Role Sequencing: Does Order Matter for Mental Health?*

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Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 2004, Vol 45 (June): 132–154

Role sequencing refers to the ordering of social roles. According to the normative order hypothesis, adults who follow a certain sequencing of their social roles will be better adjusted than their peers who follow other life course patterns. The normative order is defined as first entering the paid labor force, getting married, and later having children. This study tests this hypothesis by analyzing retrospective life history data from three subsamples of adults who completed the 1987–1988 National Survey of Families and Households: (1) married, working parents; (2) divorced, working parents; and (3) married, unemployed parents. The findings indicate significant race/ethnic (black/white), gender, and cohort differences in the type of role sequencing patterns that are conducive to positive mental health. For example, African Americans who work first, then have children, and later get married report better mental health than their peers who followed the normative order. White men and women seem to benefit from following the normative course of role transitions. Among women, however, the psychological benefits of following typical life course patterns are especially evident among those born during the baby boom.

A long tradition of sociology demonstrates that social roles are linked to health and illness. Numerous studies have documented the benefits and drawbacks of occupying many roles, embracing particular types of roles, and combining certain primary social roles (e.g., see Jackson 1997). Social scientists to date, however, have neglected a fundamental feature of the individual's role repertoire: sequencing. Role sequencing refers to the order in which social roles precede or follow other roles; role sequencing is the ordering of social role acquisition (Brim and Ryff 1980; Danish, Smyer, and Nowak 1980).

The concept of sequencing originates in life course sociology. This perspective recognizes the cumulative nature of well-being. There is a growing appreciation for the lingering psychological effects of role participation. For example, Moen and colleagues (1992, 1995) concluded that women's role biographies matter for later life satisfaction and self-esteem. Barrett (2000) clearly demonstrates the importance of marital history, rather than marital status per se, for mental health. This study is consistent with this line of research where a consideration of role sequencing allows the investigator to reach further back in time and describe the life course as it is actually lived (Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld 1987). I address the question of whether the order in which primary social roles were acquired (i.e., role sequencing) matters for current mental health.

* This research was supported in part by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health Training Program Grant T32 MH14588 awarded to Indiana University and a Strategic Directions Charter Grant, "The Con CEPT I Program in Health and Medicine," awarded to Dr. Bernice Pescosolido. I would like to thank Peggy Thoits, Brian Powell, Robin Simon, David Takeuchi, and several anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. Direct all correspondence to: P.B. Jackson, Indiana University, Department of Sociology, 744 Ballantine Hall, Bloomington, IN 47405 or e-mail: pjackson@indiana.edu.

THEORY AND EVIDENCE ON ROLE SEQUENCING

Structural Role Theory

According to structural role theory, social roles are the major mechanisms linking per-

sons to social structure. Roles are sets of normative expectations attached to statuses. The social role model and life course perspective are paradigms that originate from this broader theory, each of which speaks to the functional and dysfunctional consequences of role acquisition.

One of the differences between the social role and life course paradigm is in the conceptualization of social roles. What are often referred to as role gains and losses (or statuses) by the role investigator are labeled as role entries and exits (or histories), respectively, by the life course sociologist (Barrett 2000; George 1993). Despite the separate research traditions that have emerged from these models, they are inextricably linked because a consideration of *how* roles are acquired over the life course (e.g., marrying after finding a job) requires knowledge of *what* roles are acquired over the life course (e.g., spouse, worker). In fact, there is evidence from both camps that role sequencing should matter for mental health.

The social role model. The social role model portrays individuals as actors moving across the life course (over time) accumulating adult social roles and adjusting to their subsequent repercussions (Thoits 1994). The most vital roles in a person's repertoire are worker, spouse, and parent. In general, individuals who occupy these three roles report better health outcomes than those who occupy other role configurations (see Jackson 1997; Thoits 1992). This is not too surprising given the resources often acquired with each role. For example, entry into the paid labor force is often accompanied by an increase in social support, status, power, and income (Ross and Mirowsky 1995). Capital procured through marriage is also considerable. Marriage can provide partners with affection, companionship, and material support (Kessler and Essex 1982; Turner and Marino 1994). Alternatively, job and marital losses are associated with fewer economic and psychosocial resources (Aseltine and Kessler 1993; Booth and Amato 1991). Although the psychological benefits of parenthood have been questioned (Reskin and Coverman 1985; Wethington and Kessler 1989), most people express a desire to have children for such reasons as self-fulfillment and general life satisfaction (see Jacobsen and Binger 1991; Radecki and Beckman 1992).

However, inherent in the occupancy of any social role is the possibility of facing ongoing problems in that role (i.e., stress). Jobs that are boring and tedious, marriages characterized by inequity and conflict, and children who drain existing resources may undermine the benefits of each role by accentuating its costs (Pearlin 1989). It is the residue of these experiences that may become manifest when the sequence of role acquisition is considered because role difficulties wear people down and limited resources reduce the chances of improving one's situation. Positive experiences in roles and access to valued resources, on the other hand, make role transitions easier to manage.

In essence, the social role literature suggests that knowing the sequence of roles should provide us with some indication of the costs and benefits role occupants may have accrued over time. The focus shifts away from the costs and benefits associated with a particular social role to the type of resources or role experiences we can expect when roles are acquired in a particular order. It is at this juncture that we capture the *context* of role occupancy. Studies that focus on the timing and spacing of social roles typify this approach. For example, early marriage and parenthood, a short interval between marriage and parenthood, and close spacing of the births of children are detrimental to the accumulation of goods and assets for the family (see Chilman 1983; Coombs et al. 1970).

The main proposition we can draw from the social role model is that prior roles create current personal context, and the contextualized effects of roles accumulate. A role acquired one step back becomes part of the context for the next role acquisition. The impact of each subsequent role transition depends upon the context at the time the role is acquired. So, role entries are both transition events when they happen and then become personal contexts after they have occurred. Theoretically, this means that a role transition in a resource-poor context (e.g., parenthood before employment) can create an even more resource-poor context for the next role transition (e.g., marriage), regardless of the expected benefits of any single role.

The intersection. Unlike the social role model, the life course perspective simply alludes to an underlying stress process involving the need for adjustment and adaptation in the face of stressful experiences (such as role transitions). Furthermore, the pathway linking role transitions to adult well-being in the life

course model generally stems from the socioemotional benefits of adhering to life course norms and/or the depletion of economic resources.

The theory of cumulative advantage, often adopted by sociologists interested in stratification systems among the aged, best captures the intersection of these two perspectives. This process is described well by Tausig and colleagues (1999):

> . . . if we all go through similar status transitions, those who go through these with better resources, will have better psychological outcomes and, over time, the difference in outcomes will increase (cumulative advantage). Alternatively, those with lower resources are more likely to have poorer psychological outcomes and, having had poorer outcomes, they will have even worse outcomes from dealing with subsequent stressors (cumulative disadvantage) (p. 55).

We now turn our attention to that particular body of research whose very premise is the long-term impact of individual life course decisions.

Life course perspective. The life course has been defined as the ordered sequence of events that individuals experience from the time of birth to death (Elder 1975). Many of these events involve taking on or casting off social roles that individuals perform at various points in their lives. Roles are typically defined to include normative cultural patterns. Most people become aware of norms through socialization. Some people internalize norms while others simply respect and comply with norms because of their consequences. In general, people believe that they will be sanctioned by significant others and society if they do not adhere to life course norms, including timing and sequencing norms (see Jackson, Berkowitz, and Aucoin 2004).

Regardless of whether we obey norms completely, norms influence our behavior and thinking (Davis 1966). For example, white men and women seem to agree on an ideal age to start working full-time, marry, and to have children (see Buchmann 1989; Rook et al. 1989). It is on this basis that scholars speak of a normative life course, which denotes the typical order in which to acquire primary social roles (Elder 1975; Hogan 1978; Hogan and Astone 1986).[1] The normative model assumes that individuals experience positive affect when they conform. These feelings stem from the desire to live up to the expectations of the group, the desire to do right, and the approval received when we meet social expectations (Goode 1988).

In terms of actual sequencing patterns, research indicates that most men enter the paid labor force before getting married (Hogan 1978), and white adults, in general, work before having children (Marini 1984). The work-to-marriage pattern is also evident, but clearly less pronounced, among ethnic minorities. For example, Testa and Krogh (1995) find that employment increases the likelihood of getting married among African American men. Less is known about African American women's employment status in relation to the timing of family roles.

There is some discussion of the normative nature of the marriage to parenthood transition among African Americans. Cowan and Hetherington (1991) argue that marriage followed by parenthood may be normative if the majority of person's in the immediate environment are unmarried at the time of conception. In fact, a high proportion of African Americans marry after the conception of their first child (Testa and Krogh 1995). This gives us some reason to believe that the life course patterns of ethnic minorities may be different from white adults and that role sequencing may be situated in a particular cultural context. For example, with the presence of a supportive network of similar others, parenting before marriage (and perhaps work) may not be especially stressful.

Nonetheless, underlying the life course approach is the belief that the quality of the adult years will be influenced by the way in which people make the transition into adulthood. To the degree that role-based transitions occur in an appropriate order (or sequence), these transitions should operate relatively smoothly (George 1993). From this discussion, we can derive a *normative order hypothesis,* which suggests that those who follow the expected progression of role transitions will report fewer negative outcomes in later life than those who follow other life course patterns, especially when institutional arrangements reinforce the normative sequence.

There is some evidence for this position. Using retrospective life history information on the dates of three transitions (school exit, first job, and first marriage), Hogan (1978, 1981) found men who failed to order their events in a normative fashion (defined as school exit,

finding a job, and later getting married) report lower earnings and more marital instability than men who followed the normative sequencing pattern. Similarly, studies have found that white women who follow the normative course of school exit before starting a full-time job and family report higher earnings than their peers who order these events differently (Marini, Chan, and Raymond 1987; Smith and Moen 1988).

While the economic consequences of following various role sequencing patterns have been explored, no study has yet paid attention to the practical health implications of "disorderliness" in the life course. Since most Americans evaluate their quality of life based on their current economic and health status, health is equally important to consider (see Andrews and Withey 1976; Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers 1976). In addition, discussions concerning the adverse consequences of not adhering to a normative model of the life course are suggestive, but we are lacking an adequate depth of research to draw any definitive conclusions regarding the relationship between role sequencing and adjustment in later life. This research takes a step in this direction.

Other Sociological Evidence

Role changes often require some degree of adjustment. Entries into roles that provide vital resources (such as work), however, are not as stressful as entry into other kinds of roles (such as parenthood), since access to resources permits better coping and reduces psychological distress. There is some evidence for this stance scattered across studies. In general, a job encourages young adults to be independent and helps them to mature and become self-supporting before starting a family (Daniels and Weingarten 1982). Adults who find jobs before getting married experience fewer marital problems compared to those who marry before working (Daniels and Weingarten 1982; Simon 1995). Having few economic resources is related to marital instability (Bumpass and Sweet 1975; Furstenberg 1976). Similarly, parenting is viewed most positively when economic resources are available (Daniels and Weingarten 1982). In terms of role losses, research suggests that employed parents are less distressed than parents who are not employed (Aneshensel, Frerichs, and Clark 1981; Menaghan 1989). Similarly, women who enter the paid labor force following a divorce experience more financial constraints than women who were stably employed before their divorce (Booth and Amato 1991).

Material support is but one aspect of ongoing relationships. Emotional support from one's spouse helps to alleviate the impact of work and parental strains on psychological well-being (Jackson 1992). Thus, when marriage comes before parenting, married persons have the opportunity to bring with them a wide reserve of resources (financial, emotional, practical support) into the parental domain, compared to those who marry after they have children. The reverse sequence of having children without a spouse creates distress, and when marriage comes later the previous distress reduces possible spousal support and can add to partner tension (Furstenberg 1976). In essence, the broader sociological literature paints a picture of the life course as least stressful when the individual enters the labor force before starting a family.

A simple version of the normative order hypothesis would expect the most positive outcomes when work precedes marriage and parenthood, and when marriage precedes parenthood, indicated as the sequence W-M-P (work-marriage-parenthood). Assuming that this sequence results in greater resources to handle subsequent role transitions, then, we should notice some variations in current psychological well-being between those who follow this sequence and those who do not follow this particular sequencing pattern. However, the broader sociological literature, especially research on role meaning, suggests more intricate expectations regarding role behavior. It is the particular sequencing of work followed by marriage, for example, that may be especially important for white men who define being a good husband and father in terms of providing economic support for the family (Simon 1995).

Research issues. There are relatively few studies in the area of role sequencing, primarily because of the need for detailed life-history information that is not readily available in most research designs (see Pallas 1993 for a review). Nonetheless, the discussion of a normative model of the life course represents the experiences of white men, and to a lesser degree white women, better than other groups

in the population (Rossi 1980). Similar analyses of the patterns and consequences for nonwhite samples have not been fully explored.[2] As such, race/ethnicity and gender differences in both the distribution of sequencing patterns and the mental health effects of following certain life course patterns are examined in this article.

To further muddle the model of the life course, there may exist some cohort variation in sequencing behavior among white women. Three groups of women have been identified as having entered the labor force since the twentieth century. The first group includes those who began and completed their family obligations before starting their work careers (Sorensen 1983; Treiman 1985). A second group includes women who entered the paid labor force between marriage and the birth of their first child. Some of these women continued in the labor force, probably due to the wartime demand for labor, while others interrupted their work careers until their children were partially grown (Elder and Rockwell 1976). A third group entered the work force and remained, even after marriage and the birth of their first child. This group represents the new influx of young, educated women who entered the paid labor force after the 1960s and who may have been influenced by the women's movement (Treiman 1985). Given these documented trends, this study will explore cohort variation in sequencing behavior, paying particular attention to women's cohort experiences.

This study examines the sequencing of five role transitions: marriage, divorce, employment, unemployment, and parenthood. These transitions are the primary focus of attention for many stress and life course sociologists, thus allowing this study to speak to both research traditions. Many life course studies concentrate on the school to work transition (Featherman and Carter 1976), with special attention paid to socioeconomic well-being. This emphasis is primarily the result of the influence of the status attainment tradition and human capital approaches on the study of the transition to adulthood. Given my arguments for the residual and lasting effects of role participation, the focus of this study is adult *mental health*. As noted by Pearlin (1985), adult mental health often represents an ". . . emotional summation of important circumstances in the lives of people" (p. 193).

METHODS

Data

This study uses data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), conducted in 1987 and 1988 (Sweet, Bumpass and Call 1988). The survey was based on respondents from a multistage probability sample of households in the United States. The main sample included 9,643 households. The survey also included oversamples of minorities, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married persons (N = 3,374), yielding a total sample of 13,017 respondents aged 18 and older. The response rate for the study was 75 percent. The sample can be viewed as representative of non-institutionalized persons in the United States. Two-hour structured interviews with respondents were conducted by trained interviewers in respondents' homes. The National Survey of Families and Households is the most recent national survey to include retrospective information on dates of employment, marriages, and fertility, as well as indicators of mental health. It is, therefore, especially suited for this type of study.

Sample

The present analysis is based on three subsamples: (1) married, working parents; (2) divorced, working parents; and (3) married, unemployed parents. Spouses are individuals who report currently being in their first marital relationship. Persons who are married but living away from their spouses for work-related reasons are included in the married category. The divorced have experienced a formal separation from their spouses. Workers are defined as those employed in their first civilian job while the unemployed have lost their first civilian job.[3] The category "unemployed" refers to those who are not employed. These individuals are not working, but they may be voluntarily out of the labor force. For the purposes of this study, parents include adults who have given birth to or fathered three or fewer children. Families represented in the National Survey of Families and Households actually have, on average, two children.

In general, this study focuses on the sequencing of the first marriage and first job.

Although the classic studies conducted by Hogan (1978, 1981) and Marini (1984) also report information on first entry into these roles, this study includes a consideration of the sequencing of role losses. Furthermore, I make it clear that the sample is being confined to those who have all experienced the same set of role transitions. Theoretically, this approach sets the stage for a pure test of the normative order hypothesis, since one must know the actual order in which role transitions have been experienced in order to assess their impact. This is a much simpler task for a within-group investigation rather than across groups.

Another reason investigators focus on initial experiences in these particular role transitions is because the number of sequencing patterns increases exponentially with each additional transition. The mathematical formula that represents this phenomenon for the occurrence of each event is a simple n factorial (Ross 1988). For example, the number of possible combinations for three independent events is:

$$3! = 1 \times 2 \times 3 = 6$$

Thus, there are six ways married, working parents can become married, working parents: (*W-M-P*; *W-P-M*; *M-W-P*; *M-P-W*; *P-M-W*; *P-W-M*). There are twelve ways to become a married, working parent of two children. These four events (two of which are the same but can occur at different points in the sequence) can be represented by the following factorial:

$$4! / 2! = 1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 / 1 \times 2 = 24 / 2 = 12$$

And there are twenty ways to become a married, working parent of three children (5 events):

$$5! / 3! = 1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 / 1 \times 2 \times 3 = 120 / 6 = 20.$$

Of course, there is an infinite number of possibilities with multiple role entries and exits. As a result of this multiplicative effect, most life course sociologists use apriori categorization (the most prevalent sequencing patterns) to examine specific role changes.

The selection criteria used in this study yielded a subsample of 1,008 married, working parents (n = 860 whites and n = 148 African Americans); 249 divorced, working parents (n = 199 whites and n = 50 African Americans); and 405 married, unemployed parents (all whites). Because of the small number of African Americans who report being unemployed (for the first time), they are not included in the analysis for married parents who are not employed. Although three role configurations are considered, this study provides a conservative estimate of the psychological impact of role sequencing.

Measures

Mental health. The dependent variables include depression and general happiness. Depression is assessed using a subscale taken from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) scale (Weissman et al. 1977). Respondents were asked how many days during the past week, they: (1) did not feel like eating; (2) had trouble keeping their mind on what they were doing; (3) had trouble shaking off the blues, even with help from family and friends; (4) slept restlessly; (5) talked less than usual; (6) felt depressed; (7) felt lonely; (8) felt sad; (9) felt fearful; (10) felt that everything they did was an effort; (11) felt that they could not get going; and (12) felt bothered by things that usually don't bother them. This scale does not measure a clinical disorder, but it is a reliable (alpha = .93) and valid measure of depressive symptoms (see Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983). Previous research indicates good internal consistency (Roberts 1980) and discriminatory power among clinical subsamples (Boyd and Weissman 1982; Weissman and Klerman 1977).

General happiness is a single-item measure. Respondents were asked, "taking things all together, how would you say things are these days" (1 = very unhappy to 7 = very happy). While this measure has limitations, similar indicators have been used in other national surveys (Gove, Hughes, and Style 1983), and the general assessment of happiness captured by this construct has been shown to correlate with other measures of global well-being (see Andrews and Withey 1976).

Role sequencing. Life history information is used to establish the sequencing of role transitions. Those who have ever married were asked the month and year of their marriage and could list up to 5 marital unions. Work history tables

were compiled for 10 job changes. Work history information pertained to jobs held for at least six months, not counting when respondents were primarily attending school or in the military.[4] The fertility table allowed for the listing of 12 births. If two role changes occurred in the same month, they were assumed to occur in the most common sequence (see Hogan 1978 and Marini 1984 for a similar approach). Entry into or out of the different roles is represented by the following symbols: workforce is (W), marriage is (M), parenthood is (P), divorce is (D), and unemployment is (U).

Role sequencing is measured in two sets of variables. In the first set of equations, role sequencing is conceptualized as a dummy variable comparing those who followed the normative ordering of role transitions to those who followed other sequencing patterns. Among the currently married, the normative sequence would be W-M-P (coded 1), compared to all others (coded 0). For the divorced, a normative sequence would be W-M-P-D (coded 1), compared to all others (coded 0). And among the unemployed, a normative sequence would be W-M-P-U (coded 1), compared to all others (coded 0). These analyses are designed to test the simple version of the normative order hypothesis. The term "normative" is used here to represent a cultural expectation rather than a statistical pattern.

To be included in the W-M-P category, respondents had to: (1) be working before and at the time they were married; (2) be working before and at the time of the birth of the first child; and (3) be married before and at the time of the birth of the first child. That is, the first set of three social roles is occupied simultaneously (Featherman, Hogan, and Sorensen 1984).[5]

In a second set of equations, five additional sequencing categories were created in order to more clearly demonstrate the relationship between role sequencing and mental health in the sample of married, working parents: (1) W-P-M; (2) M-W-P; (3) M-P-W; (4) P-M-W; and (5) P-W-M. Similarly, additional analyses were conducted among white adults who followed the most prevalent sequencing patterns reported among the selected samples of divorced (1) M-W-P-D; (2) M-P-W-D; and (3) M-P-D-W and unemployed (1) W-M-U-P; (2) W-U-M-P; (3) M-W-P-U; (4) M-W-U-P; and (5) M-W-W-U. Those who followed an orderly progression of transitions (W-M-P/D/U) are used as the omitted comparison category (coded 0) for these groups (coded 1). Because the number of possible role sequences increases exponentially (given the number of events considered), the focus here is on these most basic (and common) combinations of the social roles under investigation (see Marini 1984, 1987; Rindfuss et al. 1987 for a discussion of this issue).

Background variables. Several factors are related to sequencing behavior and mental health. Those considered as controls in this study include age (measured in years), education (measured in years), and whether the respondent was working full-time (0 = part-time, 1 = full-time).[6] Family composition is measured by the presence of a minor child in the household (0 = not present, 1 = present) and total number of children ever born (range: 1–3). A variable measuring the number of years it took to complete the sequence (or become a married/divorced, working/unemployed parent) and variables representing the number of years divorced (among the divorced) and unemployed (among the unemployed) were included in the appropriate models.[7]

Analytic Strategy

Raw percentages are first discussed, noting the relative number of adults who followed certain sequencing patterns by role configuration. Results from a series of ordinary least squares regression equations are then presented where mental health outcomes were regressed on role sequencing, controlling for the variables described above. All regression models presented included the control variables, but those coefficients are excluded from the tables for ease of presentation. The significance level for all analyses is set at $p = .10$ to accommodate the small sample of African American respondents (see Lennon 1994; Moen et al. 1995; and Thoits 1983 for a similar approach).

Social Selection

The relationship proposed in this study is based on the social causation model, where ordering patterns are argued to influence mental health. Social selection is an alternative explanation which, in this case, would predict

that psychological problems determine the order in which people enter adulthood. This type of sample selection bias has been likened to a specification error which occurs when omitted variables are key predictors of the independent and dependent variable (Kmenta 1971). In the case of role sequencing, certain personality characteristics may be linked to life course choices and health outcomes. For example, Clausen (1991) notes that competent adolescents have a more stable network of roles over their adult life course than other adolescents who are lacking in self-confidence. In this instance, personality characteristics may determine the choices people make and their levels of health.

There are two characteristics in the design of this study that may alleviate this social selection problem. First, sequencing differences are assessed within a single role configuration. Individuals across role statuses are not compared. That is, ordering patterns reported by married individuals are not compared to the patterns reported by the divorced, nor are the stably employed compared to the unemployed, since the different adult samples are not pooled or combined into a single group.

The second element in this study design that can partially address this type of selection bias is the inclusion of minorities and women in the sample. If the impact of ordering pattern on health depends upon one's race, for example, a social selection argument would be hard pressed to contend that white men, for example, who work before they acquire a family role report fewer problems with their health because of high competence (or no prior health problems) while African American men who follow the same pattern report more problems with their health because of high competence (or no prior health problems). While the results from this study will suggest a causal relationship between sequencing patterns and health outcomes, we proceed with caution in the interpretation of the results and reemphasize the important theoretical model proposed between role sequencing and mental health.

RESULTS

Role Sequencing

Table 1 presents the distribution of sequencing patterns followed by the different groups of multiple role occupants. The most prevalent sequencing pattern among married working parents is to first work, marry, and then have children (row 1: W-M-P). This pattern, however, is most indicative of the life course described by men (regardless of race/ethnicity), rather than women. It is also clear that the second most common sequencing pattern among white men is to first marry, work, and then have children (rows 3, 10, and 21: M-W-P) while white and African American women are more likely to report having married, had children, and later entered the paid labor force (rows 4, 12, 23: M-P-W). A sequencing pattern that was experienced with some frequency among African American men and women is one in which work occurs first, followed in order by having children, and later getting married (row 2: W-P-M). A much lower percentage of adults have children before engaging in either the spousal (row 5: P-M-W) or work (row 6: P-W-M) role, although African American women have the highest representation in these categories.

The sequencing patterns for divorced, working parents and married, unemployed parents also show a dominance of the W-M-P pattern among white men (row 7: W-M-P-D and row 16: W-M-P-U) and increasing variation in role sequencing patterns among women. The second most common sequence for white women is to marry and have children before entering the paid labor force (row 4: M-P-W, row 12: M-P-W-D). Furthermore, the statistical norm for married unemployed mothers is to work first, marry, leave the paid labor force, and then have children (row 17: W-M-U-P). This pattern was not detected among men at all, further emphasizing the gendered nature of some life course patterns.

Does Order Matter?

WMP vs. nonWMP. The next set of analyses focused on the relationship between role sequencing and mental health. I first examined whether following an orderly progression of events (defined as W-M-P) was more psychologically beneficial to multiple role occupants than following any other life course pattern. These results are summarized in Table 2.

As shown here, there appears to be no relationship between the normative pattern of role acquisition and mental health among white

TABLE 1. Role Sequencing Patterns among Adults in Three Role Configurations in the NSFH

	White				African American[a]			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
Role Configuration[b]	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Married Working Parents								
Role sequencing								
1 W-M-P	458	77.8	153	56.5	47	58.8	24	35.3
2 W-P-M	16	2.7	11	4.1	13	16.2	7	10.3
3 M-W-P	72	12.2	22	8.1	7	8.7	5	7.4
4 M-P-W	37	6.3	71	26.2	6	7.5	14	20.6
5 P-M-W	0	.0	4	1.5	1	1.3	3	4.4
6 P-W-M	5	.8	8	3.0	6	7.5	13	19.1
Other	1	.2	2	.7	0	.0	2	2.9
N	589	100.0	271	100.0	80	100.0	68	100.0
Divorced Working Parents								
Role sequencing								
7 W-M-P-D	70	75.3	43	40.6			13	26.0
8 W-M-D-P	0	.0	1	.9			0	.0
9 W-P-M-D	4	4.3	2	1.9			2	4.0
10 M-W-P-D	6	6.5	11	10.4			4	8.0
11 M-W-D-P	0	.0	1	.9			0	.0
12 M-P-W-D	6	6.5	23	21.7			7	14.0
13 M-P-D-W	0	.0	11	10.4			4	8.0
14 P-M-W-D	1	1.1	1	.9			3	6.0
15 P-W-M-D	0	.0	0	.0			1	2.0
Other	6	6.5[c]	13	12.3[d]			16	32.0[e]
N	93	100.0	106	100.0			50	100.0
Married Unemployed Parents								
Role sequencing								
16 W-M-P-U	109	77.9	33	12.5				
17 W-M-U-P	0	.0	113	42.6				
18 W-P-M-U	0	.0	1	.4				
19 W-U-M-P	3	2.1	35	13.2				
20 W-U-P-M	0	.0	3	1.1				
21 M-W-P-U	14	10.0	13	4.9				
22 M-W-U-P	1	.7	17	6.4				
23 M-P-W-U	4	2.9	35	13.2				
24 P-M-W-U	0	.0	1	.4				
25 P-W-M-U	0	.0	2	.8				
Other	9	6.4[f]	12	4.5[g]				
N	140	100.0	265	100.0				
Combined Configurations								
Role sequencing								
W-M-P/D/U	637	77.5	229	36.2	47	58.8	37	31.4
Other	185	22.5	404	63.8	33	41.3	81	68.6
	822	100.0	633	100.0	80	100.0	118	100.0

Note: W = work, M = marriage, P = parenthood, D = divorce, U = unemployment.
[a] Empty cells means there were too few cases for these subgroups.
[b] All role sequencing categories include variations on a sequence.
[c] Of these adults, 3 worked first and 2 had children first.
[d] Of these adults, 9 worked first, 1 married first, and 3 had children first.
[e] Of these adults, 4 worked first, 2 married first, and 8 had children first.
[f] Of these adults, 1 worked first and 1 married first.
[g] Of these adults, 5 worked first, 3 married first, and 2 had children first.

men. Among white women we see that those who followed the normative pathway to acquiring social roles are happier with their lives than their peers who did not follow this pattern (B = .29, $p < .10$).

Surprisingly, African American men and women who followed the normative pattern report more depressive symptoms (B = 9.42 for men and B = 10.30 for women, $p < .10$) than their peers who followed other life course

TABLE 2. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for Mental Health Outcomes on Role Sequencing Patterns among Adults in Three Role Configurations in the NSFH (standard errors in parentheses)

	White				African American[a]			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
Independent Variable	Depression	Happiness	Depression	Happiness	Depression	Happiness	Depression	Happiness
Married Working Parents								
Role sequencing[b]	−.46	−.00	−.42	.29†	9.42†	.29†	10.30†	−.65†
	(1.48)	(.13)	(1.86)	(.17)	(5.58)	(.45)	(5.39)	(.37)
R^2	.05	.03	.03	.05	.13	.07	.22	.22
N	543		256		72		64	
Divorced Working Parents								
Role sequencing[c]	−13.04*	.90*	−5.72†	.53†			3.42	−.56
	(4.98)	(.38)	(3.16)	(.26)			(5.94)	(.46)
R^2	.14	.12	.25	.11			.19	.18
N	86		97				46	
Married, Unemployed Parents								
Role sequencing[d]	−1.51	−.10	−7.97*	.12				
	(3.06)	(.30)	(3.73)	(.25)				
R^2	.05	.05	.04	.03				
N	131		251					

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed test)

Notes: With adjustment for age, education, full-time work status, minor child in household, number of children, and number of years to complete the sequence. Variables measuring the number of years divorced or unemployed were also included in appropriate models. Cell sizes vary from original sample size due to missing data.

[a] Empty cells represent no analyses conducted for these subgroups.

[b] WMP = 1; Other = 0

[c] WMPD = 1; Other = 0

[d] WMPU = 1; Other = 0

patterns. And African American women who entered the paid labor force, then worked, and later had children (W-M-P) are not as happy with their lives as their peers who followed other life course patterns (B = –.65, $p < .10$).

Among the sample of white adults who are currently divorced, working parents or married, unemployed parents we find that role sequencing is related to better mental health outcomes. As shown, white men who followed a normative course of transition events prior to their divorce (W-M-P-D) are less depressed (B = –13.04, $p < .05$) and happier (B = .90, $p < .05$) with their lives than those who followed other role sequencing patterns. Similarly, white women who followed the norm prior to getting divorced are somewhat less depressed (B = –5.72, $p < .10$) and happier (B = .53, $p < .10$) than women who did not follow this particular role sequencing pattern. However, there was no relationship between role sequencing and mental health among the sample of African American women who were divorced, working parents.

The sequencing of unemployment also seems to matter, especially for white women. Women who first entered the paid labor force, married, had children, and later were unemployed (W-M-P-U) are significantly less depressed (B = –7.97, $p < .05$) than women who followed other life course patterns.

WMP vs. specific others. When we look at more refined comparisons between life course patterns, differences between adults who occupy the same role configuration become even more evident. Due to the low number of respondents whose first role transition was parenthood (P-M-W and P-W-M), these groups were combined to represent a parenting first category. The relationship between particular sequencing patterns and mental health was explored among all four subsamples of married, working parents but could only be considered in the analyses for white women who were divorced, working parents and married, unemployed parents (due to lack of diversity in life course patterns among the other subsamples). The results from these analyses are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3, panel A presents the results for adults who are married, working parents. As shown here, white men who married, then found a job, and later had children (M-W-P) are somewhat more depressed than their peers who followed the W-M-P sequence (B = 3.02, $p < .10$). These particular sequencing comparisons, however, do little to explain white women's mental health.

African American men who worked, had children, and later married (W-P-M) are actually less depressed than African American men who followed the W-M-P sequence (B = –13.77, $p < .05$). At the same time, men who first married, entered the paid labor force, and later had children (M-W-P), as well as those who had children prior to work or marriage (P-M-W/P-W-M), are not as happy with their lives as men who followed the normative course of role transitions (B = –1.09, B = –1.13, $p < .10$, respectively).

African American women who followed the W-P-M sequence are less depressed (B = –9.89, $p < .05$) and happier with their lives (B = .98, $p < .10$) compared to their peers who followed the normative pattern of working first, getting married, and then having children (W-M-P). In addition, women who marry first are either happier with their lives (M-W-P: B = .88, $p < .10$) or report lower levels of depression (M-P-W: B = –15.05, $p < .05$) when compared to their peers who followed the more typical pathway into young adulthood.

Turning to the subgroup of white women who are divorced, working mothers, we also find that role sequencing matters for mental health (see panel B). Women who started their families before working and getting a divorce (M-P-W-D) are more depressed (B = 8.53, $p < .05$) and are not as happy with their lives (B = –.61, $p < .10$) as women who followed the W-M-P-D sequence. A similar pattern emerges among the sample of married, unemployed parents, as described below.

As demonstrated in panel C, there are no significant differences in the psychological impact of role sequencing on mental health when we take into consideration particular patterns among white men who are married, unemployed fathers. Perhaps the lack of significant differences between men who followed the normative sequence and those who followed other sequencing patterns (especially M-W-P-U) was due to small cell sizes.

In regards to white women, however, we first find that there were no significant differences between those who exited the paid labor force before starting their families (W-U-M-P or W-M-U-P) and those who followed the "normative" pattern of work, followed by marriage, parenthood, and later unemployment

TABLE 3. Summary of Regression Models Predicting the Impact of Particular Role Sequencing Patterns on Mental Health among Adults in Three Role Configurations in the NSFH (unstandardized regression coefficients shown with standard errors in parentheses)[a]

	White Men		White Women		African American Men		African American Women	
Independent Variable	Depression	Happiness	Depression	Happiness	Depression	Happiness	Depression	Happiness
Panel A: Married, Working Parents[b]								
W-P-M (coded 1)	−2.50	−.19	5.86	−.29	−13.02*	.21	−20.11*	.98†
	(4.13)	(.38)	(4.36)	(.35)	(6.46)	(.50)	(8.14)	(.58)
M-W-P (coded 1)	3.02†	−.00	.36	−.37	−1.76	−1.09†	−5.82	.88†
	(1.79)	(.16)	(3.10)	(.25)	(7.98)	(.62)	(8.18)	(.58)
M-P-W (coded 1)	−3.73	.26	−.54	−.00	−13.19	−.24	−15.05*	.64
	(2.58)	(.23)	(2.22)	(.18)	(9.59)	(.74)	(7.57)	(.52)
P-M-W/P-W-M (coded 1)	−5.72	−.16	5.26	−.37	7.53	−1.13†	−5.49	.21
	(9.17)	(.84)	(3.76)	(.30)	(8.33)	(.64)	(6.87)	(.49)
R^2	.06	.03	.04	.04	.26	.13	.30	.26
Panel B: Divorced, Working Parents[c]								
M-W-P-D (coded 1)			.32	−.21				
			(4.49)	(.39)				
M-P-W-D (coded 1)			8.53*	−.61†				
			(3.84)	(.33)				
M-P-D-W (coded 1)			.76	−.37				
			(4.79)	(.41)				
All Others			8.71*	−.50				
			(4.05)	(.35)				
R^2			.25	.11				
Panel C: Married, Unemployed Parents[d]								
W-M-U-P (coded 1)	—	—	.00	.18				
			(3.64)	(.25)				
W-U-M-P (coded 1)	—	—	−1.43	.16				
			(4.62)	(.32)				
M-W-P-U (coded 1)	4.47	.18	12.88*	−.42				
	(3.72)	(.37)	(5.62)	(.39)				
M-W-U-P (coded 1)	—	—	−3.70	.81*				
			(5.20)	(.36)				
M-P-W-U (coded 1)	—	—	7.77*	−.60				
			(4.10)	(.28)				
All others	−3.85	−.11	11.55*	.00				
	(5.78)	(.58)	(5.27)	(.36)				
R^2	.07	.05	.09	.07				

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed test)

Note: Each equation included the control variables (see text).

[a] Empty cells represent no analyses conducted for these subgroups.

[b] Comparison category is W-M-P (coded 0)

[c] Comparison category is W-M-P-D (coded 0)

[d] Comparison category is W-M-P-U (coded 0)

(W-M-P-U). However, white women who married, entered the paid labor force, and had children prior to their job loss (M-W-P-U) and those who first married, had children, found employment, and later left the labor force (M-P-W-U) are more depressed (B = 12.88 and 7.77, $p < .05$, respectively) than their peers who followed the normative pattern (W-M-P-U). Women who followed the M-W-U-P sequence are happier with their lives than those who followed the normative pattern of role transitions. In other words, the biggest difference among the unemployed mothers in this sample appears to be between those who work first and those who marry first.[8]

In sum, order matters for most multiple role occupants but frequently in unexpected ways across race/ethnicity and gender.[9] When there are significant differences between orderly and disorderly subgroups of white adults, the disorderly subgroups are, in general, more depressed and less happy. African American men and women, on the other hand, provide mixed support for the normative order hypothesis.

There were very few effects of role sequencing on mental health in the sample of white women who were married, working parents. To explore this further, I examined the impact of role sequencing on mental health among white women, taking into consideration historically situated birth cohorts. Cohort effects are described below for each of the three role configurations.

Birth cohort analysis. In exploring differences between birth cohorts in regards to mental health, I found significant variation within the sample of white women only. The cohort distinction explored among white women was between the baby boom generation (including some "baby busters": 1946–1964) and their older peers (women born before 1945, often referred to as the "mature" generation). This was the most logical distinction, given the age distribution of the women who fall within these multiple role categories. It is also common practice among life course sociologists to distinguish cohort members by historical experience (see Hogan 1978). Upon closer examination of these particular cohorts, there were some interesting differences in both the distribution and the psychological impact of role sequencing. The results from these analyses are summarized below.

First, a visual depiction of the type of sequencing patterns followed by the different cohorts of women is shown in Figure 1. The most frequently cited sequences are presented for the three role configurations, along with a combined sample across the configurations.

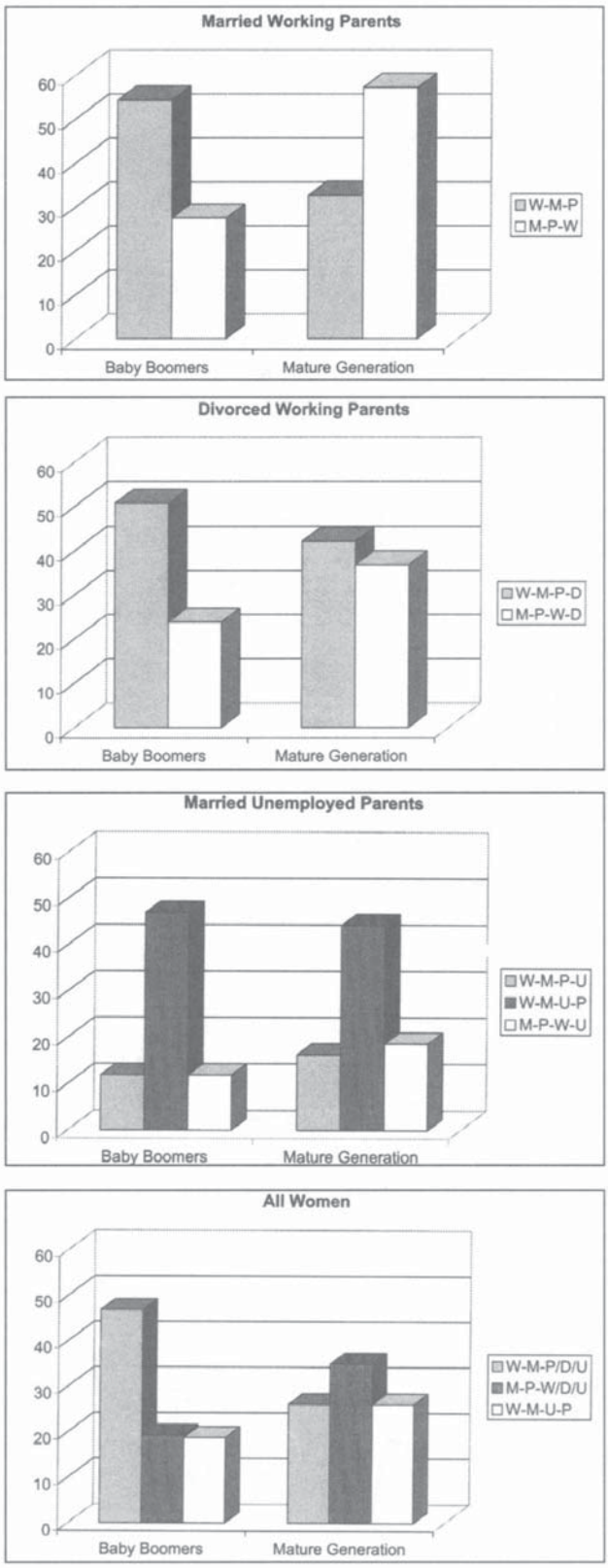
As illustrated here, the biggest difference between baby boomers and women in the mature generation can be seen among married, working mothers. Approximately 69 percent of baby boomers followed the normative course of events by working first, getting married, and later having children (W-M-P), compared to 34 percent of women from the mature generation. On the other hand, 60 percent of women from the mature generation followed a traditional female pattern of getting married, having children, and later entering the paid labor force (M-P-W), compared to only 22 percent of baby boomers.

This disparity fades somewhat among divorced, working mothers. Although a higher percentage of baby boomers followed the normative course of role transitions prior to their loss (51%), the majority of women in the mature generation also followed the norm (42%). A much higher percentage of women in the mature generation continue to report following the M-P-W pathway (37%), compared to baby boomers (24%).

Again, unemployed mothers report diverse life course patterns. The most prevalent sequencing pattern for baby boomers and women born in the mature generation is to exit the paid labor force prior to the birth of their first child (W-M-U-P: 47% and 44%, respectively), although the mature generation is still outpacing baby boomers in having followed the traditional female pattern of getting married first. As demonstrated in the combined sample, white women born during the baby boom generation have life course patterns that are more similar to men's than the mature generation of women (see Buchmann 1989 for similar findings).

In terms of the mental health consequences for women situated in these birth cohorts, a series of regression models were estimated. The results from these analyses demonstrate that women born during the baby boom generation who followed the normative pattern of work first, followed by marriage, and then parenthood (W-M-P) report the most positive mental health outcomes, especially when compared to women whose first transition into adulthood is marriage.

FIGURE 1. Particular Sequencing Patterns followed by White Women in Three Role Configurations in the NSFH, by Birth Cohort



The first set of models explored variation within-role configurations between the two birth cohorts, concentrating on differences between women who followed the norm (W-M-P) and those who followed the traditional female pathway of family formation prior to labor force participation (M-P-W). Within each of these regression models (estimated separately for each role configuration), I included a dummy variable representing the birth cohort, a dummy variable measuring role sequencing, and an interaction term between birth cohort and role sequencing. Role sequencing was measured by a dummy variable comparing those who followed the norm (W-M-P) to all others and then comparing those who followed the M-P-W pattern to all others.

The results from these analyses indicate that married, working mothers who followed the normative order and who belong to the baby boom generation report higher levels of life happiness (B = .83, $p < .05$), while those who followed the M-P-W pattern (compared to all others) are not very happy with their lives (B = –.82, $p < .05$). When making this type of comparison, no differences were found among the divorced. However, a difference does surface among the unemployed: Baby boomers who followed the traditional female pattern of M-P-W are somewhat more depressed than other women (B = 11.32, $p < .10$). Not surprisingly, when the sample is combined across role configurations (holding constant marital and employment status), I found that baby boomers who followed the normative course of events (compared to those who followed the M-P-W pattern) are happier than other women (B = 1.01, $p < .05$).

The most telling story, however, emerged when I divided the sample by birth cohort and explored variation within each role configuration. It is here that I found a more pervasive impact of role sequencing on women's mental health. Comparisons were made between women who followed the norm (W-M-P) and those who followed particular sequencing patterns. A summary of the results from these analyses is presented in Table 4.

As demonstrated here, regardless of role configuration and cohort status, women whose first transition into adulthood is employment report better mental health outcomes than women who marry first. In fact, even though the statistical norm among mature generation women was to get married first, having followed this statistical normative sequence does not appear to be of much emotional benefit in the long term.

On one hand, these findings suggest that women in the baby boom generation are somehow different from their mothers in regards to the meaning assigned to the order of these role transitions. Perhaps the women's movement is the important historical factor that marks the experiences of these women. If this is the case, the normative order hypothesis as it relates to white women is more properly contextualized in a framework of historical time (Elder 1978).

On the other hand, getting married first seems to be problematic for both groups of white women. Women who marry, work, and then have children seem to be the most torn among the group of married, working mothers. Perhaps women who followed the M-W-P sequence are experiencing the greatest amount of role conflict. Although marriage came first, embarking on a career (or entering the paid labor force) before having children may be causing them to question their priorities (Cowan and Hetherington 1991). Women who acquire consecutive family roles (W-M-P or M-P-W) appear the most emotionally healthy (among married, working parents), but the experience of divorce and unemployment highlights the lasting utility of working before starting a family.[10]

Unlike the description provided on the life course patterns of various cohorts of women (e.g., see Sorensen 1983; Treiman 1985), exiting the paid labor force before having children is not a cohort phenomenon but appears to be a situation faced by particular women across birth cohorts. Furthermore, there are few differences between women who exit the paid labor force before they start their families (W-M-U-P, W-U-M-P) and those who follow the norm (W-M-P-U). There appears to be no emotionally damaging effects of this decision, thus supporting Cardozo's (1986) contention that some trailblazing women begin the life course with full-time careers but then purposefully exit the labor force to raise their children on a full-time basis. She argues that these women have adjusted their expectations and wrestle less with societal pressure to be a superwoman than many people think. This study provides empirical evidence for this position and goes a step further to demonstrate that even women who may have married first but exited the paid

TABLE 4. Summary of Cohort Analysis for White Women in Three Role Configurations in the NSFH

	Role Configuration		
	Married Working Parents[a]	Divorced Working Parents[b]	Married Unemployed Parents[c]
Baby Boomers	M-W-P < happy	M-W-P-D < happy	
			M-W-P-U > depression
			M-W-U-P > happy
		M-P-W-D < happy	
		M-P-W-D > depression	M-P-W-U > depression
Mature Generation	M-W-P > depression		M-W-P-U > depression
		M-P-W-D > depression	

Note: W = work, M = marriage, P = parenthood, D = divorce, U = unemployment.
[a] Comparison category is W-M-P
[b] Comparison category is W-M-P-D
[c] Comparison category is W-M-P-U. These differences were also found when the comparison category was women who followed the "statistically" normative sequence W-M-U-P. The only exception was the lack of significant difference between these women and those who followed the M-W-P-U pattern.

Married Working Parents
Baby Boomers: M-W-P report lower life happiness (B = –.49, p < .10).
Mature Generation: M-W-P are more depressed (B = 24.53, p < .05).

Divorced Working Parents
Baby Boomers: M-P-W-D report lower life happiness (B = –.52, p < .10).
M-P-W-D are more depressed (B = 9.43, p < .05)
M-W-P-D report lower life happiness (B = –.71, p < .10)
Mature Generation: M-P-W-D are more depressed (B = 17.43, p < .10)

Married Unemployed Mothers
Baby Boomers: M-P-W-U are more depressed (B = 16.01, p < .01)
M-W-P-U are more depressed (B = 11.77, p < .10)
M-W-U-P are happier (B = .59, p < .10)
Mature Generation: M-W-P-U are more depressed (B = 23.24, p < .05)

labor force before having children (M-W-U-P) often lead satisfactory lives.

DISCUSSION

Since most people experience primary social roles (i.e., worker, spouse, parent) within their lifetimes, the psychological impact of the order in which those roles are acquired across the life course is an important consideration in the sociological study of stress. The results of this study suggest that most adults follow a normative course of role transitions and that role sequencing matters for adult mental health. The differences found across racial/ethnic and gender groups, however, highlight the complexity underlying a life course approach to role behavior.

Admittedly, I did not study the actual process of role acquisition nor did I assess changes in resources and role stress as roles were acquired. Perhaps adults adjust to role changes within a short time frame or redefine "nonnormative" situations as constructive personal experiences. For example, some have argued that parenting out-of-wedlock is not a pathological response, but ". . . a healthy, creative adaptation to unhealthy environmental conditions" (Ladner 1971:27). I studied a characteristic of social roles that has allowed for a consideration of the long-term consequences of these types of life course decisions. In doing so, I still found evidence of a residual effect of "nonnormative" role participation on mental health.

Among African Americans, this research provides further evidence that some unmarried parents recover from the emotional burdens of early parenting, but only in the context of employment (see Furstenberg 1976). Initially, I argued that adults who have children before work or marriage face the possibility of increased parental strain and less social support. In examining some of the information provided by parents (data not shown), I actually found that African Americans who followed the W-P-M pattern provide more positive appraisals regarding parenting than their peers who followed the normative course of events

(W-M-P). Furthermore, adults who had their children prior to getting married are more likely to live in households that include extended family members (e.g., in-laws). Perhaps these individuals are providing the social support necessary to reduce parental strain and offset the societal sanctioning of having entered adulthood in an atypical fashion.

Of course, conformity is often defined according to Anglo-Saxon norms. Minorities who are marginalized may not necessarily adhere to the same codes of behavior. Parenthood, in fact, often becomes a badge of honor among some inner-city youth (Anderson 1999). At the same time, the W-P-M pattern is not wholly inconsistent with the normative model of the life course. Working first fulfills the function of providing an economic base for the family. The most consistent pattern across racial/ethnic categories, therefore, is the utility of establishing an economic base prior to taking on family burdens. The contrast (and consistencies) in the findings for African Americans in regards to the normative order hypothesis underscores the need for more research on the meaning of social roles and their sequence to ethnic minorities.

Even though employment provides a vital infrastructure for family life, I did not incorporate the ways in which families cope with stress or resource depletion. For example, research suggests that families adjust to financial stress through wives' employment (Ewer, Crimmins, and Oliver 1979; Oppenheimer 1979). Similarly, women who begin their families before engaging in paid employment often have spouses who are working at the time of the marriage. As such, I may be missing the complexity in individual mental health by not assessing the complementarities of roles within the household. This type of approach awaits future study.

An important component to this life course puzzle is the emotional reactions people have about the order in which they entered adulthood. In other words, to what extent are people satisfied with these early life course decisions? The variation in mental health responses can probably be more fully explained by a combination of several personality factors and the explanations people provide for making these role transitions. Other important aspects of roles, including timing and spacing, may also contribute to emotional well-being. For example, I found that white men who are early in the timing of work are less satisfied with their jobs compared to those who enter the workforce at the same time as the majority of their peers (data not shown). Considering the simultaneous effects of timing and sequencing may prove fruitful in future research.

The current research is an important piece to this life course puzzle since it offers evidence of a relationship between ordering patterns and later life adjustment among a heterogeneous adult population. In demonstrating that individuals who acquire the same role set (married, working parents) are not equally well or poorly adjusted, this study highlights the utility of the cross-fertilization between stress research (including structural role theory) and life course sociology (George 1993).

In general, the models described in much of the life course literature pertain to the male experience (Giele 1982; Rossi 1980). There is growing appreciation for the way in which women's life course patterns may differ from men's (Riley 1985), especially in regards to possible cohort differences. The cohort analysis explored in this article provides further empirical support for this position. Normative expectations for women may have changed due to the women's movement. As such, the implicit assumption in the life course literature that the dominant white male pattern applies to other groups is likely mistaken. At the same time, it would appear that once women experience a role loss (such as divorce and/or unemployment), the benefits of having followed the normative course of events becomes even more relevant across birth cohorts. Rather than inferring norms about sequence from white male patterns, we need to conduct studies of normative beliefs about appropriate role orders by race/ethnicity and gender.

This study raises important theoretical questions for stress research and life course sociology. What factors structure life course decisions? Are the trends in life course patterns evidence of the destandardization of the life course? There is some discussion regarding the influence of socialization to societal norms, role-making processes, and opportunity structures in determining the transition to adulthood (see Clausen 1991; Meyer 1988; Pallas 1993). Perhaps it is a combination of these factors that helps explain both race/ethnic and gender variation in the impact of role sequencing. In an effort to construct a sound bridge between these two paradigms, these issues must be

given more careful attention in the study of social roles.

Although compelling, the findings from this research must be viewed with caution. Given the cross-sectional nature of the study the issue of self-selection into particular sequencing patterns cannot be ignored. Even though the analyses were structured to explore role sequencing among individuals who currently occupied the same set of social roles, perhaps individuals with certain personality characteristics are more likely than others to follow the normative pathway (Clausen 1991). Despite these limitations, this study advances our understanding and appreciation of the context in which social roles are acquired over the life course. The next step is to try to disentangle the mediating factors in the relationship between role sequencing and mental health.

NOTES

1. This study focuses on order rather than timing, asserting that norms that govern order may not be age norms, per se.
2. Although men of different ethnic origins were included in Hogan's (1978) study, there is little discussion of the extent of variation in the life course patterns among the men.
3. As noted by an anonymous reviewer, being in the military is also a job. Unfortunately, the NSFH did not gather information on military service history to the same extent as it did civilian work history. In fact, while I know the date in which individuals began active duty, I do not know when they were not on active duty. Only information regarding the last separation from active duty is included in the NSFH. Approximately 32% of the white men, .9% of white women, 24% of African American men, and 1.1% of African American women across the three role configurations report having ever been on active duty for more than six months. The implications for the role of military experience in predicting sequencing behavior, therefore, are stronger for men. To the extent that military experience is related to sequencing behavior, differences between sequencing patterns may be due to extended work experience rather than any long-term consequences of role experiences garnered across the sequence (as argued in the paper). The impact of role sequencing on mental health might be overstated if men who have military experience are more likely to then enter a civilian job rather than get married first. To capture some of these effects, I included a variable measuring whether the respondent has ever been on active duty. This variable did not alter the results reported in the body of the paper and was, therefore, not included in the final analyses.
4. Given the way in which employment was assessed in the NSFH, entry into the labor force is not an independent event from school or military service; therefore, I do not examine the sequencing of these roles in relation to the sequencing of other role transitions (see Marini 1984 for this type of analysis).
5. This approach also negates the social selection problem that occurs when studies do not consider prior role history in the examination of psychological well-being (see Aseltine and Kessler 1993 for a discussion of this issue). This conceptual issue has been ignored by some investigations of role sequencing (see Marini 1984; Hogan 1978) and discussed in regards to its contamination effects by others (see Rindfuss et al. 1987).
6. Early research on role sequencing indicates that educational attainment predicts sequencing patterns when education is measured as a categorical variable (Hogan 1978, 1981; Marini 1984). Because the dependent variable in this study is mental health, rather than sequencing behavior, I measure age and education at the interval level (to be consistent with stress research). At the same time, I recognize that these variables do not capture the complexity of the sequencing process as might be more clearly illustrated by the age at the time of a transition (see Settersten and Hagestad 1996; Settersten 1997) or the extent to which levels of education may launch an individual onto a particular trajectory. The measure of education in the NSFH is not independent of employment history (see body of paper), making it difficult to pursue this relationship here.
7. Descriptive statistics on the background and dependent variables for each of the subsamples can be found in Appendix A.
8. See Appendices B and C for the descriptive

statistics on the mental health outcomes across sequencing categories for the study sample.

9. I examined the sequencing of two roles among five subsamples of dual-role occupants in the NSFH, when the sample size permitted (determined as $n \geq 50$). The results from these analyses further indicate that order matters for adult mental health. I also combined the three samples of multiple role occupants (married, working parents; divorced, working parents; and married, unemployed parents), holding constant employment and marital status and including two interaction terms (role sequencing * employment status; role sequencing * marital status) in the regression models predicting mental health. The results of these analyses are available upon request.
10. At the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, pure "age" effects were explored by including an interaction term between age and sequencing pattern in the models predicting mental health. There were very few age effects, but there is one worth noting: older women who followed the normative sequence (W-M-P) are not as happy with their lives as their peers who followed other life course patterns. These findings, in conjunction with the cohort analysis that compares the mental health status of women across sequencing patterns, indicate a general pattern of wear-and-tear among women who get married first, enter the paid labor force, and later have children (M-W-P). In fact, it is here where it appears that age effects are stronger than birth cohort effects. In other words, the M-W-P sequencing pattern seems to wear women out over time.

APPENDIX A. Mean Values for Variables Used in the Analysis by Race, Gender, and Role Configuration (standard deviations in brackets)

	Control Variables						Dependent Variables	
Subsamples	Age	Education	Full-time	Minor in HH	# of Children	# Years to Complete	Depression	Happiness
White								
Men								
Married, Working Parents	38.79	12.72	0.99	0.77	1.96	6.14	22.47	5.58
	[11.24]	[.97]	[.09]	[.41]	[.70]	[4.22]	[13.93]	[1.19]
Divorced, Working Parents	38.93	12.65	.99	.34	1.83	15.91	27.17	4.98
	[9.81]	[1.08]	[.10]	[.47]	[.69]	[8.32]	[17.66]	[1.27]
Married, Unemployed Parents	65.32	11.62	.99	.12	2.11	39.26	22.26	5.75
	[14.79]	[2.06]	[.08]	[.33]	[.71]	[13.42]	[12.20]	[1.30]
Women								
Married, Working Parents	34.08	12.79	0.77	0.84	1.75	6.89	24.79	5.56
	[9.61]	[.84]	[.42]	[.36]	[.76]	[5.34]	[13.29]	[1.13]
Divorced, Working Parents	36.12	12.76	.91	.81	1.69	10.75	28.58	5.04
	[10.31]	[.85]	[.29]	[.39]	[.66]	[7.22]	[15.15]	[1.16]
Married, Unemployed Parents	39.67	12.52	.87	.67	1.91	8.90	26.78	5.73
	[16.95]	[1.23]	[.33]	[.46]	[.78]	[10.29]	[16.81]	[1.15]
African American								
Men								
Married, Working Parents	36.27	12.64	0.97	0.87	1.98	5.72	25.61	5.71
	[9.83]	[1.04]	[.16]	[.33]	[.70]	[4.19]	[17.79]	[1.28]
Women								
Married, Working Parents	35.23	12.93	0.91	0.82	1.75	7.37	27.95	5.36
	[10.53]	[.39]	[.29]	[.38]	[.69]	[5.69]	[16.62]	[1.20]
Divorced, Working Parents	37.16	12.70	.98	.74	1.96	6.34	26.22	5.33
	[7.64]	[.78]	[.14]	[.44]	[.80]	[7.19]	[13.91]	[1.16]

APPENDIX B. Mean Levels of Mental Health for Groups in the NSFH, with Primary Role Sequencing Patterns Shown (standard deviations in brackets)

	White							
	Depression				Happiness			
Role Configuration	Men		Women		Men		Women	
Married, Working Parents	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N
W-M-P	22.46	448	24.75	149	5.59	409	5.60	135
	[13.75]		[13.04]		[1.16]		[1.18]	
W-P-M	24.40	15	30.60	10	5.36	14	5.30	10
	[18.07]		[20.85]		[1.55]		[.67]	
M-W-P	24.22	68	25.04	21	5.52	66	5.26	19
	[15.28]		[12.53]		[1.29]		[1.09]	
M-P-W	18.14	34	23.04	71	5.82	34	5.69	62
	[11.25]		[12.77]		[1.14]		[1.11]	
P-M-W or P-W-M	18.20	5	31.33	12	4.25	4	5.17	12
	[6.57]		[11.97]		[1.70]		[1.03]	
Divorced, Working Parents								
W-M-P-D	25.34	69	26.57	42	5.14	64	5.28	40
	[16.14]		[13.58]		[1.00]		[1.08]	
M-W-P-D	24.80	5	22.45	11	5.88	8	5.50	12
	[10.40]		[12.19]		[.83]		[1.24]	
M-P-W-D	31.00	5	32.41	22	4.50	6	4.71	21
	[31.48]		[15.42]		[1.87]		[1.05]	
M-P-D-W	—		26.92	11	—		4.83	11
			[13.27]				[1.33]	
Married, Unemployed Parents								
W-M-P-U	21.94	109	25.62	33	5.83	109	5.54	33
	[11.95]		[17..73]		[1.27]		[1.16]	
W-M-U-P	—		25.25	113	—		5.79	113
			[15.79]				[1.21]	
W-U-M-P	24.33	3	24.30	35	5.00	3	5.84	35
	[3.51]		[13.35]		[1.72]		[1.08]	
M-W-P-U	25.96	14	34.61	13	5.79	14	5.19	13
	[16.91]		[26.20]		[1.02]		[1.34]	
M-W-U-P	—		21.58	17	—		6.35	17
			[7.95]				[.70]	
M-P-W-U	21.50	4	30.75	35	6.00	4	5.58	35
	[13.89]		[16.90]		[1.15]		[1.13]	

Note: W = work, M = marriage, P = parenthood, D = divorce, U = unemployment.
[a] Empty cells represent no analyses conducted for these subgroups

APPENDIX C. Mean Levels of Mental Health for Groups in the NSFH, with Primary Role Sequencing Patterns Shown (standard deviations in brackets)

	African American[a]							
	Depression				Happiness			
Role Configuration	Men		Women		Men		Women	
Married, Working Parents	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N
W-M-P	27.02	46	28.27	22	5.95	40	5.24	21
	[19.95]		[17.12]		[1.23]		[1.13]	
W-P-M	17.41	12	19.57	7	5.92	12	6.00	6
	[6.57]		[8.73]		[1.08]		[.89]	
M-W-P	26.57	7	24.75	4	4.83	6	6.25	4
	[18.61]		[17.03]		[1.94]		[.50]	
M-P-W	19.33	6	25.76	13	5.40	5	5.22	9
	[5.20]		[18.29]		[.54]		[.97]	
P-M-W or P-W-M	34.85	7	35.20	15	4.83	6	5.07	14
	[18.41]		[16.32]		[1.16]		[1.59]	

(Continued on next page)

APPENDIX C. ***(Continued)***

	African American[a]			
	Depression		Happiness	
Role Configuration	Men	Women	Men	Women
Divorced, Working Parents				
W-M-P-D		23.38 [8.31] 13		5.18 [.89] 13
M-W-P-D		35.00 [31.59] 4		4.83 [1.29] 4
M-P-W-D		25.14 [4.81] 7		5.76 [1.08] 7
M-P-D-W		28.84 [14.81] 4		5.00 [1.58] 4

Note: W = work, M = marriage, P = parenthood, D = divorce.
[a] Empty cells represent no analyses conducted for these subgroups.

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