ONTGENETIC DEVELOPMENT AND 'BREAKDOWN IN ADAPTATION'

A Review on Psychosocial Factors Contributing to the Development of Myocardial Infarction, and a Description of a Research Programme.

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SUMMARY: In this paper, we review the role of the Type A coronary-prone behavior pattern, stressful life changes, and manifestations of vital exhaustion and depression in the development of myocardial infarction from a dynamic ontogenetic psychological perspective. It is argued, that although some of these psychosocial factors have contributed to different extents to the general understanding of the pathogenesis of myocardial infarction, in future studies more attention should be paid to the specific historical and social contexts in which Type A behavior, stressful life changes, and vital exhaustion and depression are embedded, in order to gain more psychological insight into the long-term developmental structures that may lead to the onset of coronary heart disease and myocardial infarction.

A research programme is described, in which the complex interactions between these psychosocial factors are investigated in different phases of the life course of myocardial infarction patients and healthy subjects, by means of epidemiological studies, biographical investigations, and psychophysiological experiments. Also two instruments that were developed to this purpose, the Maastricht Questionnaire on vital exhaustion and depression, and an interview schedule assessing the exposure to and coping with life changes over the life course, are discussed, together with some results.

* This paper should be regarded the result of a collective effort. Although the first author is primarily responsible for writing this paper, all authors have contributed equally to the research presented here, and to the theoretical and methodological considerations that have made these studies possible.

Dr. Paul Falger is a gerontologist, concerned with developmental structures and psychosocial factors in the biographies of myocardial infarction patients. Prof. dr. Ad Appels is a personality psychologist, and the author of the Maastricht Questionnaire on vital exhaustion and depression prior to myocardial infarction, and of the Dutch version of the Jenkins Activity Survey. He serves as the coordinator of the research programme. Dr. Rutger Lulofs is a psychophysiologist involved in research on psychophysiological and biochemical characteristics of the Type A behavior pattern, and of vital exhaustion and depression.

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, we consider 'breakdown in human adaptation' as the outcome of protracted psychosocial and biological processes that may cover extensive phases of the human life-span. However much this may appear to be a truism, yet this statement poses serious questions with respect to the appropriate methodology to be applied, or about the feasibility of the theoretical models to be constructed, in order to be able to conduct psychosocial research from this vantage point. It is proposed here that a life-span developmental orientation, both in methodology and theory construction, may solve some of those problems. The remainder of this paper, then, will be devoted to some considerations with respect to our investigations on 'breakdown in adaptation' that are presently being conducted from a life-span developmental perspective. These studies investigate the multilevel interactions of some psychosocial, behavioral and psychophysiological parameters in the development of myocardial infarction (MI) in adulthood.

First, we will review some properties of our particular life-span developmental theoretical orientation, then we will consider established empirical evidence about the factors mentioned above that may fit into this psychological orientation. This paper will be concluded with a description of the instruments that are employed in our studies, and with some results.

2. **ONTOCGENETIC DEVELOPMENT AND 'BREAKDOWN IN ADAPTATION'**

About a decade ago, life-span developmental psychology became established as a comprehensive theoretical and methodological orientation in studying human behavioral development, although the original notions, then rather isolated, date back to the 1930's (Bühler, 1968, originally published 1933). This orientation is concerned primarily with '..the description and explication of ontogenetic (age-related) behavioral change from birth to death' (Baltes & Goulet, 1970), and hence with examining '..intraindividual change in behavior across the life-span and with inter-individual differences (and similarities) in intraindividual change' (Baltes et al., 1977). The adjective 'life-span developmental' has become generally accepted as denoting the potential range of problems admissible for investigation. However, it would have been conceptually more accurate if emphasis would have been put instead on the manifold processes involved, in succintly speaking of 'ontogenetic' psychology (Schroots, 1982).