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# Ordinary Lives and the Sociological Character of Stress: How Work, Family, and Status Contribute to Emotional Inequality

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**Abstract**

It has been thirty years since the publication of Leonard Pearlin's (1989) "The Sociological Study of Stress." This classic work left an indelible mark, shaping the way the field thinks about stressors, their emotional consequences, and the factors that influence the nature of the links between stressors and outcomes. In this essay, I dialogue with that paper—not with a comprehensive summary of the field but rather with a sharper focus on a few core themes that have inspired the direction and current parameters of my scholarship. Pearlin's theorizing and empirical work on social roles provides a foundation for the sociological study of stress and mental health. I describe the ways his ideas about role strains have influenced my thinking and development around themes like the Stress of Higher Status model, and I propose new directions for research on topics like distributive justice. Pearlin's ideas hold a special place in the history of social stress research—and the many intellectual puzzles that he proposed remain and provide fertile terrain for advancing knowledge. A greater integration and synthesis of theory and evidence in the sociology of mental health, sociology of emotion, social psychology, stratification and work, occupations, and organizations will help guide such innovations.

**Keywords**

Leonard Pearlin, sociology of mental health, stress of higher status model, stress process, distributive justice, social roles

My introduction to Leonard I. Pearlin ("Len") and many of his wonderful colleagues, collaborators, and friends in the discipline began in the mid-1990s. As a graduate student, I enrolled in a course titled the "Sociology of Stress," taught by one of my mentors—Heather Turner, at the time a new assistant professor at the University of New Hampshire. Heather's course packet (which I still have to this day) was chock full of foundational pieces from leading scholars in the field—Blair Wheaton, Carol Aneshensel, Jay Turner, Peggy Thoits, Bruce Link, Catherine Ross, John Mirowsky, Elizabeth Menaghan, Bill Avison, Sarah Rosenfield, and the list goes on.

Heather's course set me on an exciting journey—for this, and her support over my career, I owe her a great deal of gratitude. I remember cracking open that course packet for the first time and peeling back the cover to see the leading paper: Len's "The Sociological Study of Stress," published in a 1989 issue of the *Journal of Health*

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*and Social Behavior*. I was hooked. Over the years, I have gone back to it many times to discover new ways of thinking about my own ideas, and I have directed my students to it as an introduction to the field. Len's classic work has left an indelible mark. It shaped the way scholars think about stressors, the emotional consequences of those stressors, and the factors that influence the nature of the links between stressors and different kinds of health outcomes. It has been thirty years since the publication of "The Sociological Study of Stress." In this essay, I dialogue with that paper—not with a comprehensive summary of the field but rather with a sharper focus on a few core themes that have inspired the direction and current parameters of my scholarship. And I offer some ideas about future directions for others to reflect on and pursue.

## BACKGROUND

### *Ordinary Lives and the Structure of Everyday Experience*

When I tell people that my research focuses on stress, one of the most common reactions is "You should study me!" Once the awkward laughter subsides, I express my curiosity with a slightly intrusive question: "What is it about you that I should study?" The answers reveal the complexities of what Wheaton (1994, 1996) called "the stress universe."

In his 2001 Pearlin Award lecture, Wheaton (2001) expressed the following: "I wonder whether we stop to think about what is on the computer screen when the findings stare back at us. One thing they stand for is a thousand silent voices speaking together as a coefficient" (p. 229). In this delightfully nerdy and provocative passage, Wheaton underscored the ways that sociologists seek to identify commonalities in the origins of unpleasant emotions, misery, and suffering in society. By listening to those thousand voices, we might come to understand why so many people exclaim: "You should study me!" Their stories typically inform us about the "conditions of threat, challenge, demands, or structural constraints" that undermine health and well-being (Wheaton and Montazer 2010:173). By paying attention to the details of these stories, and by applying the rich theoretical and empirical lens of the sociological study of stress, we might discover the social origins, patterns, and implications of stress exposure and vulnerability.

Our task as sociologists is to map the social conditions behind these processes—and Pearlin (1983) set the coordinates, writing, "It is my intention . . . to bring the study of stress closer to the study of ordinary lives. To understand how stress comes about, we do not always have to reach out to the exotic, rare, or eventful. We need only to take a careful look at the structure of everyday experience in the pursuit of everyday life" (p. 30). Those words have provided inspirational direction to my own research—and the novel insights of many others. In my view, Pearlin's concern with the qualities of social roles and their implications for the stress process is among his fundamental contributions. Scanning across the vastness of the stress universe, we can productively orient our lens toward roles—their qualities, arrangements, tensions, and changes—to understand the complex social origins of stress and the topography of emotional inequality. We can also catalogue the psychosocial resources these roles impart (e.g., personal control, social support, the sense of mattering) to enable people to cope with adversities of all shapes and sizes. In these efforts, we can further advance the theoretical and empirical scope of the sociological study of stress and mental health and make its relevance for the general population more evident. What we discover can help individuals understand the factors that shape their quality of life—and, through that knowledge, learn ways to improve it.

### *Structured Arrangements and Repeated Experiences*

Pearlin (1989) opened "The Sociological Study of Stress" with the following passage: "Sociologists have an intellectual stake in the study of stress. It presents an excellent opportunity 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" (p. 241). In the early decades of stress research, Pearlin was instrumental in shifting scholarly attention from the strong emphasis on the adversities of life events to the more enduring and pernicious effects of chronic stressors; in that turn, Pearlin (1983) emphasized the central ways that social roles embody the "structured and durable social and economic antecedents of

stress" (p. 4). He suggested that chronic stressors are socially patterned and core elements of the primary social roles of everyday life. When sociologists address these issues, our insights might gain more traction and appeal beyond academic audiences—a point that speaks back to that commonly heard refrain: "You should study me!" Usually, the details embedded in that reaction typically evolve from exposure to chronic stressors. However, there is no question that stressful life events are also potent and consequential and are often linked to enduring chronic stressors (Pearlin 1989; Wheaton 1994, 1996). One could imagine the early ("off-time") and unexpected death of a spouse who is the primary breadwinner in the household; this might set in motion a series of other chronic stressors and resource losses that those significant others left behind must now navigate (e.g., diminished household income, loss of health care coverage, new intra- and interrole strains, and so on). Moreover, Pearlin maintained that sociologists should invest the same degree of attention to the ways that stress arises as they typically direct toward the conditions that prevent or buffer stress. I encourage sociologists with an interest in the social patterning of emotional health and well-being to further this mission—the understanding of how social stress arises—and advance it in novel ways. As I describe below, these efforts will also maintain our area's important alliance with a foundational tradition in the wider discipline: social stratification and inequality.

Social roles matter for the core of structured arrangements because of the significance that people place upon them. Roles provide the foundation for our sense of self and identity (Thoits 1983). As Stryker and Burke (2000) observed, "Identity is internal, consisting of internalized meanings and expectations associated with a role" (p. 289). The salience of identity is fundamental to our cognitive schemas—and it shapes the ways that we define our circumstances, especially in the main roles of everyday life (Stryker 1968; Stryker and Serpe 1994). The more salient an identity, the more sensitive we are to the expectations, commitments, conflicts, and outcomes that occur within the roles associated with that particular identity. When we speak of an identity salience hierarchy, roles are often central in that formulation. The qualities and concerns in social roles shape the range of emotions that we feel and the "feeling rules" that determine how we express them (Thoits 1983, 1989). Roles also define—and are defined by—the parameters of our status characteristics and their influences on inequalities within the broader institutional structures of society (Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014). In these ways, roles shape the exposures and vulnerabilities to a range of social stressors—and, ultimately, our life chances.

From an early age, humans are incessantly socialized to care about their roles. When others ask about the state of our lives, the questions often center on role-specific themes: "What do you do for work?" "Are you married or seeing someone?" "How are your kids doing?" And, to the graduate students going on the job market: "How many publications do you have?" As Thoits (1983) contended, "Role requirements give purpose, meaning, direction, and guidance to one's life" (p. 175). Social roles can enhance the sense of mattering (Schieman and Taylor 2001).

People might involve role-based identities in social interactions because those identities carry behavioral and affective expectations that shape the interaction. For example, having a sense of another's occupation or marital status might help us anticipate his or her actions and reactions; these dynamics enable us to engage in more informed behavioral choices. Moreover, the quality of our roles matters—so we devote effort toward improving them, and that usually translates into substantial transfers of time, energy, and attention. This also means that we are confronted with obligations and responsibilities that define particular role arrangements—and while these can provide purpose and meaning, these might also produce role strain (Goode 1960). Pearlin (1983) defined *role strain* as "the hardships, challenges, and conflicts or other problems that people come to experience as they engage over time in normal social roles" (p. 8). Role quality matters, so we invest. In doing so, we are often confronted with challenges and conflicts. When these role strains appear on our radar, being indifferent is usually not an option—unless one is willing to risk losing status or, for that matter, even occupancy in the role itself. And, if that happens, a major source of our identity might be significantly eroded or lost. These processes are all highly relevant for the sociological study of stress and the quest to understand emotional inequality.

## Roles as Excellent Vantage Points

Socialization processes shape what we learn about the form, content, and organization of social

roles. Cultural forces—which are sometimes invisible—contribute to these socialization processes and structure the ways that we understand and navigate role obligations, expectations, and responsibilities. More important, because roles are situated within broader organizations and institutions, societal and economic changes can affect role quality and the scope of our behavior within them—or whether we even occupy the role in the first place.

Pearlin (1989) described social roles as "excellent vantage points from which, if we turn in one direction, we observe aspects of broader social organization and, if we turn in the other, we observe the behavior of individuals" (p. 5). For example, we can look from the structure of work organizations to the responsibilities of individual jobs and workers' responses to those responsibilities. This depiction points to the sociological character of stress. As I see it, one interpretation relates to the fact that these vantage points so centrally involve work and family roles—and their interface. We can look in one direction to observe the responsibilities associated with the work role; then, we can turn in the other direction to witness a different set of demands emanating from the family role. Sometimes these demands coexist peacefully, sometimes not. Pearlin (1989) was well aware of the potential for tension in the work-family interface, referring to interrole conflict as "the incompatible demands of multiple roles, especially demands of work and family," and he observed the challenges for individuals to "satisfy the demands and expectations of one of these roles without forsaking those of the other" (p. 245).

These ideas about the importance of roles for the self and their potential for strain resonate with social-psychological scholarship on identity. Stryker and Burke (2000) noted that individuals must often enact multiple roles across groups—and in this respect, they possess multiple identities. These multiple identities can harmonize, but sometimes there is competition or tension among them—and this has implications for identity-based role commitments and other self-relevant dynamics (Reitzes and Mutran 1995; Stryker and Burke 2000; Thoits 1983, 1986; Wiley 1991). In Wheaton's (1994) "stress universe," this conflict between two roles (and their associated identities) is like two galaxies colliding. The question becomes: What remains after the fireworks? This is where, I believe, sociologists who study stress and mental health can discover some of the most compelling patterns of emotional inequality.

Since 2005, my research team and I have conducted large national surveys of Americans and Canadians that inquire about experiences in social roles. The topic of interrole conflict resonates, with the familiar echo of competing pressures, insufficient time or energy for loved ones, the quest to minimize strain, and, ultimately, the desire to be treated fairly (Glavin and Schieman 2012; Milkie, Nomaguchi, and Schieman 2018; Narisada 2018; Schieman, Milkie, and Glavin 2009; Young and Schieman 2018). In qualitative interviews and focus groups, we have probed even further. In one of those interviews, a 28-year-old mother of three children (aged 3, 7, and 11) provided a powerful image. She told us that navigating the competing demands of her work and family roles felt like she was constantly carrying a dinner plate with a thousand tiny peas on top: "It's like I have to carry this plate from one room to the next without spilling any of these tiny peas—but everything is just rolling all over the place."

These dynamics have given rise to the cultural lure of concepts like "work-life balance," as individuals struggle with excessive and sometimes competing demands in the work-family interface (Allen and Finkelstein 2014; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Clark 2000; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Moen (2015) encouraged the use of the term "work-life fit"—but this too, with the emphasis on the idea of "fit," encompasses some degree of deference to organizational needs (in juxtaposition to individual needs). Expectations, obligations, and responsibilities define the nature of "fit" from the purview of individual, family, and organizational domains—and ideals about standards and competing devotions operate in the background (Blair-Loy 2003).

Work-life balance or fit boils down to managing the discord between the responsibilities of work and everything else that emerges as individuals move through the life course. Over time, some people add new responsibilities to their work role—but that often means that the time, attention, and energy for home-related role duties will suffer; the opposite can be true as well. Simply put, some people have more peas on their plate than they can handle. Eventually, the act of constantly balancing competing responsibilities can leave individuals feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and less satisfied than they might otherwise have expected or hoped (Schulte 2014). At various

points of the life course, many people come to recognize—albeit sometimes reluctantly and with a twinge of angst—that something needs to give. Despite the popular myth of "having it all" (Slaughter 2016), many face the harsh reality that some sacrifices need to be made. When the "balancing act" flops, and fit falls short, that is when those silent voices that Wheaton (2001) recognized start to grumble resentful protests like: "this *isn't* what I signed up for!"

## APPLICATIONS AND EXTENSIONS

### *The High Standards of the Ideal Worker*

Like death and taxes, at least one other thing in life is unavoidable: *standards*—specifically, trying to live up to your own, other people's, or a complicated blend of the two. With standards come expectations that are intricately ensnared in aspirations to be an ideal worker, parent, partner, student, citizen, and the list goes on. Standards define the nature of effort and dedication required for social roles. Many people believe that they solely determine their own standards—but, by definition, that is a misguided notion. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a standard as "something established by authority, custom, or general consent as a model or example." In the analysis of the social forces that contribute to the sway of standards and expectations, the domain of work is probably among the most productive starting points.

In his classic book *The Organization Man*, Whyte (1956) alluded to the tension that work can pose as a prominent social role. Whyte described the organization man as someone who felt beholden to his job, who experienced the endlessness of the treadmill, the overtiredness of the rat race, and the powerlessness in the inability to control his direction within the organization that he worked for. However, Whyte also asserted that while the organization had a powerful grip on its workers, the organization men were not innocent bystanders in the process—in fact, the organization men contributed to this stressful dynamic and, in a masochistic way, some seemed to enjoy sacrificing parts of their lives to the organization.

What Whyte labeled "the organization man" has morphed into the cultural ideology of being an *ideal worker* (Acker 1990; Davies and Frink 2014; Williams 2000). Ideologies can be incredibly powerful as systems of ideas that set aspirations and constraints; they contribute to definitions of who we are and who we hope to be. When it comes to work, ideologies encase each rung on the ladder of success with standards. The idea that work encroaches on the lives of its employees is hardly new. Decades ago, Coser (1974) described work as a "greedy institution"—one that has few qualms about wringing time, energy, and attention from its employees. For the ideal worker norm, the expectation of strong commitment or allegiance to work is a prevailing frame. In competitive environments, many companies endorse and exercise ideal worker norms, and, in turn, the standards around these norms solidify what Blair-Loy (2003) called the "work devotion schema." There are upsides and downsides to devotion.

When an organization chooses an employee, that organization probably expects the employee to choose it in return—this is one of the foundational exchange relationships in most societies. But exchange relationships can sometimes be lopsided. Dumas and Sanchez-Burks (2015) defined the contemporary ideal worker as someone who is unencumbered by non-work-related responsibilities and as someone who places a primacy on work. Competing devotions undermine the perceived ideal of an undistracted mind and "all-in" spirit. One underlying norm that defines an ideal worker is simple: *Productive workers are the best workers*. And, whether it is 1956 or 2019, organizations want the best workers. In this exchange relationship, organizations have always socialized their workers—and they always will. There are unwritten or unspoken rules about workplace culture that help to define what makes an ideal worker—and some of these rules are likely to be absent from the formal job descriptions or the handouts provided during the HR orientation session. There is a reason why this norm persists and, unlike the 1950s of Whyte's analysis, now extends to women in the workforce (Blair-Loy 2003; Schulte 2014; Slaughter 2016; Williams 2000). Having a productive, talented, and dedicated workforce allows organizations to compete and thrive in their respective industries. Ideal workers enhance success, and success yields greater profit. But this means that focused workers—not the chronically distracted—are the best workers. The organization expects full attention, not a preoccupied mind and spirit. The presence of competing expectations and

responsibilities outside of the work role can undermine that ideal. Moreover, unlike the 1970s of Coser's analysis, we now have cell phones, emails, and a range of other sophisticated communication tools to help the greedy institution reach into the lives of those within its orbit (Chesley 2005; Chesley, Moen, and Shore 2003; Glavin and Schieman 2012; Schieman and Glavin 2016).

There is no doubt that "greed" is a complicated thing.[1] On one hand, in the contemporary work landscape, organizations might be "greedier" in the various ways they can monitor and contact their employees. The advances and proliferation of mobile technology might render it more difficult for workers to avoid (Chesley 2014). On the other hand, the structure and organization of work in the twenty-first century have become increasingly contingent, with employees having shorter job tenures more generally and self-employment becoming increasingly common (Kalleberg 2011). What are the implications of these trends for the claims I have made above? To suggest that work is an increasingly greedy institution does not necessarily imply that it now expects "perfect commitment" from workers over an extended period of time. It seems plausible that many organizations could enact a somewhat different form of "greed" in that organizations have few qualms about letting a worker go once they have extracted what they need or satisfied a narrower purpose. At the same time, however, from the workers' perspective, these dynamics might also mean that employees themselves invest less of their own identity in the role of employment with any one particular organization. Indeed, for many workers and their relationship with organizations, much has changed since Whyte's (1956) *The Organization Man*. Ideal worker norms remain—but the ways those standards manifest in role enactments have changed.

## The Stress of Higher Status

These ideas about role strains and ideal worker norms have been influential in the development of my own research program. With the help of students and colleagues, for example, I have formulated, refined, and tested the Stress of Higher Status (SHS) model (Schieman 2013; Schieman and Koltai 2017; Schieman and Reid 2009; Schieman et al. 2009; Schieman, Whitestone, and Van Gundy 2006). Pearlin's (1983) scholarship on types of role strains—three in particular—has been influential: "(1) those involving problems between the individual and the nature of the tasks she or he is expected to perform; (2) interpersonal problems within role-sets; [and] (3) intrapersonal problems resulting from participation in multiple role sets" (p. 8). The SHS model asserts that individuals with status-related advantages tend to experience elevated exposure to these strains, and then it seeks to trace the implications of these status-based patterns of strain for well-being—and, more broadly, for social stratification and health disparities. The SHS model does not negate the fact that individuals with status-based disadvantages experience elevated exposures to some harmful stressors (e.g., financial strain, personal stress; see Schieman and Koltai 2017) but instead argues that it is also important to note other stressors that shape experiences for individuals across the spectrum of status achievements and positions in various social hierarchies. In this regard, the SHS model helps move the discussion away from conversations about the differences between those at "the top" versus those at "the bottom" of conventional socioeconomic hierarchies or from prevailing comparisons between "the rich" and "the poor." Status advantages are represented in different forms on a continuum. To make progress on understanding how social status is associated with stress exposure and outcomes like distress, we must take a more systematic approach to characterizing stressors across hierarchies. The SHS model encourages this approach.

In his analysis of role strains, Pearlin (1983) was describing experiences back in the 1980s—and a lot has changed since then. Downsizing and nonstandard work arrangements have decreased the guarantee of long-term, stable employment and increased the generalized sense of job insecurity (Kalleberg 2011), and these dynamics have implications for elements of the stress process and its outcomes (Glavin 2013, 2015; Glavin and Schieman 2014). Perhaps even more important for interrole strains, the rapid expansion in communication technologies and their increasing use in the workplace have modified employees' accessibility (Bittman, Brown, and Wajcman 2009; Valcour and Hunter 2005). These changes have led to greater permeability in the boundaries between work and non-work life and the integration of these once more separate spheres (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2006). In turn, these processes shape the nature

and implications of the ways that the greedy institution accesses its workers. Job demands are channeled through *role blurring* activities—that is, the integration of behaviors and thoughts associated with work and family roles (Desrochers, Hilton, and Larwood 2005; Glavin and Schieman 2012; Schieman and Glavin 2016).

One of the main propositions of the SHS model is that individuals with status-related advantages experience elevated exposure to particular kinds of stressors—especially the three types that Pearlin (1983) identified, as I noted above. One of those role strains relates to the kinds of tasks or activities in the work role that employees are required to perform. We have extrapolated from this point to focus, for example, on the potency of job pressure (Koltai and Schieman 2015; Schieman 2013). Pearlin also wrote about the power of interpersonal problems within role-sets; here, our work has demonstrated the link between job authority—a key form of higher status—and exposure to interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Schieman and Reid 2008, 2009). And last but not least, work-to-family conflict has represented a major form of "intrapersonal problems resulting from participation in multiple role sets" (Pearlin 1983:8). Our analyses have sought to link these kinds of problems to various forms of higher socioeconomic status such as education, occupation, and income (Koltai, Schieman, and Dinovizter 2018; Schieman and Glavin 2011; Schieman et al., 2006, 2009).

From these foundational starting points, the SHS model then attempts to trace the health implications of the observed status-based patterning of role strain. My analysis of job authority illustrates these processes. I am grateful for the ideas of Mirowsky and Ross (2003a) for inspiring this direction of inquiry. In their description of the relationship between social stratification and health, they articulated an unresolved paradox with respect to one dimension of stratification—job authority. *Job authority* is defined as having power over other workers' pay, the ability to hire and fire workers, and supervisory control over other workers' activities (Elliott and Smith 2004; Schieman, Schafer, and McIvor 2013). Mirowsky and Ross hypothesized that the positive and negative elements of job authority cancel each other out—and these counterbalancing dynamics were suspected as being responsible for the observed null association between job authority and health. In fact, Mirowsky and Ross (2003a) identified elevated exposure to interpersonal conflict as one of the main downsides of job authority:

> Having authority means being responsible for the actions and accomplishments of others. A person who supervises or manages others must get them to cooperate and produce. That invariably creates frustration and conflict. No amount of authority changes the fact that individuals themselves decide what they do, and may lack the ability to accomplish things they willingly try. Even so, a person who judges and decides what others should do bears responsibility for the success of their actions and efforts. In a hierarchy those responsibilities go in both directions, to persons higher up as well as to persons lower down. Decision-makers often feel apprehension about how things will turn out and tension about resolving the conflicting interests of others higher and lower in the organization. When things go poorly, guilt, shame, anger and resentment often mingle with disappointment and fear of consequences. (P. 123)

In a paper published in *Social Science and Medicine* (Schieman and Reid 2009), we explicitly tested Mirowsky and Ross's speculative ideas about the counterbalancing dynamics behind job authority and found clear evidence to support them. First, we observed the null association between job authority and poorer health outcomes prior to statistical adjustments. Then, we demonstrated that the strength of the association between job authority and poorer health outcomes emerges only after we statistically adjust for key role strains: interpersonal conflict at work, job pressure, and work-to-family conflict. These adjustments result in a swelling of the negative coefficient for the relationship between job authority and distress, anger, or physical symptoms. Elevated levels of interpersonal conflict at work, job pressure, and work-to-family conflict among people with greater job authority mask the negative association between job authority and poorer health outcomes; that is, these stressors function as suppressors in the SHS model (Schieman 2009). However, when we adjust for the upsides of job authority—like greater autonomy—that net negative association between job authority and poorer health disappears. In other words, the

coefficient representing the relationship between job authority and poorer health ends up back where we started: a null association (just as Mirowsky and Ross observed). While our *Social Science and Medicine* paper focused on between-person differences (Schieman and Reid 2009), in my current research I have been collecting data on a large national sample of Canadian workers and following them over time to evaluate whether these patterns replicate longitudinally (from 2011 to 2019). Preliminary analyses of within-person change suggest similar patterns that we originally observed in the American data. Individuals who experience gains in job authority also tend to experience greater stress exposures over time, and these stress exposures elevate poorer health over time. We therefore detect support for the SHS model predictions longitudinally, but more research is needed—especially in cross-national contexts.

In another set of preliminary analyses, we are examining *decision authority* in Japanese and American samples (Schieman et al. 2019). In the classic Job Demands-Control model, the conceptualization of job control includes decision authority—that is, the "organizationally mediated possibilities for workers to make decisions about their work" (Karasek et al. 1998:323). Workers with greater decision authority are required to initiate their own ideas and determine the course of action on the job; they have greater latitude in deciding the tasks they do and how they do them; they have greater say in decision-making processes and involvement in planning workplace organization (Karasek and Theorell 1990). As a quintessential form of job control, decision authority should be linked with less exposure to Pearlin's role strains. However, our initial analyses discovered a positive indirect effect of decision authority on work-to-family conflict through its positive effect on job pressure. This positive pathway masks decision authority's negative link to work-to-family conflict. These countervailing patterns exemplify a stress of higher status suppression mechanism and suggest that potential reformulations are needed to prominent frameworks like the Job Demands-Resources model. People with greater authority look in one direction and witness all the relational complexities of the organization. Then, they look in the other direction and must make decisions regarding the tasks and resources of subordinates. Role-set complexity means a lot of incoming fire and lots of fires that constantly need putting out. Complaints from someone with higher status about his or her exposures to these kinds of strains might be met with a slightly dismissive: "That's why you get paid *the big bucks*!" But, are "the big bucks" enough?

## *The Sometimes Perverse Relation: Money and Happiness*

Higher status usually means more money—and money buys happiness. Or does it? The assumption is that each dollar increase should be linked with even greater happiness. Mirowsky and Ross (2003b) described the diminishing marginal effect of household income on distress: The impact of an additional $10,000 a year is largest at the low end and gets smaller at higher levels of income. Similarly, a vast literature outside of the sociology of mental health examines the relationship between income and subjective well-being (SWB), with analyses that focus on individual- or country-level differences (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002). In the majority of these studies, measures of household income are correlated with higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Kahneman and Deaton 2010; Kahneman et al. 2006). However, the positive association tends to be weaker when measures of "experienced happiness" are used instead of more global measures of life satisfaction. I suspect this pattern is likely attributable to the fact that what is being labeled as "experienced happiness," or the other affective features of SWB, probably correspond more closely to the actual, objective conditions in social roles—especially work and family. I wonder: Is there something about the quality of social roles that, while enhancing pecuniary rewards, ultimately dampens (even slightly) "experienced happiness" and the emotional dimensions of everyday life associated with it?[2]

SWB studies find that the positive association between income and happiness is steepest at lower levels of income and becomes increasingly flatter at the middle- to middle-upper range. In a highly influential paper published in the journal *Science*, Kahneman and colleagues (2006) described the relationship between individuals' income and their experienced affect as a "sometimes perverse relation" (p. 1909). That claim is based, at least in part, on evidence from an earlier study by Schnall and colleagues (1998), which found no relationship between individuals' levels of

personal income and their levels of happiness throughout the workday. However, that same study did find that household income was related to elevated feelings of anxiety, anger, and excitement.[3] From this, Kahneman and colleagues (2006) concluded, "higher income was associated with more intense negative experienced emotions and greater arousal, but not greater experienced happiness" (p. 1909).

In their own study, Kahneman and colleagues (2006) analyzed data from the 2004 General Social Survey to report the distribution of self-reported happiness across levels of family income. The happiness item asked, "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" The authors state that individuals in households with earnings greater than $90,000 are roughly twice as likely to describe themselves as "very happy" compared with individuals in households with income below $20,000—but the difference between those households earning $50,000 to $89,999 versus $90,000 or more was only one percentage point (41.9 versus 42.9 percent reported feeling very happy). One takeaway is that a comparison of the highest to the lowest family income brackets reveals a greater happiness gap more so than the comparison of the highest and second-highest brackets.

While it is evident that a substantial percentage of people in higher income households report feeling very happy, questions remain: Why do they not also feel happier than individuals in the next highest income bracket? What is it about the conditions of their lives that dampen the psychological rewards of their relatively higher earnings? Kahneman and colleagues did not answer these questions in their 2006 paper. As far as I can determine from what they report (see their Table 2, p. 1909), the results are based on bivariate analyses and do not adjust for any other conditions. Ultimately, SWB studies collectively suggest that there does appear to be a statistically significant association between income and subjective well-being—but it is stronger at the lower end of the income distribution, with diminishing returns as levels of income rise (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002; Howell and Howell 2008; Veenhoven 1991).[4]

Sociologists know what explains the association between income and distress or SWB at the lower end of the income scale. It typically involves stressors like financial strain, which tend to be more prevalent among lower income groups (Koltai, Bierman, and Schieman 2018; Mirowsky and Ross 2003a, 2003b). The theoretical explanations for the negative association between income and happiness at the lower end of the income distribution make sense—and the structural reasons embedded in the stress process model seem plausible and have been empirically verified. But what causes the flattened curve? Scholars outside sociology tend to evoke psychological explanations: relative income theory (Easterlin 1974), homeostatic theory (Cummins 2000), adaptation level theory (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman 1978), and goal theory (Diener and Lucas 2000). Howell and colleagues (2013) underscored the ways that "need theory" might help explain the curvilinear association between income and SWB. Need theory suggests that increasing levels of income and wealth among those with the least amount of money, usually those under the poverty level, have a stronger impact compared with increases at the higher income levels, because money helps those with less "satisfy basic physiological needs" (p. 17). This generally aligns with financial strain as a central explanation.[5]

Moving forward, to advance this literature I encourage researchers to consider the sociological study of stress and mental health for additional theoretical and empirical leverage about the nuanced links among higher status, earning money, and role strains (Koltai et al. 2018; Schieman and Koltai 2017). We should attend to role-specific dynamics to more productively advance the broader scientific understanding of the link between social stratification and emotional health. But in that effort, it is essential that scholars traverse the sociology of stress terrain—with an eye to the nuanced, intricate, and overlooked connection between personal income and job qualities or the conditions of working life. This has been a foundational principle in the SHS model, which provides insights by showing that exposure to Pearlin's (1983) role strains peaks at the points where the income-happiness curve flattens—currently at roughly $65,000 to $75,000. When research neglects these strains, it might tend to underestimate the ways that higher personal income is associated with less distress or better SWB. In future research, I encourage sociologists and others to shine a light on role strains to advance knowledge on this "sometimes perverse relation."

As an important aside, the majority of studies on the association between income and SWB

tend to focus on *household* income. In my view, we could provide more informed discoveries about SHS dynamics with greater attention to *personal* income, because it tends to tack more closely to the "pain" of the work role (e.g., demands, responsibilities, obligations, expectations, and tensions). If you complain about the stressors associated with your higher status position and the associated responsibilities at work and someone retorts "that's why you get paid the big bucks," I suspect that they are referring to your personal earnings—not the combined amount that you and your spouse/partner earn as a household. Your pain is purportedly compensated by your *own* earnings—not your spouse's or partner's income (although having more resources as a household is certainly an advantage and a potential protective buffer against life's adversities).

To be sure, there are likely to be many nuances or "pockets of complexity" across the entire spectrum of socioeconomic status (Schieman and Koltai 2017). Moreover, no part of what I am arguing here—especially in the SHS model—suggests that people at the top of the income spectrum *have it worse* than those in lower income brackets, especially those individuals at the very bottom. The SHS model asserts that status gains, mostly through the middle and upper-middle of status-based hierarchies, are associated with an increase in exposure to particular kinds of stressors, and these stressors, in turn, have well-established empirical links to unpleasant emotional outcomes. One possible counterpoint might make claims about differential vulnerability: "Is it possible that all of the emotional costs of greater responsibility and interpersonal drama are more than offset by the 'big bucks' associated with being in the top income bracket?"[6] This is a legitimate question—but it requires clarification on at least two points. First, the questions about the income-happiness curve should not be interpreted as pertaining to factors that affect those at the very top, but rather the shades of higher status along the spectrum; this should not be a focus on crude categories like those at "the top" or individuals with the very highest status. Second, the contention that higher earnings offset the effects of stressors associated with higher status remains an empirical question—one that requires tests of theoretically viable interaction effects. As a concrete example, if those who gain status (e.g., more income or more job authority) experience an increase in substantially more interpersonal conflict at work, job pressure, or work-to-family conflict, we would need to see evidence that the higher earnings buffer against the distress that typically comes with more of those stress exposures. In the Canadian Work, Stress, and Health study, job pressure and work-to-family conflict had some of the strongest positive correlations with distress—but we found little evidence that the higher earnings associated with these stressors were more protective. Nonetheless, the ways that higher status resources function more generally as buffers against the stressors associated with higher status remains an important direction for future studies. Longitudinal designs that delineate causal mechanisms embedded within buffering effects might provide new insights.

I would like to make one final point about the ways sociologists who study stress and mental health can inform the vast literature on SWB. First, SWB is purported to have cognitive and affective components (Cummins 2000). I argue that it is essential to consider these as separate but related aspects—and we should focus particular attention on the affective components. At this juncture, there is an important distinction between the global appraisal of happiness (e.g., "How happy are you with your life in general?") and the more specific set of symptoms that tap specific features of psychological distress (e.g., "anxious," "tense," "worried," and so on). An even greater distinction is required in the delineation of mental health disorders—that is, emotional conditions that are severe enough for a clinical or psychiatric diagnosis (e.g., major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, schizophrenia). It is important to underscore that the thrust of the discussion above is not as relevant for understanding mental illness because issues of selection then move to the fore. That is, more severe emotional problems—especially those deemed "clinically significant" to be defined as psychiatric disorders—are more likely to cause a "drift" downward in terms of socioeconomic position (Harkey, Miles, and Rushing 1976; Kessler 1982; Liem and Liem 1978). The ideas that I am grappling with, especially in the SHS model, have more to do with the classic discussions of the social patterns in psychological distress (Kessler 1979, 1982; Kessler and Cleary 1980; Mirowsky and Ross 2003a; Turner, Wheaton, and Lloyd 1995). This requires a distinction between social patterns of subjective well-being (happiness), psychological distress (anxiety), and psychiatric disorder. As I have argued above, I think the first

two—SWB and distress—are more closely related and relevant for this discussion about income. In particular, symptoms of distress tack more closely to the characterization embedded in the social causation argument: Personal income, more so than household income, is associated with particular kinds of occupations or work arrangements that are related to particular kinds of conditions, and those conditions tend to elevate particular kinds of emotions or moods—the subclinical kind. The very nature of the social selection/drift argument implies that we would, by definition, expect to see fewer severely unhappy or distressed people in the middle, upper-middle, and upper ranks of income because those with more severe (untreated) suffering presumably should have already drifted downward on the income ladder.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I would like to conclude by briefly proposing some ways that future research might attempt to advance the themes and ideas in this essay. First, it is critically important to elaborate the "greedy institution" idea—and what it means for role qualities and organizational dynamics. On this front, it is essential to forge a stronger synthesis of concepts and theoretical approaches in the sociology of mental health with organizations, occupations, and work. In our qualitative interviews, we observed that resentment toward the organization for past and current injustices emerged as a powerful narrative, especially around the "greedy institution" and "ideal worker" concepts. Anger has been around a long, long time—indeed, it reflects what sociologists of emotion consider a "primary emotion" (Schieman 2006; Thoits 1989). But what happens when anger lingers inside an individual and grievances are regularly rehearsed? This can morph into a simmering resentment about everyday life. In contrast, given my comments above about the changing landscape of work and the fact of shorter tenures or greater precarity, if individuals are not employed at the same organization for as long a duration as workers once were, then the kinds of resentments I am referring to might be more diffuse—that is, less directed at a particular company or organization. The sense of generalized resentment or low-grade anger might be directed toward opportunities missed or the sense of an unjust job market—a system that does not work for them. These kinds of broader social and economic changes are important to consider when we study emotions like anger and resentment. Given the scope of our expertise, sociologists have a lot to offer on the causes, processes, and consequences associated with these emotions (Simon 2007). Building stronger links between the sociology of mental health, the sociology of emotions, and the long sociological tradition of stratification research would productively advance this effort.

This first point leads to a second and related theme: *justice*. It would be wonderful to witness greater integration and synthesis of the sociology of mental health with the social-psychological perspectives on distributive justice—I think there is room in the application of the stress process model for this kind of development. Hegtvedt and Johnson (2018) defined distributive justice as "the dispersion of benefits and burdens in a society according to agreed upon principles such as equity, equality, or needs" (p. 276). The institution of work has long embodied a foundational exchange relationship in which employees invest in the work role and, in return, employers provide rewards such as earnings and other benefits (Adams 1965; Blau 1964). The equity rule emphasizes that the rewards workers receive "should be proportional to contributions defined positively as productivity, effort, ability, merit, and status or negatively like harms and losses perpetrated by individuals" (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2018:279). When rewards fail to match contributions, workers express the sense of unjust desserts. This process underscores the importance of understanding the nature of role-specific contributions in justice formulations.

The sociological study of stress and mental health provides key insights into these dynamics: (1) the emphasis on the quality of social roles like work and family and the strains embedded within them and (2) perceived inequity represents a formidable stressor (Narisada 2017). Wheaton (1999) identified underreward as a central element of chronic stress, as it reflects "reduced outputs from a relationship relative to inputs, as in lower pay for a job than others with the same qualification" (p. 184). From the stress process perspective, perceived inequity might come to represent a chronic experience (Pearlin 1983). The dissatisfaction and anger that develop and persist over time might foster feelings of resentment. If conditions do not seem mutable, producing an enduring sense of what Pearlin (1983) called "role captivity," emotional responses might shade into

feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and depression (Adams 1965; Hegtvedt and Parris 2014; Homans 1974; Pearlin 1983). At the same time, however, the stress process model has long suggested the potency of some kinds of resources for buffering the effects of perceived inequity. Research suggests, for example, that feelings of financial and job security represent conditions that attenuate the overall positive relationship between perceived underpayment and job dissatisfaction (Narisada and Schieman 2016). This research should be extended to understand changes over time and include a wider range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to unjust pay—perceived or actual.

On this particular research track, some scholars are advancing innovative lines on distributive justice and perceived inequity that address an important question: Can a "greedy institution" really be fair? It would seem that the very notion of "greedy" implies unjust organizational policies or practices that, in turn, provide the grounds for perceived inequity. Narisada (2018) provided an innovative take on this question by describing a "greedy institution process" in which particularly stressful job pressures influence perceptions about perceived inequity. He demonstrated that actions and strains in the work-family interface—especially elevated levels of work-to-family conflict—provide an explanatory link that connects excessive job pressure to perceived underreward. The proliferation and use of communication technologies facilitate the extraction of time, effort, and attention from workers, often outside of regular working hours, and the related actions of role blurring provide the catalyst for these excessive work demands. The question becomes: What happens when workers feel that this kind of inter-role strain represents excessive contributions that are not sufficiently rewarded? Moreover, what is the emotional fallout when (a) this is a chronic state and (b) one has few options to rectify it?

The sociology of mental health and the sociology of emotions both have a lot to offer in understanding the consequences of unjust dynamics in roles. In these dynamics, I believe that it is essential for researchers to continue to unpack the concept of *dissatisfaction*, especially as it relates to unrealized role expectations. The balance of contributions and rewards in roles is an essential formulation in equity theory (Adams 1965; Homans 1974). The strains being described in the "greedy institution process" raise important questions about the "contributions" side of the distributive justice formulation—and, ultimately, the determinants and potential consequences of perceived inequity (Narisada 2018). The stress process perspective can be integrated here to help us understand how being chronically dissatisfied in a role, even at a modest level, can take a toll on role functioning, relationships, and well-being. In an era that places a premium on "being happy," the sense of dissatisfaction might be even more dissonant. Anecdotally, at least in the United States, it seems that anger is trending upward. Unrealized expectations are blending with distributive injustice to fan the flames—especially as levels of actual inequality rise. These might very well be the "structured and durable social and economic antecedents of stress" that Pearlin (1983:4) underscored in his emphasis on social roles and everyday experience.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There are many reasons why receiving the 2018 Pearlin Award means a great deal to me. I spent four years working with Len as a research scientist at the University of Maryland, from 2000 to 2004. On many late afternoons, Len and I would share the commute home. He would drop me off at the Friendship Heights metro station, and then I would hop on the subway to continue the journey to my condo in Washington, DC. Along the way, Len would share his experiences as a key figure in the history of social stress research and his rich insights about the intellectual puzzles that remained. In those conversations, I also discovered how much the sociological study of stress could teach us about our own ordinary lives—and the importance of psychosocial buffers in these processes. Those trips to Friendship Heights gave me the inspiration and confidence to become the scholar I am today.

Len was such an amazing mentor—he transformed my experience and shaped the direction of my intellectual life. Our friendship was deep and enduring. Len was "mindful" before mindfulness became trendy. To this day, I find myself asking, "How would Len approach this problem?" or "How would Len react to this feedback?" He was one of the most empathic listeners and easy conversationalists I have ever met; I am so grateful for having been a part of his life.

In 2018, we lost another giant—R. Jay Turner—a friend and supportive mentor to many,

myself included. The Sociology of Mental Health Section of the American Sociological Association, and the broader discipline, has benefited in countless ways from prominent scholars like Len and Jay. They are deeply missed, but they stay with us over time in so many different ways. When we come up with our own ideas or think differently about an old idea, we build upon their contributions. When we attempt to add something new to an existing theoretical model or mentor the next generation of scholars, we continue their legacy. In this important work, we celebrate—and pay tribute to—the lives of scholars like Len and Jay, and we keep moving forward as a community of thinkers and teachers.

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## NOTES

1. I thank a reviewer for this point and the related ideas that follow.
2. Both happiness and life satisfaction are components of subjective well-being. Satisfaction and happiness are usually assessed with "global" indicators: "All things considered, how satisfied with your life as a whole these days?" and "Taken all together, would you say you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" (Kahneman et al. 2006:1908). I am less interested in the differences between these global indicators of satisfaction and happiness than I am between these global measures and the more fine-grained emotional experiences in everyday life—such as those captured by symptom-based measures. A key point in my argument here is that what Kahneman and colleagues labeled "experienced happiness" is closer to what sociologists who study stress and mental health have identified as the frequency of symptoms of distress. In my view, even the term *experienced* implies something more akin to role conditions and their effects.
3. These patterns are based on data from a sample of 374 workers at 10 different work sites; measures were taken using the Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) technique, an approach that asked workers to describe the intensity of different feelings on a 0 to 3 scale roughly *every half hour* during one workday.
4. A reviewer noted that Kahneman has demonstrated that the income-happiness curve flattens out but also that the relationship between proportional increases in income and happiness is linear (as in a log function).
5. Social comparison processes might also be relevant for the nature income-happiness association. For example, Alderson and Katz-Gerro (2016) observed the centrality of subjective relative comparisons in determining the link between household income and happiness. They found that the more advantaged study participants felt relative to others, the higher their self-reported happiness—but that those who placed more value on comparisons with others felt worse. These patterns tap into a larger debate about the importance of relative versus absolute income in determining SWB.
6. A reviewer suggested that higher earnings and their associated resources might function as a buffer: "The rich can afford massages, vacations, eating out in fine restaurants—as well as guidance and therapy of various kinds (coaches, psychotherapists and other healers)." The reviewer also noted that rising income inequality might be important to consider if it affects the value of increases in status through the middle and upper-middle parts of the status spectrum. Related to this, the cost of living as it related to the conventional middle-class lifestyle could further condition the protective efficacy of additional earnings, implying that conventional resource buffers might function differently for them relative to others.

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