Making sure aging is active: the influence of health and well-being throughout the life course on active aging

Conference Item

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INTRODUCTION

• policy emphasis on 'active ageing'
• a life course perspective features in the approaches being adopted e.g. “encourage young adults to prepare for old age in their health, social and financial practices” (World Health Organisation, 2002: 52)
• Structure of the presentation
  1. Outline of the life course approach to health and well-being
  2. Importance of life course approach to ‘active ageing’ policies

1. OUTLINE OF THE LIFE COURSE APPROACH TO HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

• multidisciplinary approach which has been used to supplement biological and epidemiological based explanations.
• many different models
• starts from the premise that poorer health outcomes accumulate as we progress through each life stage
• from conception through to old age we are exposed to various risk factors. The health outcomes of these risks are shaped “independently, cumulatively and interactively” (Kuh and Hardy, 2002:5) by various environmental, psychological, social, historical and biological factors
• positive experiences can offset negative events
• led to the recognition of the development of disease over the life course and further understandings of the patterning of health and illness over the life course
• central to the contemporary public health movement and other policy areas e.g. social care
• used in many other areas of study e.g. inequalities in health, aging, disability, mental illness and injury prevention
2. RESEARCHING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

- Growing body of evidence that many risk factors for poorer health are rooted in people's experiences in the early years and that individuals exposed to severe adversity during their early years are at an increased risk of developing negative outcomes in later life (Borgonovi, 2010:1928)
- Only available from numerous disparate sources and organisations

- Aim: to synthesise the existing body evidence to get a full account of health and well-being across the whole lifespan from a life course perspective
- Life stages defined as:
  - Prenatal (prepregnancy and in utero)
  - Childhood (0-10)
  - Adolescence (11-19)
  - Young adulthood (20-39)
  - Midlife (40-65)
  - Old Age (over 65)

3. ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

- ……disentangling, let alone researching, all the processes that purportedly affect our health and well-being throughout our lives is highly problematic. Hence the life course perspective on health and well-being raises "formidable methodological challenges" (Graham, 2007:145)
- Looked at the literature about each of the stages in the life course I had identified and analysed what it tells us about risks to health that can occur in each stage and the implications of these risks for future life stages
RISKS OUTCOMES FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN OLD AGE

Pre-pregnancy influences
maternal prepregnancy weight below 50kg
low birth weight, which in turn can result in cardiovascular diseases, hypertension and diabetes

Fetal exposures
maternal diet
greater risk of poor fetal growth and low birth weight which can result in cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, obesity and diabetes

obesity in pregnancy
increases risk of abnormality
hydrocephalus, brain damage, epilepsy, deafness, blindness, growth problems

maternal alcohol consumption
fetal abnormalities eg Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) which lead to facial deformities, physical and emotional development problems, memory and attention deficits, cognitive and behavior problems

prenatal stress
low birth weight, which in turn can result in cardiovascular diseases, hypertension and diabetes

maternal antenatal depression
increased vulnerability to depression and abnormalities of the neuropsychiatric systems in adulthood

uncontrolled Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes
the effects of congenital malformation

4. RISKS TO HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN OLD AGE OVER THE LIFE COURSE

- risks to our health and well-being do accumulate as we progress through each life stage even in the later life stages
- very wide range of risks at each stage
- the risks in the various stages of the life course have many implications for health and well being in old age
## OUTCOMES FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN OLD AGE

### Childhood
- Outcomes: irreversible brain, skeletal and organ damage
- Risks: maternal depression, increased vulnerability to mental health problems

### Adolescence
- Outcomes: legacies of reduced employment prospects and unresolved emotional, developmental and fertility problems, ongoing anxiety, higher mortality risks
- Risks: chronic illnesses, poor mental health, inconsistent use of contraception

### Young adulthood
- Outcomes: cardiovascular disease, obesity, lower employment opportunities, lower income, reduced education attainment
- Risks: smoking, overweight and obesity, recreational drug use

### Late transition to parenthood
- Outcomes: increased risks of breast cancer and depression
- Risks: poverty

### Early transition to parenthood
- Outcomes: reduced employment, ongoing anxiety, increased risks of breast cancer and depression
- Risks: poverty
### 5. INFLUENCES ON THE OUTCOMES OF THE RISKS

#### a. the health outcomes of risks are shaped “independently, cumulatively and interactively” (Kuh and Hardy, 2002:5) by various environmental, psychological, social, historical and biological factors

#### b. the life course perspective recognises that negative events and risk factors can be offset by positive experiences or positive factors over the life course

### (a) environmental, psychological, social, historical and biological factors

- interactions between socioeconomic background and interpersonal resources
- gender
- social and cultural changes
- the economy
- poverty and social disadvantage
(b) positive experiences/factors which offset exposure to the negative events and risk factors

- breastfeeding
- personality
- ethnicity
- parenting

6. CONCLUSIONS

Implications for 'active ageing' policies
- a life course approach to 'active ageing' is very important
- need to address the influence of ALL the life stages on old age
- BUT there are many challenges because
  - many factors and influences interact in unpredictable ways
  - some factors and influences beyond control e.g. economy
  - other highly significant events can have unpredictable and long lasting effects on health and well-being across the life course

USEFUL REFERENCES

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