. Even more, “linked lives” is largely used to refer to dyadic or more intimate relationships, and it is imperative to advance views of human lives as embedded in much broader and more complex networks, which are themselves embedded in a rapidly changing social world.

This issue of *Advances in Life Course Research* seeks to better join the fields of social networks and life course through novel theories, empirical contributions and methodological applications. Social network research is well-equipped to help make visible the centrality of social relationships as a key context of the life course. Scholars in this field work with a wide range of concepts describing the structural features of networks, such as transitivity, closure, or brokerage that can affect resources, actions and decision-making of individuals and groups. Moreover, network research offers nuanced concepts and methods for improving our understanding of how ties are formed, maintained, and lost over time (e.g., homophily, dormancy, or foci of activity). All of this seems to provide a body of knowledge that can greatly enhance the understanding of the influence that social relationships have on the individual life course.

As we planned this issue, we were struck by how little of the literature addresses intersections between life course and social network research. Certainly, there are many studies that have dealt with the meaning of “linked lives,” particularly looking at the role played by specific types of relationships, such as relatives (e.g., Roy & Settersten, 2022; Widmer, 2010), partners and marital relations (e.g., Umberson et al., 2005), intergenerational

relationships (Cornwell & Shafer, 2016) or friends (e.g., Blieszner & Adams, 1992; Faris & Felmlee, 2018). However, there are few examples where social relations are considered as research objects *per se* and where they are analyzed within larger and more complex structures. This recalls studies such as those of Kahn and Antonucci's (1980) social convoy model, Laura Carstensen's social-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999), Fingerman and Lang's (2004) cube model, as well as Bidart, Degenne and Grossetti's (2020) studies. However, to our knowledge, the recent handbook edited by Alwin, Felmlee, and Kreager (2018) is the first and only publication to explicitly connect life course research and social network concepts and methods.

We follow their lead. We invited leading scholars from both fields to submit conceptual and empirical papers to bridge scholarship on life course with scholarship on social networks. We asked them, for example, to take a long view of human development and adopt a dynamic approach, including leveraging longitudinal data where possible, to probe how lives are linked and how these links matter over time. Although the two fields are quite distinct, there are many important points of complementarity, intersection, and synergy with the potential to advance both fields for their mutual benefit and collaboration.

Whereas life-course studies generally focus on individual actors and the individual life trajectories, network analysis generally focuses on the relationships between multiple actors and the properties of these relationships (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) – though also network analysts, especially those rooted in the egocentric tradition, pay special attention to individual actors (or “egos”) and how they are affected by their personal networks (e.g., Small et al., 2021). Life-course research has a diachronic orientation, focusing on the significance of time (e.g., historical time, individual time, the timing of events and transitions). In contrast, a dynamic perspective is relatively new to social network analysis, due in part to the methodological and technological challenges related to complex network structures.

What especially unites the two perspectives is their common interest in the structural conditioning of individuals, their personal choices, and their capacity for action – and thus their human agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Landes & Settersten, 2019). Both network and life course research care about reciprocal influences between actors. So far, life course scholars have most often turned their attention to intimate or emotionally close relationships, such as family and close friends (Carr, 2018). Yet, as a social networks perspective reminds us, a broader and more complex range of relationships that must be taken into account. For example, acquaintances, colleagues, and organizations influence actors and provide diverse opportunities and constraints for phases of the life course (Bernardi et al., 2019; Small, 2009; Vacchiano & Spini, 2021).

The Life Course Through the Lens of Social Network Concepts

Because this is an issue of a life course journal, we pause here to describe a few key social networks concepts that appear in multiple papers and can serve as opportunities to enrich exchange and collaboration with life course research. Following Mitchell's (1969, p. 2) classic definition, networks are described as a "specific set of linkages between a defined set of social actors". These linkages and social actors can refer to social entities of any kind. For example, actors can be individuals, but also households, families, organizations or institutions. Linkages can refer to the content of relationships, such as the flow of information, material resources, and emotional or instrumental support. Even though linkages among actors are defined by their content, the network concept refers first and foremost to the structure of those relations. Scholars are often interested in the size of such networks, their density, and the processes that define why ties exist, with what logic and frequency (e.g., reciprocity or transitivity). Therefore, analyses of these structures are often combined with concepts describing the content of relations (cf. Marsden 1990, 2011, 2018) – for instance,

social support or social capital, which are commonly used (Lin, 2001). The great potential of network research is that, using two simple concepts, such as nodes and linkages, an unlimited number of social phenomena can be represented – not only personal networks, but also networks as large as organizational networks (e.g., Vacchiano, Lazega & Spini, 2022).

Another important distinction in network research is between “egocentric” and “sociocentric” (sometimes also called “whole”) networks. Sociocentric networks consist of all linkages among actors within a certain boundary, for instance a community or a class. In contrast, egocentric networks have a focal actor (“ego”), which makes them particularly relevant for life course research. Egocentric networks can be further distinguished between the “first order star,” which consists of all linkages from “ego” to their “alters” and the “first order zone” which additionally encompasses all linkages among alters (Barnes, 1969). Data on alter-alter ties must also be collected if one is to acquire information on structural network features like density or clustering (e.g., Marsden & Hollstein, 2023). These features are important for the speed of information transfer within a network, as well as for social control (Coleman, 1988). With data on the “second order zone” (Barnes, 1969) one also acquires data on the bridging ties that connect “structural holes” between different networks, which can be an important source of new information, for instance when looking for a job or transitioning into new social settings (Burt, 1995; Granovetter, 1973; Settersten, Hollstein & McElvaine, 2023).

As a concept truly positioned between egocentric and sociocentric approaches, Koehly and Manalel (2023) propose a model of “interconnected convoys”. As an extension of the social convoy model (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), “interconnected convoys” provide information on the structure of linked personal networks, which is important in understanding the processes underlying social support systems (e.g., in the care of an elderly person). Vacchiano, Lazega, and Spini (2022) propose another operationalization of “linked lives” that

transcends the egocentric approach. They show how the analysis of networks involving both individuals and organizations, known as multilevel networks, aids in identifying “potential” contacts – individuals with whom to establish future connections – that can foster career development. These examples convey how social network research can enrich life course studies by offering specific avenues for addressing the complexities of “linked lives.”

Additional concepts developed in social network research provide explanations for how relationships are formed, maintained or lost (cf. Rivera et al., 2010); examples include balance theory (Davis, 1967), the concept of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), focus of activities (Feld, 1981) and homophily (McPherson et al., 2001). As several contributions in this issue show, these concepts can fruitfully be combined with life course concepts, such as timing, transitions and turning points. For instance, Settersten, Hollstein, and McElvaine (2023) develop the concept of “unlinked lives” and a set of propositions that reveal how experiencing unlinking from others (as a process) and being unlinked from others (as a status) matters for the life course and social networks. Hollstein (2023) proposes a “relationship-related structural approach” that yields a fine-grained understanding of how life events can directly and indirectly impact the formation, maintenance and dissolution of social ties and networks.

In sum, attention to conceptual and methodological developments in the social network approach will enable life course researchers to better translate the treatment of “linked lives” in more meaningful ways. Of course, the inverse is also true: life course concepts and methods also offer social network scholars the opportunity to translate and extend their more structural approaches in ways that are more sensitive to time, change, and social process.

Overview of the Articles

The issue consists of nine original articles written by 18 authors from institutions based in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Switzerland, and the United

States. Two commentaries, provided by Buchmann and Marsden, use the papers as a foundation for launching reflections on how to nurture the intersection between life course and social network research.

The issue begins with four papers that advance theories and concepts. In “‘Unlinked lives’: Elaboration of a concept and its significance for the life course” Settersten, Hollstein, and McElvaine (2023) show that there are many lessons to be learned about human interdependence by focusing on relationships that are lost or ended by choice or circumstance. They examine “unlinkings” as processes and being “unlinked” as an outcome – and show how these involve social relationships directly, as well as accompany losses or changes in institutional affiliations, social statuses and positions, and places, all of which may trigger unlinkings in social relationships or be triggered by unlinked relationships. They put forward nine key propositions related to when and how unlinkings happen as well as some of their consequences. The coupling of “unlinked lives” with “linked lives” offers a crucial avenue for advancing life course theories and research and for bridging scholarship on the life course and social networks.

In “Personal network dynamics across the life course: A relationship-related structural approach,” Hollstein (2023) builds on Simmel’s writings to propose a novel perspective – the “deep structure” of social ties – that specifically accounts for the opportunities and constraints resulting from the fact that relationships are solidified through patterns of interaction which, once established, can develop a power of their own (inertia, momentum) that cannot be easily influenced by the actors involved. The concept offers a means for a more detailed understanding of how life events may directly and indirectly affect the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of social relationships and networks. Furthermore, the concept allows a more thorough examination of the interplay of structural constraints and individual action orientations.

Koehly and Manalel's (2023) "Interconnected social convoys: Understanding health and well-being through linked personal networks" extends the convoy model of social relations (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). It considers the composition, structure, and function of linked personal networks encompassing both family and non-family members and the influence of these networks on the health of the set of focal actors. They illustrate this extension within the context of family by using the example of informal caregiving.

In "Multilevel networks and status attainment" Vacchiano, Lazega, and Spini (2022) address the role of organizations and hierarchy in explaining the relationship between social capital and career inequalities. They reinterpret Lin's (1999, 2001) theories through a series of studies conducted on the career development of 126 French researchers in the early 2000s. Using concepts from multilevel networks research they shift the focus to networks that are broader and more complex than personal ones, that is, to networks between the individuals and organizations in which these researchers were immersed throughout their careers. Their multilevel theoretical model extends classic concerns of the status attainment literature by treating membership in organizations as a source of inequality and social positioning.

Next come five empirically-based articles, starting with the question of how personal life events or transitions bring changes in networks. Lin and Marin's (2022) "When life happens: A multidimensional approach to studying major life events and relationship change" reveals that life events do not affect different types of relationships in the same ways. Changes of residence, illness, or job changes, for example, all affect the ability of people to stay in touch. However, in the absence of social interaction, it is our most meaningful, dutiful (notably familial), and affective ties that remain active over time. Decreased opportunities for contact are thus a driver of network changes, especially the loss of weak ties, which need to be nurtured through interaction and exchange to remain active.

In “Linked lives and convoys of social relations,” Webster, Antonucci, and Ajrouch (2022) use data from a 23-year longitudinal study to test the multidimensional weight of relationships on life courses. Do social relationships early in life have consequences for long-term health? How is the quality of our most important relationships influenced by the social position of individuals? And how are network structures affected by transitions, such as that from work to retirement? The results show that larger and stronger networks are linked to better mental health over time. Ethnic differences and higher educational levels improve the quality of relationships with spouses and children. The transition to retirement, finally, seems to have a disruptive impact on networks, reducing their size.

Weiss, Lawton, and Fischer’s (2022) “Life course transitions and changes in network ties between young and older adults” explicitly examines network turnover with a focus on differences that might exist at distinct life stages: early adulthood and later life. Through an analysis of three waves of ego-network data from the UC Social Network Study (UCNets), they show that it is the typical events of entry into adult life, such as marriage and the birth of a child, that create instability of networks, whereas older adults facing experiences such as the transition to retirement have more sustainable networks that are less prone to turbulence.

Volker’s (2022) “Birds of a feather – forever? Homogeneity in adult friendship networks across the life course” also considers turnover in networks, but with a focus on the development of and changes in friendships over a period of 19 years. In a representative Dutch sample, she finds that friendships remain similar in age as people grow older but become increasingly homogeneous in terms of gender and education. She also finds that there is strength in friendship networks at times when there is great change and reconfiguration in family ties, which are increasingly subject to the turbulence of transitions such as divorce.

Finally, in “Internet use and cohort change in social connectedness among older adults” Ang (2022) turns attention outward to the ways in which the digital world affects

relationships. Examining internet use in a sample of older adults in two different generations – the “Silent Generation” and the “Baby Boomers” – he shows that increased internet use is a factor associated with greater frequency of contact with meaningful ties, such as family and friends. Ang suggests that the digital world has not undermined communities but has simply fostered a new “networked individualism” that has altered the way people spend time with others.

As Buchmann’s (2023) and Marsden’s (2023) commentaries suggest, the concepts and evidence advanced by these nine articles reveal the potential for a new field of study, one strengthened by the development of its own theories and methods, as well as its ability to advance longitudinal data collection through retrospective and prospective designs (see also Hollstein, 2023). Such a field will better capture the complexity of social relations and reveal new hypotheses and mechanisms (Settersten, 2018), not only related to the positive effects of social relations on the life course (e.g., Volker, 2020) but also how they create conflict and stress and prompt or respond to turning points and transitions (Portes, 2014). New themes, theoretical foundations and empirical evidence can also help us understand the aspects or properties of social relationships that are universal or unique across cultural and national contexts.

Expanding the Research Agenda

These nine articles and two commentaries thus open up ideas for advancing theories and research on the life course, social networks, and their intersections. There is much to be gained in combining the synchronic (a snapshot in time) and diachronic (over time) approaches of these two perspectives. Greater integration would allow researchers a more complete understanding of how social networks evolve in response to life transitions and, conversely, how life transitions are influenced by social relationships. Network research has

made significant progress in understanding how the structural properties of networks evolve, especially in sociocentric network research (Snijders, 2005). Network scholars might shift their attention towards issues that are central to life-course studies, such as timing, transitions, and turning points. Further analyzing how networks evolve through the rhythm of life events (e.g., Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Marin & Hampton, 2019) will also help further reveal interactions between agency and structural constraints on the life course, as suggested in Buchmann's (2023) commentary.

Likewise, life course scholars should expand their interest beyond the study of egocentric networks. Social network research offers techniques for collecting data of different types and representing and analyzing relational structures of all kinds (Koehly & Manalel, 2023; Vacchiano, Lazega & Spini, 2022). The studies presented in this issue suggest that it is not only important to investigate the influence of “those one knows.” Individuals access resources through much broader relational structures, and extending the gaze beyond personal networks will yield a more comprehensive overview of the many levels of analysis that characterize life courses (Bernardi, Huinink & Settersten, 2019). Indeed, the life course paradigm has long focused on a dichotomous view of individual (micro) and collective, structural (macro) forces, and it has too often overlooked the many spaces in between, such as intergroup or interorganizational relations. These kinds of relations may constitute a “meso” level of analysis that can be better integrated and analyzed through the grammar of social networks. This could also foster a more comprehensive investigation of how structural forces govern life trajectories (Heckhausen & Buchmann, 2019; Spini & Vacchiano, 2023).

Further insights from this issue come from Ang's (2022) research on the impact of the digital world on social relations. Computers and smartphones foster connectedness beyond constraints of time and space, but they are also dangerously linked to a lack of face-to-face interactions and loneliness (Kim, 2017). It seems crucial to thoroughly probe (and

problematize) the meaning of “linked lives” in the digital space to understand questions such as: How is social support exchanged in the digital space? How do “Information and communication technologies” affect the convoy of relations in which people are embedded? How are relationships kept alive, and risked, when they extend beyond geographical boundaries? Together, researchers on networks and the life course can shed light on the many mechanisms through which the digital world is transforming the life course today.

In this issue, as in much of the literature, too little attention is paid to the negative aspects of social relations (Portes, 1998, 2014). In many moments of transition – parenting, career changes, geographical relocation, divorce and separation, illness – social relationships provide emotional and instrumental support and fulfill a wide range of expectations and obligations. But there is much to learn about the “dark side” of social relationships, and how conflict, difficult ties, and limited or absent support affect individuals’ life courses (Lubbers et al., 2020; Offer & Fischer, 2019; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017).

Methodologically, to achieve greater synergies between the fields of social network and life course research will require strengthening longitudinal research. In this issue, Ang (2022), Volker (2022) and Weiss, Lawton, and Fischer (2022) provide good examples of how this can be done using panel data. They help identify patterns, changes, and connections that would likely have been missed in cross-sectional studies. This is even more the case for mixed methods studies that allow us to account for individual action orientations and meaning-making (e.g., Bidart et al., 2020; Hollstein, 2024; Hollstein & Wagemann, 2014). However, there is also a need to improve retrospective data collection. Prospective longitudinal research is essential, but it is also time-consuming and resource-intensive. In most countries, research using panel data remains prohibitively expensive and advances in retrospective data collection may provide many researchers with better access to data combining social networks and life courses. In this issue, Lin and Marin (2022) offer a good example of how using wedding

albums can help overcome the memory biases that are typical in eliciting contacts retrospectively (McCarty et al., 2019; Hollstein, 2019; Verd, 2023).

Conclusion

Social networks play a central role in shaping the trajectories of individuals' lives, but gaining a comprehensive understanding of their influence, and of the mechanisms that underlie them, presents a multifaceted challenge. This issue has emphasized the possibility and imperative to deepen the study of the interdependencies between social networks and life events, transitions and trajectories, and to explore their mutual influence over time. Contacts have a life of their own, but they are formed, maintained, and lost in conjunction with the choices, circumstances, and constraints that unfold in one's life. Collectively, these articles point to the urgency of addressing these processes more clearly, both those related to linked lives – including extended family and non-family ties – as well as the processes and outcomes associated with the unlinking of lives across the life course.

When we envisioned this issue, we were convinced that the time had come to claim a new research field – which we labeled “networked lives” – situated at the intersection of the life course and social network paradigms. These papers show that the bridges between these two fields are numerous, important, and fruitful. At the same time, it seems clear that there is distance between the two fields. It took much effort to find colleagues who were truly working at their intersection or who could move easily or nimbly between the two. Establishing a shared, cooperative, integrated and active space will take some time. Nonetheless, we remain hopeful that scholars will see the marriage between the life course and social network perspectives as a perfect complement to understanding how lives are intimately influenced by social relations and networks from birth to death.

Authors' Note

This issue of *Advances in Life Course Research* was designed and edited by the four authors spanning several years of collaboration and multiple time zones. For editorship of the issue, the order is alphabetical, symbolizing our collective effort, collegial style, and roughly equitable division of labor. For this introduction, the team wanted to acknowledge Vacchiano's effort in producing the first draft, to which all authors have made deep and meaningful contributions; for this reason, the other authors follow alphabetically. Hollstein, Spini and Vacchiano also wish to express their gratitude to Settersten for handling communications with the journal editors and dealing with many of the formal and administrative procedures related to this project.

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