Preface

In 1981, Leonard Pearlin and his colleagues published an article that would radically shift the sociological study of mental health from an emphasis on psychiatric disorder to a focus on social structure and its consequences for stress and psychological distress. Pearlin et al. (1981) proposed a deceptively simple conceptual model that has now influenced sociological inquiry for almost three decades. With his characteristic penchant for reconsidering and elaborating his own ideas, Pearlin has revisited the stress process model periodically over the years (Pearlin 1989, 1999; Pearlin et al. 2005; Pearlin and Skaff 1996). One of the consequences of this continued theoretical elaboration of the stress process has been the development of a sociological model of stress that embraces the complexity of social life. Another consequence is that the stress process has continued to stimulate a host of empirical investigations in the sociology of mental health. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the stress process paradigm has been primarily responsible for the growth and sustenance of sociological research on stress and mental health.

Pearlin et al. (1981) described the core elements of the stress process in a brief paragraph:

The process of social stress can be seen as combining three major conceptual domains: the sources of stress, the mediators of stress, and the manifestations of stress. Each of these extended domains subsumes a variety of subparts that have been intensively studied in recent years. Thus, in the search for sources of stress, considerable interest has been directed to life events and to chronic life strains, especially the former; in work concerned with conditions capable of mediating the impact of stressful circumstances, coping and social supports have had a rather dramatic rise to prominence; and as for stress and its symptomatic manifestations, the expanding volume of research ranges from the microbiological substrates of stress to its overt emotional and behavioral expressions (p. 337).

With these three sentences, a paradigm was launched – one that has emerged as the dominant perspective in the sociology of stress and mental health.

This initial specification of the stress process is now widely known. Pearlin and his colleagues described how stressful life events and more chronic life strains diminish individuals’ self concepts and their sense of mastery. They also argued that two types of psychosocial resources, social support and coping, play important roles in protecting individuals from the consequences of their stressful experiences.
Pearlin et al. (1981) made the important assertion that “there are several junctures at which the mediators can conceivably intervene: prior to an event, between an event and the life strains that it stimulates, between the strain and the diminishment of the self-concept, or prior to the stress outcome” (p. 341). Thus, at this early stage in the development of the stress process paradigm, the complexity of a seemingly simple model was apparent. Although some of the constructs and dynamics of the stress process had been introduced earlier by Pearlin (Pearlin 1980, 1983; Pearlin and Lieberman 1979; Pearlin and Schooler 1978), the synthesis of these ideas into a model and the presentation of an empirical test of that formulation clearly catapulted the paradigm into the forefront of thinking and research in medical sociology and the sociology of mental health.

In a subsequent article, Pearlin (1989) more explicitly discussed the central importance of the social context in which the stress process operates. In so doing, he highlighted the distinctive sociological perspective that the stress process brings to the study of stress and its manifestations. He also elaborated on the interplay among stressful life events and chronic strains and continued to explore the locations in the stress process where mediators could be expected to exert their influence. In this paper, Pearlin clearly establishes the sociological character of the stress process.

Pearlin’s (1999) contribution to the Handbook of the Sociology of Mental Health (Aneshensel and Phelan 1999) provides a comprehensive reflection on the stress process paradigm approximately two decades after its creation. In this chapter, Pearlin identifies three key assumptions that underlie the model. First, the stress process is dynamic in nature: changes in one set of factors produce changes in others. Second, Pearlin argued persuasively that social stress is by no means unusual or abnormal; indeed, it is typical of ordinary life. Stress arises out of commonly-held social roles of everyday life and in typical social contexts. Third, the origins of stress are in the social world. This directs the sociological study of stress to a greater emphasis on social context than on history or biology.

Pearlin then systematically reviews the major components of the stress process. He reiterates the importance of social and economic statuses as crucial structures that influence human experience. He draws attention to the importance of the neighborhood context as a kind of crucible in which life experiences occur. He further elaborates the domain of stressors by noting that other dimensions of stress require consideration within the paradigm and he articulates the concept of stress proliferation (having earlier provided an empirical demonstration of this process in Pearlin et al. 1997). In this chapter, he also clarifies the conceptual distinction between resources as mediators and resources as moderators of the stress–distress relationship. He concludes with a succinct justification of the advantages of examining psychological distress as the primary outcome in stress process research.

These three major statements in 1981, 1989, and 1999, together with Pearlin’s program of empirical research, provided sociologists with a well-articulated model that was soon applied to a variety of issues. His emphasis on the social context in which the stress process unfolds became one of the dominant perspectives for understanding the social patterning of mental health and illness. His careful consideration of the many sources of stressors in people’s lives and the variations in the
availability of mediating and moderating resources provided sociologists with a rich source of ideas for empirical investigation. Leonard Pearlin’s work has been particularly noteworthy in the ways that it has fostered innovation in the study of social roles, especially those related to the family and work. His ideas have also stimulated studies of the social structural determinants of psychosocial resources such as social support and mastery.

Remarkably, this was only the beginning. In a seminal paper, Pearlin et al. (1997) demonstrated how the stress process could be applied to the study of caregiving. In subsequent studies of people giving care to persons with HIV/AIDS (Pearlin et al. 1997; Turner et al. 1998) and caregivers to persons with Alzheimer’s disease or other dementias (Aneshensel et al. 1993, 1995; Pearlin 1992; Skaff and Pearlin 1992; Skaff et al. 1992), the utility of the stress process for understanding the stress of caregiving was documented empirically. This work not only introduced the stress process paradigm to social scientists interested in caregiving and family dynamics, but it also brought the paradigm to the attention of researchers in the health sciences and other disciplines concerned with family-based care. In short order, research based on the stress process paradigm increased exponentially.

The influence of this paradigm spread further as Leonard Pearlin began to explore the ways in which the stress process might be aligned with ideas from the life course perspective. Pearlin and Skaff (1996) suggested a number of ways in which principles central to the life course perspective could be integrated with key elements of the stress process to examine how individuals’ exposure to stressors. They suggested that as people move through the life course, individuals’ lives are restructured. As their statuses and roles change, so too do the stressors they encounter and the mediating resources to which they have access.

These ideas have been elaborated; Pearlin et al. (2005) specify elements of the stress process that may affect stress and health across the life course. These include the effects of economic strains and discriminatory experiences, stress proliferation, and the intersection of status attainment and stress exposure. This synthesis of the stress process with the life course has been stimulating to research in the sociology of mental health. Most recently, Turner and Schieman (2008) have assembled a wide-ranging set of papers that explore the interface of the stress process with the life course.

It is no exaggeration to assert that this vast body of research on stress and mental health is due in large part to the imagination of Leonard Pearlin. The richness of his theoretical ideas and his apparent comfort with investigating the complexities of social life have called a generation of sociological researchers to action. The work continues and a second generation has emerged to carry on this research. And there is little doubt that the generative nature of Len’s responses to the work of others has facilitated the continuing significance of the stress process.

In honor of Leonard Pearlin’s significant contributions to sociological theory and research, we invited some of his colleagues, collaborators, students, and friends to contribute essays that attest to Len’s influence on their work. We also encouraged these researchers to tell us what their future lines of inquiry might be and how Leonard Pearlin’s ideas have shaped these new directions.
Initially, the authors came together in Boston in August 2008, for a day of celebration with Len. The day began with a breakfast hosted by Jean Shin, Director of the American Sociological Association (ASA) Minority Affairs Program. Len Pearlin has been a long-time supporter of the Minority Fellowship Program. The breakfast provided new MFP Fellows with the opportunity to meet a number of sociologists with research interests in stress and health.

Sally Hillsman, Executive Officer of ASA presented Len with a plaque that acknowledged his contributions to the MFP program. She also noted that Len Pearlin has been a member of ASA for 58 years. We then presented our papers, shared memories with Len, and conclude with a celebratory dinner. We have included a picture of the entire group. The essays that appear in this book are all dedicated to Len Pearlin, colleague, mentor and friend.

We wish to acknowledge the American Sociological Association for providing meeting space for the one-day event and Jean Shin for hosting the MFP breakfast. We also wish to thank Teresa Krauss and Katie Chabalko at Springer for their support of this project. Special thanks to Kathleen Lynch for her assistance in the final editing process.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the efforts of our colleagues in contributing to this book. Their cooperation has been stellar. Over many years, this group of stress researchers has met regularly at the American Sociological Association Annual Meetings where the Section on the Sociology of Mental Health has become a vibrant forum for the exchange of ideas. We will contribute our share of royalties from the sale of this book to the Section in recognition of its continued support of sociological research.

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Toronto, ON Scott Schieman
Toronto, ON Blair Wheaton

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Advances in the Conceptualization of the Stress Process

Essays in Honor of Leonard I. Pearlin

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