TAKING A LIFECOURSE PERSPECTIVE IN ABORIGINAL POLICY RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

Lifecourse has become an important framework for academic and government policy research, offering a dynamic and multidimensional perspective on health, labour market experiences, family and marital transitions, as well as social participation and other activities. Its use has been proposed for research into the ongoing disadvantage of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. We explore the benefits of a life course approach to analyzing drivers of persistent Aboriginal inequality, but also identify some important considerations for viewing Aboriginal issues through a life course lens. These include the particular relationships between Aboriginal peoples and state programs, and the cultural content of the life course.

Le cours de la vie est devenu un cadre important pour la recherche universitaire et gouvernementale en matière de politiques, offrant une perspective dynamique et multidimensionnelle sur la santé, les expériences sur le marché du travail, les transitions familiales et conjugales ainsi que la participation sociale, entre autres activités. L'utilisation en a été proposée pour la recherche sur le désavantage continu des Autochtones au Canada. Nous explorons les bénéfices d'une approche du cours de la vie pour analyser les inducteurs de l'inégalité persistante des Autochtones, mais aussi pour déterminer certaines considérations importantes pour voir les difficultés des Autochtones à travers la lentille du cours de la vie, notamment les relations particulières entre les peuples autochtones et les programmes de l'État et le contenu culturel du cours de la vie.

One of the interesting recent developments in policy-related research is the use of the lifecourse as a lens for viewing the interaction of individual lives with various policies. Its adoption by academic, government and other researchers has grown over the past decade and for good reasons. The lifecourse gives us a dynamic view of lives that is intuitively attractive and offers a more accurate reflection of lived experience. Driven partly by the increasing availability of longitudinal data, lifecourse approaches see conditions such as poverty, unemployment, or ill health in their biographical contexts. It emphasizes the interrelationships between various aspects of life, including health, family and community as well as work and education (Kunz 2005). In this paper, we argue such an approach may be very useful for Aboriginal policy research and that the lack of longitudinal data should not be an impediment. However, the unique relationships between Aboriginal peoples and government policies, and the cultural content of the lifecourse, should be carefully considered.

LIFECOURSE AND POLICY RESEARCH

A 2004 discussion paper by the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) articulates a lifecourse approach to policy research, with a focus on the accumulation and depletion of resources over people's lives (PRI 2004). In the PRI's

framework these include time, financial resources, skills and services; and, they are derived from markets, family and community as well as government. Understanding how these resources are acquired, are used by individuals and families and vary across life would help policies provide appropriate types of support at times they are most needed. This focus would also help facilitate *transitions*, such as return to work after a layoff or full-time childcare, and help reduce the risk of persistent poverty or social exclusion as experienced by identifiable groups, including lone mothers, recent immigrants and Aboriginal peoples (Kunz 2005; PRI 2004).

There are other reasons for favouring a lifecourse perspective on inequality. It provides a prism through which to view disadvantage across the age span and the importance of early life experiences for conditions later in life. Moreover, the lifecourse approach provides space for considering multiple dimensions of disadvantage and how they may interact. Ageing is experienced differently by men and women but is also different for immigrant and Canadian-born men and for working- and middle-class women (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; McMullian 1995). The lifecourse also helps us understand how *timing,* as well as experience, matters and how resources are accumulated or depleted over lives. O'Rand's (1996) work on "cumulative advantage and disadvantage" has helped to show how those who have good beginnings, such as early completion of educational programs, can continue to gain advantage over those with more discontinuous trajectories, contributing to ongoing racial and ethnic inequality in the U.S.

The lifecourse can help bridge disciplines and integrate insights from sociology, economics, social epidemiology and gerontology. Access to resources is conditioned by social location and circumstance, the focus of much sociological thinking. However, lives are also shaped by decisions and actions of individuals and groups, a primary concern of microeconomics (Marshall and Mueller 2003). The lifecourse also helps link individual experience to history and social change through the different experiences of birth cohorts (Elder 1994; Riley 1988). To these social aspects of the lifecourse we can add biological effects, such as how conditions in infancy or *in utero*, themselves heavily influenced by social conditions, may result in health disparities later in life (Hertzman 2004). Psycho-social perspectives on health consider the implications of social conditions or psychological trauma at earlier ages for mental or physical health later in life Meyers and Hwang 2004). Although not a theory in itself, the lifecourse provides a way of incorporating these findings from multiple fields into a single framework.

ABORIGINAL INEQUALITY FROM A LIFECOURSE PERSPECTIVE

It is not hard to see why we think the lifecourse approach holds promise for research into the social, economic, and health conditions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. It is well-known that Aboriginal peoples are at higher risk to experiencing negative health, social and economic conditions (Box 1) and that this disparity has been resistant to change (Waldram *et al.* 2006; Cooke *et al.* 2004; Guimond and Cooke 2008). A dynamic, biographical view might help by directing attention to differences in lifecourse patterns, connections between various domains and the possible accumulation of disadvantage with age. Employment trajectories, for example, should be analytically connected to experiences in health and the family with focus on the timing of interrelated lifecourse events. Similarly, although lower average educational attainment is an important issue, Aboriginal peoples also tend to complete education later than other Canadians (Hull 2005), potentially resulting in less time with which to benefit from this education in the labour market. A lifecourse approach might help us identify some of the subtle mechanisms of the reproduction of Aboriginal disadvantage, with a view to policies that provide appropriate supports at critical times.

Despite the promise we hold for this approach, there are some reasons to apply it cautiously. Indeed, the lifecourses of Aboriginal peoples may vary from those of other Canadians, with implications for accumulation of resources. But although these differences can be made visible through comparisons, care must be taken not to set up an idealized "mainstream" Canadian lifecourse as the most desirable. "Early", "late", or "out-of-sequence" timing of transitions can indeed have negative consequences but this is, to a great degree, because of the resources available to support these transitions, not the events themselves. Lone parenthood (Norris *et al.* 2004) may contribute to negative outcomes for Aboriginal women and their children but only when adequate supports are unavailable, either from markets, family and community, or the state. Later educational attainment and return to formal education in adulthood might allow for other life experiences, such as family formation, work experience, or traditional activities, and may simply reflect a different life timetable. "Mainstream" institutions, that are oriented to a normative lifecourse and ill-equipped to deal with other patterns, may fail to adequately support transitions by Aboriginal peoples. High rates of mobility between First Nations and cities (Norris *et al.* 2004), for example, might disadvantage children who are moved between various schools (Hagan

Box 1: Examples of Lifecourse Risks faced by Aboriginal peoples in Childhood, Adulthood, and Older Adulthood.

Lifecourse domain	Childood and young adulthood	Adulthood	Older Adulthood
Work, Education and Income	Higher drop-out rates Lower rates of progression to post-secondary	Lower and later educational attainment Less continuous work, lower average income	Lower retirement incomes
Family/Community	Residential mobility crowding Family disruption Earlier childbearing	Lone parenthood Higher risk of victimization	Increased chance of widowhood Possibility higher risks of victimization
Health	Poor childhood nutrition Poor housing conditions Risk of substance abuse	Higher risks of chronic illness (diabetes, cardiopulminary disease)	Higher rates of disability, diabetes

et al. 1998). However, this might be attributed, at least in part, to expectations of the educational system in terms of continuous attendance and residential stability.

We should also consider how the lifecourses of Aboriginal peoples may be different *because* of policies and programmes. More than their American counterparts, European lifecourse researchers have been interested in how a standard lifecourse is institutionalized (Marshall and Mueller 2003). State programmes have been key to the tripartite working lifecourse, with education in early life and complete retirement after a working career (Kohli 1986).

Aboriginal peoples have historically been subject to different legislative and policy regimes than have other Canadians. This is more the case for Status Indians, who have had a distinct relationship with the federal government through the *Indian Act* and through the differential status

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of the northern territories relative to provinces; however, the *Indian Act* and associated regulations affect non-Status people and others through families and communities. For example, the recently changed Matrimonial Real Property (MRP) rules meant that women living in First Nations were subject to different rules regarding the division of property upon divorce, with implications for the economic well-being of women both on- and off-reserve (Abbott 2004). Until the late 1980s, income earned on-reserve or by working for band organizations was generally not subject to Canada/Quebec Pension Plan (C/QPP) deductions, affecting retirement income (Gyimah *et al.* 2004). The registration rules of the *Indian Act* itself, including the 1985 Bill C-31 changes, shape lives by defining who is, and who is not, eligible to be registered, forming a complex segmentation of populations and communities based on legal status and Band membership (Clatworthy 2001). It is also worth noting that Métis peoples' relationship with governments is also different; more to the point, it is evolving rapidly, with the inclusion of Métis peoples in the 1982 Constitution Act and the subsequent recognition of Métis Aboriginal rights via the 2003 *Powley* decision.

These examples of how policies have shaped – and continue to shape – the lives of Aboriginal peoples are minor when compared to the impacts of residential schooling or community relocation. One of the goals of the PRI's framework was to create a foundation for understanding "how social policies actually work" (PRI 2004) and a lifecourse approach to Aboriginal policy research should recognize the potential role of policy in creating lifecourse differences.

Our last concern with the application of a lifecourse framework is the possibility that ideas of trajectories, transitions and careers in various domains are loaded with cultural content and assumptions. The lifecourse's intuitive appeal is partly because many of us use these ideas to make sense of our own lives, in day-to-day interaction (Holstein and Gubrium 2007), but understandings of the lifecourse and expected progressions are culturally bound (Dannefur 2003). It might be that, for First Nations, Inuit or Métis people or for particular communities or cultures, the idea of a lifecourse as we have defined it above does not represent their own thinking about their lives. Castellano, for example, described the Anishnabeg conception of life paths as having a branching structure, recognizing that trajectories are not always linear (Castellano 2008). There also might be an inherent individualism in the conception of the lifecourse as trajectories (Mayer 1998), which may not reflect Aboriginal perspectives. Given these concerns, it would be necessary to first explore how Aboriginal peoples view the lifecourse framework and to what extent the framework needs to be adapted to specific cultural realities, before proceeding. However, we are confident that these concerns can be addressed and that a culturally appropriate lifecourse framework can be articulated and operationalized.

MOVING FORWARD WITH A LIFECOURSE APPROACH

As a final point, there is one potential argument against the use of a lifecourse framework for studying Aboriginal inequality with which we disagree – the lack of longitudinal data. The popularity of the framework has been greatly influenced by the development of panel studies and techniques for their analysis. Longitudinal surveys from Statistics Canada do not include enough First Nations, Inuit, or Métis people for complex analyses and, in any case, do not generally sample in Aboriginal communities. Nonetheless, data availability should not keep us from using the lifecourse as a guiding framework.

As we have tried to argue elsewhere, there is no reason to limit lifecourse thinking to topics on which we have longitudinal data (Cooke and Gazso, forthcoming), although such data sources should certainly be developed. While not designed with lifecourse in mind, existing national surveys such as the Aboriginal Peoples Surveys (APS) or the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS)[1] collect some retrospective data, such as mobility histories, that can be useful for lifecourse analysis. Moreover, even current states should really be seen as aspects of the lifecourse for which observation is truncated. Seemingly static variables such as educational attainment or marital or family status can be seen as snapshots of otherwise unknown trajectories and still provide some information about those trajectories. The census can also provide valuable lifecourse information, by allowing us to follow cohorts as they move through various ages. Contrary to views of the lifecourse as only individual trajectories, cohorts allow us to see the effects of historical time, including changing policy regimes.



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Lastly, qualitative data can give us insight into not only the life courses of Aboriginal peoples but also into how these are understood. Lifecourse approaches to policy, if they are going to support people in making transitions, need to understand the goals and intentions behind these decisions, as well as the types of resources and supports that are required. This means incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into lifecourse research and investigating cultural differences in the understanding of life paths and how these might relate to policy.

NOTE

[1] Although longitudinal in design, only cross-sectional data are available from the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS), at time of writing.

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