Introduction: Balancing Connectedness and Autonomy in Diverse Families

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Before describing the history, purpose, and structure of this book, it seems appropriate to identify an unintentional and latent theme in this *Handbook of Marriage and the Family, 3rd Edition*. As we edited these excellent chapters, a covert theme seemed to emerge in this immense amount of knowledge that explains why people seek to live in the diversity of family forms and close relationships described in this book. An essential theme that courses through these pages is that families, in their various forms, may be the primary means to address two fundamental interpersonal relationship needs: connection and autonomy. Reduced to their essence, family members, following the human inclination for social bonding, seek to address the elemental relationship question: "How to balance one's needs for connections with others while, at the same time, affirming one's individuality within their interpersonal relationships?" In a metaphoric sense, therefore, like birds, humans may need both a "nest" for secure *connections* as well as "wings" to soar freely and affirm their individuality within their everyday relationships.

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Much like birds, who build a great variety of nests for secure togetherness and have greatly varied flight capabilities, family members must manage this dynamic between togetherness and individuality in ways that fit their unique ecological and cultural circumstances (Raef, 2006; Rothbaum & Trommsdorf, 2007). The result is a great profusion of family and close relationships such as ethnic/cultural variations, cohabitation, dual earner families, nuclear families, as well as lesbian and gay families, to name only a few. Moreover, the failure to find a satisfactory balance for connection and autonomy within diverse family or close relationships may result in relationship/marital conflict, relationship dissolution, emotional divorce, family violence, family stress, disrupted parent–child relationships, delinquency, and sexual dysfunction (Peterson, 1995, 2009).

The increasingly diverse forms of family relationships demonstrated in these chapters may be a primary means through which most of the humanity seeks to address these basic social needs. This analogy underscores the importance of balancing both the need to be secure or *connected* with others, while simultaneously gaining *autonomy* within marital, premarital, partnership, heterosexual, same sex, parent–child, and close family relationships of all varieties (Peterson, 1995, 2009). Given the great diversity of human circumstances and almost infinite individual uniqueness, many family forms or close interpersonal relations are needed for family members to both seek and realize the desired balance between being connected to

others and autonomous enough to affirm one's individuality. As these chapters will illustrate in a multitude of ways, families continue to develop novel structures and processes so they can satisfy needs for establishing connections with each other while, at the same time, practicing autonomy in creative ways so they can adapt to changing social, cultural, historical, and economic circumstances.

An initial understanding of the importance of finding an acceptable balance in autonomy and connectedness in family relationships first requires clear descriptions of what is meant by these two concepts. The first of these dimensions, connectedness in family relationships, is an aspect of intimate relationships that is shaped by a complex of general social values and qualities frequently referred to as *collectivism* (Kagitcibasi, 1996; Rothbaum & Trommsdorf, 2007; Triandis, 2001). This concept refers to cohesiveness in relationships and is closely allied with such ideas as attachment, caregiver sensitivity, affection, intimacy, supportiveness, loyalty, emotional closeness, interpersonal harmony, conformity to authority, and giving priority to group/familial interests. Collectivistic qualities such as these are commonly but not exclusively believed to be prominent within Asian-American, African-American, and Hispanic American ethnicities. Cultural traditions in collectivistic contexts are believed to give precedence to interpersonal closeness, group interests, and to viewing the self as a product of relating to others (Bush, 2000; Kagitcibasi, 1996; Rothbaum & Trommsdorf, 2007; Triandis, 2001). Anthropologists frequently propose that our capacity to connect with others, form social bonds, cooperate for common protection, and collaborate for productive efficiencies propelled homo sapiens to evolutionary dominance over more physically capable species (Aronson, 2007).

The second of these concepts, autonomy, is an aspect of intimate human relationships that is closely allied with a complex of general social values and qualities often referred to as *individualism*. As an aspect of individualism, autonomy has been the most prominent theme among American immigrant groups from Western Europe and has been the dominant theme throughout the United States history (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; McDougall, 2004). Autonomous aspects of family relationships often are reflective of broad cultural patterns found more commonly within the United States and Western Europe than other societies. This concept is associated with ideas about a person's independent or private sense of self, individual rights, inner personal experiences, psychological independence, emotional distinctiveness, freedom of choice, and self-control. Despite being an aspect of one's individuality, however, a fundamental error is to equate the concept of autonomy with psychological *separateness* or total independence instead of viewing it as the particular degree of individual self-control and freedom of choice within the context of continuing connections with others (Kagitcibasi, 1996; Rothbaum & Trommsdorf, 2007). Diverse family forms and close relationships vary extensively in the degree of autonomy that is encouraged or tolerated. In short, having sufficient autonomy within diverse families allows their members the flexibility to make choices about whether or not to cooperate with group expectations, chart a unique response that affirms one's individuality, or choose some pathway in-between these options. The result is that family and relationship diversity provides an increasing degree of choice about how to achieve the desired balance between the goals of expressing one's individuality and being connected to others.

Some initial caution is necessary, however, when characterizing family systems and their encompassing cultures as either collectivistic or individualistic, when most, in fact, are neither exclusively one or the other (Kagitcibasi, 1996; Peterson, 1995, 2009; Rothbaum & Trommsdorf, 2007). Instead, both of these general values probably coexist in varied degrees of balance across virtually all cultures/ethnic groups and family systems. In addition, despite the shared relationship themes of autonomy and connectedness across cultures/ethnicities, these aspects of relationships often are expressed differently across ethnic/cultural communities, even within those that share an overall emphasis on either

individualism or collectivism (Bush, Bohon, & Kim, 2009; Raef, 2006). Thus, for example, expressions of family connection may differ both across two predominantly collectivistic ethnicities as well as between collectivistic and individualistic communities. An illustration is the tendency of "collectivistic" Chinese American family members to use physical affection (e.g., hugging, kissing, etc.—an aspect of connection) less often than is common for the "collectivistic" practices of Hispanic American family members.

Despite the centrality of this dynamic between autonomy and connectedness in family relationships, disparate views exist about whether states of tension or compatibility are most often prevalent between autonomy and connectedness. The initial, and until recently, the most prominent viewpoint was to portray the relationship between autonomy and connectedness as one of conflict or "tension." A *tension* viewpoint portrays the quest for autonomy as a set of psychological attributes and behaviors aimed at guiding a person to separate or disengage from primary social connections in favor of pursuing one's own self-exploration and self-interest. Such a conception almost inevitably means that relationship connectedness, which emphasizes affiliation, nurturance, responsibility, conformity and engagement, must be at odds with autonomy. From this "tension" perspective, autonomy and connectedness often are viewed as opposing forces in which any increases in one will inherently lead to decreases in the other, much like a zero sum game (Peterson, 1995, 2009).

Such conceptions of tension are evident, for example, in popular conceptions of adolescent development in families where this dichotomy is presumed to exist and prevent continued conformity to their parents' expectations while the young are gaining independence from them (Peterson, 2005). This tension perspective is most fully developed in classical and recent versions of psychoanalytic theory in which autonomy is viewed as being achieved during early childhood and adolescence through a process of "separation" from early bonds with parents (Peterson, 1995, 2009). From this view, a separation process of this kind is viewed as a normal feature of

growing up and is proposed to have positive consequences for the progress of youth toward adulthood. During adolescence, for example, the young are supposed to gain autonomy by separating from or becoming less connected to parents as they spend more time with peers, begin to date, experiment with sexuality, and become committed to their own values. They also learn to make more of their own life-style choices about such things as entertainment, music, and styles of dress (Peterson, 2005).

A tension viewpoint portrays adolescents as achieving autonomy through a distancing process as they spend less time with and reduce the quality of ties they have with parents. Gaining autonomy through separation provides the young with greater freedom from the physical and emotional controls of parents so they can make their own life decisions and engage in intimate relationships with people outside their families (Blos, 1979; Freud, 1969). A common feature of parent-adolescent relationships that fosters this separation process is the increased level of tension, conflict, and turmoil that is supposed to be common during this developmental period. Conflict and turmoil contributes to increased adolescent separation, which creates the conditions for greater youthful autonomy at the expense of connections with parents (Arnett, 1999). Young children and adolescents, for example, are viewed as making important developmental progress during early childhood and adolescence by separating psychologically from parents and focusing their energies on (or becoming connected to) social objects outside the family, a process that results in greater independence and less dependency by the young on their elders. This separation or individuation process is viewed as essential for the young to make developmental progress toward adulthood by separating from their families of origin and forming stronger bonds of connection within newly formed families of procreation. A key point here is that increases in autonomy come at the expense of proportional decreases in connectedness (Blos, 1979; Freud, 1969).

More recent interpretations of this "tension" or "separation" process, however, view it either as a declining perspective or one where mounting

separation is not a developmental asset but a liability leading to growing delinquency, relationship dissatisfaction, dysfunction, social rejection, conflict, and dissolution of family relationships (Peterson, 1995, 2009; Peterson, Bush, & Supple, 1999). For example, despite the increased prevalence and importance of peer relationships during adolescence, parents remain an important source of support and guidance for most youth (Wang, Peterson, & Morphey, 2007). That is, parent–child relationships change in how autonomy and connectedness are expressed across the life course, but balance is still achievable when a secure base exists.

Contrasting with the tension perspective is the more recent view that autonomy and connectedness develop *simultaneously* as either universal or highly generalized aspects of human and family relationships. Some degree of balance between autonomy and connectedness is necessary because humans are believed, almost universally, to both assert their individuality at the same time they seek social connections with others instead of being at odds with each other. Autonomy and connectedness are multi-faceted aspects of family relationships that are compatible in ways that are virtually essential. Although the meaning of autonomy and connectedness may vary across particular relationship circumstances and cultures, both are thought to be present in interrelated fashion, in most, if not all cultural and family circumstances (Kagitcibasi, 1996; Rothbaum & Trommsdorf, 2007).

An important example of this compatibility viewpoint is provided by attachment theory, which can be used to explain how people develop and experience connectedness and autonomy within families and other relationships during the entire lifespan (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988). The emergence of attachment behavior by infants, an early form of connectedness, contributes to close ties between infants and attachment figures (e.g., parents) or people who serve as sources of security and protection. Infant-to-parent attachment involves such behaviors as crawling and eye contact to maintain close proximity, clinging responses for protection, and affectionate behaviors (e.g., cuddling, snuggling, and smiling) for emotional support (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Attachment relationships also may provide the young with an internal working model or a set of beliefs about what to expect from relationships and how they will work in the future (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Cassidy, 2008). Early parent–child relationships, therefore, provide children and youth with an understanding of how reliable and trustworthy other people are in relationships. As the social world of the young expands, these views of others are carried into new relationships and may provide basic models for later life. Aspects of these relationship templates may be predispositions about how to balance connectedness and autonomy within dating, marriage, partnership, friendship, and other intimate associations.

Concerning the compatibility issue, attachment theory offers the idea that most people who have experienced secure attachment relationships are less likely to experience conflict between autonomy and connectedness in either their early or later relationships. Instead, autonomy is not only portrayed as being compatible with connectedness but also as springing from the close ties that a person has experienced in secure attachments with others. Autonomy begins early in development, as infants gradually expand how far they crawl away from their parents to explore objects at a distance in the environment. During childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, the process of gaining autonomy retains this common theme of constantly expanding explorations through increasingly more complicated behaviors. Individuals use parents, friends, dating partners, spouses, and partners as sources of security and springboards for more elaborate excursions into the social world (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1988). For example, most teenagers do not simply reject positive relationships with parents as they gain greater freedom from parental connections. Instead, teenagers often expand the number and complexity of their peer relationships, while maintaining close ties with parents. Greater autonomy is not achieved, therefore, as a "zero sum game" in which gains in self-direction necessarily mean losses in connections with parents. Most adolescents report that they value

making more of their own life-style choices and desire to spend more time with peers, but without suffering dramatic declines in the love and respect they feel for parents (Peterson, 1995, 2005, 2009; Wang et al., 2007). Consequently, the development of autonomy and connectedness are not inevitably in conflict but, indeed, are compatible and essential aspects of human relationships that develop together.

These brief comments about the dynamic relationship between autonomy and connectedness within diverse families may illustrate only one of many common themes that are present in these chapters. These comments only begin to scratch the surface of more complex aspects of this balance between asserting one's individuality and being connected to others. However, most, if not all of us, are at least partially shaped by the "security of the nest" and the "freedom of wings." Other readers of this volume will undoubtedly uncover other themes that are either explicit or implied in these pages.

Turning to the specifics of this project, *The Handbook of Marriage and Family* has a long heritage in family sociology, family studies, and related fields based on two previous editions published by Plenum Press (1987 and 1999) and the original edition published by Rand McNally (1964) with Harold Christensen as Editor, one of the founders of family sociology. Over the years, the *Handbook* became one of the most recognized sources of knowledge about families for multiple fields and disciplines. The initial *Handbook* by Christensen was followed by two subsequent editions of the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* edited by Sussman and Steinmetz (1987) and by Sussman, Steinmetz, & Peterson (1999). The current project was designed to continue, build upon, and elaborate on this very rich tradition of conceptualizing and synthesizing the best social science knowledge about family life embodied in the previous *Handbooks*. Our conception of the current edition is very similar to the aim underscored by Christensen (1964) in the first edition's preface as attempting "to take stock of past accomplishments, present resources, and future potentials. We have wanted to know where we have been, where we are, where we are going, and how to get there (p. 1 of Preface)."

Consistent with Christensen's primary goal, the intent of the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, *3rd Edition* is to describe, analyze, synthesize, and critique much of the current research and theory about family relationships, family structural variations, and the role of families in society. The goal was to provide the most comprehensive state-of-the art assessment of the existing knowledge of family life, with particular attention to variations due to gender, socioeconomic, race, ethnic, cultural, and life-style diversity. Our intent was to provide the best synthesis of existing scholarship on families that will be a primary source for scholars and professionals but also serve as a primary text for graduate courses on family relationships and the roles of families in society.

Although we did not enforce "cookie cutter" similarity across chapters, we did send instructions to chapter authors specifying format and content guidelines to encourage them to address a common set of issues within the parameters of a similar chapter format. The intent was to encourage a greater degree of coherence across chapters than was characteristic of previous editions of the *Handbook*. Consequently, many but not all the chapters address the following components in similar ways:

1. An introduction that acquaints the reader with the general importance of the topic being addressed.
2. A review of the literature that summarizes and synthesizes the existing research/scholarship in an area.
3. Some attention to how family theory or theories can be used to provide greater insight into the existing scholarly/research literature on the topic.
4. An evaluation of the current research methodology within a specific area covered by each chapter.
5. A concluding section that summarizes the most important ideas, makes recommendations for future work that is needed, and/or suggests applications of the knowledge provided in the chapter.

The chapters of the book are organized into five parts as follows: (I) Theoretical and

Methodological Issues, (II) Relationships, Processes, and Roles in Families, (III) Families and Other Institutions, (IV) Diversity in Family Life, and (V) Application of Family Social Science. A strongly emphasized feature of this project is its multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary quality through the involvement of chapter authors from a variety of fields including family psychology, family sociology, social work, child development, family science, family life education, and family therapy. Chapters describe and conceptualize internal aspects of family relationships, family theory, family structural variations, and the place of families in the larger society. A particular emphasis of this book will be its focus on the best social science that identifies how the study of family systems and the relationship level of analysis provide fundamental insights into the human experience by expanding beyond an exclusive focus on individual development.

This third edition of the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* is not only to review the current research literature within a specific area of scholarship, but also to make theoretical contributions to our understanding of families. Specifically, authors were encouraged to integrate concepts from family theory or related theories that can be used to provide meaning to the research literature in a specific area of focus. Selected chapters on family life education, applied family science, and family therapy also provide an analysis of the state of applied social science knowledge that seeks to improve the lives of family members.

Finally, we are well aware that we stand on the shoulders of and have benefitted from insights and achievements of those editors of the *Handbook* who have gone before us, Harold Christensen, Marvin Sussman, and Suzanne Steinmetz. These founding editors have set standards of excellence that we have felt challenged to match. We have done our best to maintain the excellent legacy of the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* and hope that our editorial predecessors would approve of the final product.

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