

## CHAPTER 7

# Intergenerational Relations in Changing Times

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Families have changed remarkably over the last century—in age structure and generational composition, in their diversity of forms and functions, in family members' expectations of one another and ways of relating. One consequence of the dramatic increase in longevity has been the growing prevalence of three-, four-, and five-generation families, lengthening the time spent in family roles, such as grandparenthood. At the same time, increases in divorce and remarriage, single-parenthood, and cohabitation have greatly increased the complexity of family configurations and relationships.

Early in the 20th century Burgess (1926) observed that the family had become more specialized in its functions and that the productive and instrumental aspects of family life—characterizing the traditional extended family—had been replaced by more emotional and subjective functions—characterizing the modern nuclear family. Burgess conceptualized this modern “companionship” family as not just a structure or a household, but as a process, an interaction system influenced by each of its members. With the ascendancy of the companionate nuclear family, the importance of grandparents and the extended family necessarily weakened. Burgess thought the three-generation family would persist as a network of relations still significant in the lives of older people, but kinship ties were no longer central and vital (Burgess, 1960). Parsons (1944) also saw less need for the kinship system in the modern era; rather, the nuclear family form was the most functional for industrialized society. It was not

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obvious, however, that such perceptions of the family arose from specific economic and cultural conditions within specific historical contexts. In the past few decades, which have seen rapid social and economic change, the nuclear family form has become less prominent.

Ironically, the complexities of today's family configurations appear not too different from what they were at the beginning of the 20th century, although they clearly depart from the relatively simple and idealized nuclear family form that characterized mid-century America. In recent decades, remarriage and cohabitation following divorce, and childbearing in second and third marriages as well as outside of marriage, have reintroduced a diversity of kinship compositions—half siblings, a variety of step relatives, ex-relatives, fictive kin—similar to families in earlier centuries when remarriage frequently occurred following the death of a young mother or young father (Hareven, 2001). So, in certain ways, families of yesterday have more in common with contemporary families than we often recognize.

As multigenerational family structures and functions have evolved over time, so too have our theoretical approaches and methods for understanding these changes. What we now recognize, as early family sociologists did not, is that changing social, economic, and cultural conditions affect, in essential ways, intergenerational family structures and relationships and the individual lives within those families. The maturation of several longitudinal studies now allows us to examine the dynamics of family life and individual development across different social and historical contexts. This research, guided by insights from the "life course" perspective, is expanding and amplifying our knowledge of the complexities of multigenerational family life.

In this chapter we first discuss how the life course perspective informs the study of intergenerational relations and multigenerational families. Second, we examine a number of demographic and social trends since the 1960s and their consequences for intergenerational relations and individual well-being: population aging and its effects on generational structures and kin resources; marital instability and single parenthood; changes in life cycle boundaries and intergenerational family roles; and women's increased labor force participation and its effects on family kinkeeping. Third, we describe an example of a theoretical and methodological approach used in life course research on multigenerational families. Fourth, we summarize two studies that illustrate the utility of life course precepts applied to intergenerational relations and individual development research. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

### **APPLICATION OF THE LIFE COURSE MODEL TO MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY RESEARCH**

Our investigations of the changes and continuities in multigenerational family relations in changing historical contexts draw upon fundamental insights of the life course perspective. Elder (1974) developed the life course framework almost three decades ago, building on observations of Cain (1964) and Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965). The life course framework has itself developed and changed over the years, and in this volume (Chapter 1), Elder summarizes five principles that guide life course research.

Two principles—life span development, and linked lives—are integral to research on multigenerational family processes. The first principle is that *development and aging are lifelong processes*, and that the relationships, events and processes of earlier life stages have consequences for later life relationships, processes, and outcomes. For example, longitudinal research has shown that parental affirmation received in childhood continues to make a

significant contribution to self-esteem in adulthood (Roberts & Bengtson, 1996). Research has also shown that socialization occurs not only in childhood but also throughout the adult years, particularly evident in the domain of work (Bengtson, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002). The second principle concerns the *interdependence of lives over time*, especially in the family, where individuals are linked across generations by bonds of kinship and processes of intergenerational transmission. This principle also includes the impact of larger social changes on interpersonal relations. For example, economic declines can have reverberating effects on the interconnected life paths of family members, as Elder has demonstrated in his examination of effects of the Great Depression and World War II (Elder, 1974, 1986; Elder & Johnson, 2002).

The third principle guiding life course research concerns *agency* in human development and the idea that planfulness and intention can affect life course outcomes. Individuals are active agents in the construction of their lives and make choices within the constraints of social structures and historical conditions. Family life also has agentic aspects, as reflected in negotiation processes. For example, in a qualitative study, Pyke and Bengtson (1996) examined the differences between “individualistic” and “collectivistic” families as choices are made regarding caregiving for dependent elders.

The fourth principle, *the impact of history and place*, has become increasingly important in multigenerational family longitudinal research. Researchers now recognize the necessity of nesting individual lives and family processes in social and historical contexts. While individual development shapes and is shaped by interactions within the immediate context of family relations, these relationships affect and are affected by larger social, economic, and cultural events and conditions. Multilevel modeling techniques now allow researchers to more accurately specify these complexities of family relationships within their environments.

A fifth principle of the life course perspective—*biographical time, family time, and historical time*—emphasizes the importance of transitions and their timing relative to structural and historical contexts. As noted by Elder (Chapter 1), there can be a “best fit” in the timing of individual development and family life stage, and their temporal convergence with structural and historically created opportunities.

The life course perspective points to the fundamental importance of historical conditions and change for understanding individual development and family life. It is therefore important to consider current demographic and social trends, to which we now turn.

## **DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL TRENDS: CONSEQUENCES FOR INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS**

### **Population Aging**

Population aging, which is accelerating around the world, will be a major challenge facing all societies in the 21st century (Bengtson, Kim, Myers, & Eun, 2000). It is more than just a demographic phenomenon—it affects the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of life for entire societies. The worldwide decline in fertility coupled with significant increases in life expectancy will mean greater numbers and proportions of elders, especially those aged 85 and over. This will strain existing health care and support resources of nations and families. In the United States, for example, the proportion of the population 65 and over was 14% in 2000. It will increase to 20% of the total population by 2030, when the last of the Baby Boom cohorts reach 65 (Bengtson & Putney, 2000).

Population aging in conjunction with later age at marriage and childbearing not only is altering the age-dependency ratios in nations, but also has profound implications for generational dynamics and family well-being. It is changing family structures, bringing about changes in living arrangements between generations (especially in Asian societies) and reducing the numbers of adult children available to care for aging parents and grandparents. Longer lives and women's increased labor force activity are putting pressures on traditional caregiving arrangements. Societies do not approach the problem of population aging in the same ways. Much depends on their unique social and political histories as well as their cultural traditions and economic resources. In Asian societies, evidence suggests that there will be increased state responsibility for providing care to elders as family support resources become more strained. In the United States and other Western nations, by contrast, there appears to be a retrenchment of family support policies because of strains on national budgets. Still, reliance on the family to provide support and care to elders remains central in all societies (Bengtson & Putney, 2000). These macro-societal changes in age distribution have implications for the generational structure of American families.

**LONGER YEARS OF SHARED LIVES ACROSS GENERATIONS.** The average life expectancy of Americans increased by almost three decades during the last century, from about 47 years in 1900 to over 77 years in 2000 (U.S. Census, 2001). This increase in longevity coupled with declining fertility (with the exception of the Baby Boom cohort) is reflected in the changing age structure of the American population over the past 100 years. In 1900, the shape of the population age structure was that of a pyramid, with a large base (represented by children under age 5) progressively tapering into a narrow group of those aged 65 and older. By 2030, dramatic declines in the fertility rate and extended life spans will cause the age structure to look more like a rectangle, with similar numbers in each age category (Population Reference Bureau, 1999).

Longer lives and fewer births have changed the age structure of most American families such that their "shape" is more like a beanpole—long and thin, with more family generations alive but with fewer members in each generation (Bengtson, 2001). Uhlenberg (1996) showed how mortality changes over the course of the 20th century have affected generational structures. The chances of a child becoming an orphan (both parents dying before the child reached age 18) were 15% for children born in 1900, compared to less than 1% for children born in 2000. Among children born in 2000, 68% will have four (or more) living grandparents. It is more likely that a 20-year-old alive today has a grandmother still living (91%) than a 20-year-old alive in 1900 had his or her mother living (83%). These statistics suggest that there are now more years of "co-survivorship between generations" than ever before in human history (Bengtson, 1996). One positive effect of this is the increased potential for aging parents and grandparents to provide family continuity and stability across time (Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 1998).

**CHANGES IN "KIN RESOURCES" ACROSS GENERATIONS.** One of the major functions of multigenerational families is the provision of care and support to dependent members—in childhood, youth, and old age. Longer lives and the changes in family structure that ensue have important implications for family functions and relationships, because they affect the availability of potential caregivers and the chances of receiving family support. The increased longevity of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and other family members represents a resource of kin available for help and support that can be, and frequently is, activated in times of need (Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995). At the same time, as people live

longer, they transfer wealth in the form of inheritances much later in life, often at a time when the younger generation is in less need of financial help than would have been the case earlier. In some countries, such as Germany, intergenerational wealth transfers are mandated by law when people are younger (e.g., parents may have to pay their children a monthly sum if they are enrolled in higher education). This means that wealth transfer may take place when the younger generation is most in need, but it also means that the younger generation has lowered expectations of inheritance upon parents' deaths.

There are also other potentially negative consequences of the "longer years of shared lives" across generations. The years of caregiving for dependent elders may be protracted (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1995). Such family demographic changes may also increase the potential for protracted family conflict—what an 84-year-old mother termed a "life-long lousy parent-child relationship" (Bengtson, 2001). Thus, an important research agenda is the examination of the quality of intergenerational relationships to find out why some families get along better than others and to identify the conditions that contribute to greater satisfaction, affection, and less tension in the relationships.

### Marital Instability and Single Parenthood

Over the last several decades changing patterns of family formation and dissolution, child-bearing, and other types of kinship arrangements have altered family configurations and dramatically increased the diversity of family forms. In 2000, 53% of the adult population were married compared to 72% in 1970; 11% were separated or divorced in 2000, up from 4.5% in 1970 (U.S. Census, 2001). The 2000 Census demonstrates the continued shift from two-parent to one-parent families. The proportion of family households consisting of married couples with their own children (which can include stepchildren) declined from 40% in 1970 to 24% in 2000 (Bianchi & Casper, 2001), while those consisting of one parent with children increased from 11% in 1970 to 16% in 2000. Approximately half of the first marriages of the Baby Boom cohort will end in divorce (a rate that may be lower for more recent birth cohorts), while about 60% of second marriages end in divorce (Emery, 1999). The number of couples living together outside of marriage has increased substantially since the 1950s but this group still comprises only 5% of U.S. households at any given time. About one-half of couples marrying now have lived together first (Bianchi & Casper, 2001), and among those currently divorced, 16% are cohabiting (Smith, 1998).

Increases in divorce and remarriage, and childbearing outside of marriage are forcing reconsideration of how families and kinship relations are defined. For poor and minority families in particular, young women have come to rely less on marriage and husbands and more on other kinship ties for support—mothers who help them in raising their children, grandparents, siblings, other relatives, and fictive kin. In general, African-Americans are more likely than whites to reside in extended family households with other kin nearby and to report having "fictive kin" (Chatters & Jayakody, 1995). Latinos are also more likely to reside in multigenerational households than whites (Himes, Hogan, & Eggebeen, 1996).

Changes in family configurations brought about by divorce, single parenthood, and remarriage have important implications for individual and family well-being. Duncan and Morgan (1985) found that the economic environment faced by most people is not stable but volatile, and that much of this volatility can be explained by frequent changes in marital status and hence family composition. They found such family composition changes to be far more important for the family's economic status than were changes in the labor force participation

and wage rates of the adults in the household or any of the initial characteristics of the adults, such as educational attainment or attitudes. In particular, divorce had devastating effects on the economic status of women and children, while marriage or remarriage had almost equally beneficial effects.

## Changes in Life Cycle Boundaries and Intergenerational Family Roles

**DELAYED NEST-LEAVING AND THE EXTENSION OF PARENTING.** The life course perspective calls attention to how economic, social, and historical changes over the 20th century have altered the timing of “nest-leaving” for different cohorts of young adults. Economic conditions and occupational opportunities determine in no small way when young adult children leave the parental home and transition to independence. The relatively prosperous 1950s promoted early nest-leaving through marriage (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998), and during that decade age at first marriage reached its lowest point in the century. But when unemployment is high and the labor market is unfavorable, early nest-leaving is impeded. Since the early 1980s, the timing of this life course transition has changed; the boundaries of nest-leaving have been extended outward and have become more fluid. In 2000, 56% of men and 43% of women age 18 to 24 years lived at home with one or both parents (Spain & Casper, 2001). Some adult children don’t leave home at all (Crimmins & Ingegneri, 1990). Other young adults find they must return to their parents’ home because of economic hardship or when their marriages fail. Adult children may return with their own children, or these grandchildren may come alone, causing grandparents to take on the responsibility of parenting their grandchildren (Minkler & Roe, 1993). Under contemporary economic conditions, adult children benefit from coresidence with parents into their mid-20s, particularly in terms of educational attainment (White & Lacy, 1997).

Less is known about how coresidence affects the quality of the parent–adult child relationship. Do the economic and instrumental benefits of coresidence come at the expense of feelings of closeness and affection between parents and adult children? Are the effects of coresidence different for adult children than for their parents? Aquilino and Supple (1991) found generally high parent satisfaction and positive parent–child interactions in such circumstances, although there were also strains, primarily having to do with expectations about the timing of leaving home. Coresidence can intensify parent–child interactions (Ward & Spitz, 1992). There can also be differences in how parents and adult children perceive their coresidential situation, with parents generally feeling more positive than their adult children. This may have to do with different expectations regarding the achievement of autonomy in young adulthood (White & Rogers, 1997). Coresidence may also reflect the adult child’s need and the parents’ feelings of obligation, not necessarily feelings of closeness.

Alwin (1996) found that younger cohorts (born after 1940) are more favorable to the idea of intergenerational coresidence than earlier born cohorts, but this may be because parents are helping to support the younger generation. In terms of intergenerational relations, benefits from extended coresidence may take the form of increased individual well-being and strengthened family bonds. In the past, coresidence was generally a strategy for meeting the disability needs of aging parents. Today, coresidence is more likely to meet the needs of adult children—recently referred to as “adultolescents” (Tyre, 2002). By delaying nest-leaving, young adults receive a significant amount of parental support, both tangible and emotional, over a longer period of time. Only when parents reach late life do they receive more help and support from adult children than they provide (Bengtson & Harootyan, 1994; Eggebeen & Hogan, 1990; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

**THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF GRANDPARENTS.** Changing demographic and socio-economic conditions suggest that grandparents will play an increasingly important role in multigenerational families (Bengtson, 2001). In a culture enamored with youth, the positive attributes of grandparents and their contributions to family well-being are often inadequately appreciated. In the public imagination, grandparents are still more likely to be associated with declining health, nonproductivity, dependency, and need for caregiving. Empirical evidence suggests quite a different picture, with grandparents providing many unacknowledged functions in contemporary families (Szinovacz, 1998). Often, for example, grandparents are important role models in the socialization of grandchildren (Elder, Rudkin, & Conger, 1994; King & Elder, 1997). They also often provide significant economic resources to younger-generation family members (Bengtson & Harootyan, 1994), and they contribute to cross-generational solidarity and family continuity over time (Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 1998). In situations in which teenage mothers are raising infants, grandparents can represent a bedrock of stability (Burton, 1995). Perhaps the most dramatic contribution is when grandparents (or great-grandparents) actually raise grandchildren or great-grandchildren. In 2000, over 4.5 million children under age 18 were living in a grandparent-headed household, representing 6.3% of all children. The number of children in grandparent-headed households has increased 30% since 1990 (AARP, 2002).

The contemporary grandparent role has several distinct features which shape, and are reflected in, grandparent–grandchild relationships (Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 1998). These role attributes include (1) normative ambiguity; (2) the fact that grandparent–grandchild relations are mediated by the middle generation, which has crucial implications for the strength or weakness of the grandparent–grandchild relationship when parents divorce, depending on custody arrangements; (3) a far wider array of competing roles enacted by grandparents than in the past; and (4) the normative contradictions that inhere in the questions of noninterference and familial obligation and support. This last dilemma is particularly evident in the situation of the surrogate parenting of grandchildren.

Silverstein and Long's (1998) examination of the patterns of grandparents' association with their adult grandchildren over 23 years found evidence that the grandparent role has indeed changed in recent history. They found that grandparents' affection declined somewhat as grandchildren grew from adolescence into young adulthood, but then increased. The reasons for these changes in the grandparenting role may include greater wealth, earlier retirement, and better health—each of which provides opportunity for alternative social roles. At the same time, emotional closeness and support from grandparents may compensate for or mitigate divorce-related family processes and custodial-parent role-overload that can negatively impact the well-being of both adult children and grandchildren (Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 1998).

### **Women's Increased Labor Force Participation and the Kinkeeping Role**

The principles of the life course perspective are exemplified in several aspects of family kinkeeping: the interconnectedness of family members' lives over time; the duration of the kinkeeping role which may span many years of the incumbent's life; and the volitional quality of kinkeeping—that is, why the kinkeeping role may or may not be chosen and the constraints that impinge on that decision. Because social and economic conditions and changing demography affect the meaning of kinkeeping and the likelihood of its enactment, the kinkeeping role can be said to be shaped by history.

Kinkeeping is what family members “do” in support of one another in the context of promoting family ties and collective well-being (Rosenthal, 1985), and therefore is an important mechanism for maintaining intergenerational bonds. Kinkeeping is also linked to broader economic and normative structures through women’s employment decisions and beliefs about family obligations. Kinkeepers act as communication links between family members up and down the family lineage and laterally within the extended family. Some researchers see caregiving to elderly family members as an aspect of the kinkeeping role (Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993). Underlying the activities of kinkeeping are the bonds of affection and norms of obligation that tie one generation to another. Research shows that the bonds of intergenerational solidarity are strong and families often rely on the work of kinkeepers to maintain those bonds (Bengtson et al., 1990). Kinkeeping is usually performed by women (Aronson, 1992; Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993; Rosenthal, 1985; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), with the kinkeeper role often passing from mother to daughter. Traditional gendered expectations about the emotional and caring work in families has meant that women take on these responsibilities. However, women’s lives have changed dramatically over the past few decades, and in the future women may not be as available, or willing, to take on the kinkeeping role.

A major reason for this is women’s increased participation in the labor force. Seventy-five % of middle-age women—those traditionally responsible for kin work—are now in the work force (Spain & Bianchi, 1996), which puts pressure on the time and energy they have available for kinkeeping activity (Genovese, 1997; Moen, 1992). For economic reasons alone, it is unlikely women’s commitment to market work will decline. A second factor pertains to cultural changes and preferences. Noting the marked increase in nonfamily living arrangements among young adults over the past three decades, Goldscheider and Lawton (1998) suggested that women who leave their parents’ home for nonfamily living rather than marriage may later value work and privacy more highly than kin work and be less inclined to take on the responsibilities of kinkeeping. Third, women’s kinkeeping activities are not always chosen, and may be considered an unwelcome obligation, particularly among younger women (Aronson, 1992). Finally, because of the declining birth rate, a designated family kinkeeper may be less needed in the future to maintain lateral siblings relationships within the extended family, which has traditionally been a major kinkeeping function (Rosenthal, 1985). On the other hand, because of longer life expectancy and the increasing verticalization of multigenerational families (Bengtson et al., 1995), a kinkeeper who keeps family members in touch with one another and takes care of the oldest and youngest generations may be especially needed.

### **AN EXAMPLE OF A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH USED IN LIFE COURSE RESEARCH ON MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILIES**

Are intergenerational relationships changing? Have the dramatic social changes of the past four decades weakened family bonds? In what ways do strong intergenerational bonds promote individual family members’ well-being over time? Such questions take on new importance as increased life expectancies extend the duration of shared lives and role occupancy in multigenerational families. A major aim of the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) research program is to investigate the effects of sociohistorical change on the interactions among and aging of successive family generations.

The LSOG, begun in 1971 and now including seven waves of data, is a study of linked members from some 300 three- and four-generation families as they have grown up and grown old during a period of dramatic social and economic change. The study examines long-term relationships between parents and children and between grandparents and grandchildren, how these relationships have changed over time, and the consequences of these changes for the well-being of family members over several generations. An important objective of the LSOG program has been the development of a theory of family solidarity and conflict and elaboration of the dimensions of intergenerational relations as a means of providing a better understanding of the complexities of family life. The research has identified six distinct dimensions of intergenerational solidarity: affection, association, consensus, functional support and exchange, norms of family obligation, and structural opportunities or barriers (Roberts & Bengtson, 1990).

Consistent with a life course approach, the solidarity and conflict model of intergenerational relations was forged on the notion that broad social structures and large social contexts affect family life and relationships. Using nationally representative data and latent class analysis, Silverstein & Bengtson (1997) demonstrated that the dimensions of solidarity and conflict may be arrayed in a variety of configurations, as typologies of parent–adult child relations. Five types of extended families are identified: tight-knit, sociable, intimate-but-distant, obligatory, and detached. Tight-knit and sociable are the most frequently found parent–adult child relationship types, with the other three types in smaller but similar proportions. Such typologies can empirically represent the inherently multidimensional nature and diversity of parent–child relationships as they have responded to changes in the economy and occupational structures, in marriage and divorce, and in childbearing patterns. Moreover, shifts between types over time can be used for examining family processes as parents grow older.

Silverstein and Bengtson (1997) examined differences in the types of relations adult children maintain with their mothers and their fathers. Adult children's relationships with mothers are more likely to be tight-knit, with daughters more likely than sons to have tight-knit relationships with their mothers. About four times as many adult children are detached from their fathers as from their mothers. Divorced fathers have weaker emotional attachments with their adult children than do married fathers or divorced mothers. The odds of having detached relations are about five times greater for divorced fathers than for divorced mothers.

A life course approach to multigenerational family research considers how family relationships change or remain stable across individual lives and families and how these processes are linked to multiple and evolving historical contexts (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). With panel data collected over 30 years that have seen rapid social change, the LSOG now allows us to examine these issues. The study is unique because of its accumulation of parallel longitudinal assessments for multiple generations within the same families in different historical periods. This makes it possible to draw conclusions about the relationship between historical change in family structures and intergenerational influence and socialization outcomes. Another unique feature of the LSOG is that sufficient time has elapsed since 1971, when data were first collected, that the chronological ages at which members of different generations were assessed have begun to overlap. This allows us to utilize a generation-sequential design, comparing sets of parents and children at the same ages across different historical periods. In the next section we discuss two studies that demonstrate the utility of the life course perspective for investigating changes in intergenerational relations and individual development over time. The reader may also wish to refer to the chapter in this volume by Alwin and McCammon, who discuss the “meanings” of different generational labels (such as “Generation X”) and the importance of studying generationally defined demographic groups.

## TWO STUDIES USING THE LIFE COURSE APPROACH

### Changes in Parental Influence on the Life Course Outcomes of Offspring

Our recent research examines how family relationships serve as conduits by which values, resources, and behaviors are transmitted across multiple generations. Bengtson, Biblarz, and Roberts (2002) used a generation-sequential design and parent-child dyads to investigate intergenerational influences on sons' and daughters' education and occupational aspiration, self-esteem and values (individualism and materialism). The study also examined how transmission processes have been affected by parental divorce and maternal employment. The analytic design is based on two general research questions, one focusing on intergenerational transmission *outcomes*, the other on intergenerational transmission *processes*. The first question is: have the aspirations, values, and self-esteem of Generation X youth (G4s, born between 1966 and 1980) been adversely affected by changing opportunity structures and rising divorce and maternal employment rates over recent decades? The second question is: were Baby Boom parents (G3s) less influential for the development of their Generation X children's aspirations, values, and self-esteem than G2 parents had been for the development of these attributes among Baby Boom youth? Three critical connections between family influences and young adults' outcomes are examined: one grounded in the family's socialization functions, a second based on particular families' access to social resources, and a third stemming from the quality of parent-child emotional bonds in particular families and their effect upon intergenerational transmission processes.

Findings indicate that the patterns of parental *influences* on youths' outcomes are remarkably similar across two generations (young Baby Boomers and Generation X youth) and historical time periods (growing up in the 1960s and the 1990s). This suggests that despite changes in family structure and socioeconomic context, intergenerational influences on youths' educational and occupational aspirations, self-esteem and value orientations are still strong—and haven't changed much since the 1960s. When Generation X youth are compared with their Baby Boom parents when they were in youth 26 years earlier, Generation Xers have higher aspirations and higher self-esteem, and are more collectivistic. Across generations, parental resources strongly affected their children's educational and occupational aspirations, suggesting the continuing importance of learning and modeling processes within families.

We might now ask about the importance of period effects, such as the increases in women's labor force participation and marital disruption since the 1960s. Findings indicate that maternal employment has not affected the aspirations, values, and self-esteem of youth across these two generations in a negative way. Generation Xers whose parents divorced were slightly less advantaged in terms of educational and occupational aspirations and self-esteem than those who came from nondivorced families, but they were nevertheless higher on these measures than were their Baby Boomer parents were at the same age, regardless of family structure. Among Generation Xers, parental divorce affected the influence of mothers' affirmation on their children's self-esteem. It is not that children of divorce feel less close to their mothers than children from two-parent families. Rather, in the context of divorce, closeness to mothers turns out to be a weaker determinant of the self-esteem that children ultimately develop. Consistent with other research (Amato, 1994; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), father-child affective bonds were found to be significantly weaker for Generation Xers than they were for Baby Boomers in their youth, a result that can be largely attributed to the increase in parental divorce. Divorced fathers were found to have significantly

weaker emotional bonds with their children than mothers, whether divorced or not. Also, parental divorce reduced to almost nil the ability of Baby Boom fathers to influence their Generation X children's aspirations, self-esteem, and collectivist values. Nonetheless, in the context of divorce, fathers do influence the assumption of materialist values in their children. The study found that Generation Xers are becoming more collectivist in their value orientation. This may indicate a possible shift in cultural values among more recently born cohorts.

### **The Life Paths of Baby Boom Women**

Using LSOG panel data and a cohort sequential design, Putney (2002) used a life course perspective to examine changes in women's life paths and the consequences of historical change on mental health outcomes, such as depression and self-esteem. Specific focus was on contrasting the life paths of Baby Boom women with those of women of the Silent Generation (born 1931–1945) who came before them. Four factors relevant to women's life course mental health outcomes were examined: work/family balance, the quality of women's relationships with parents, changing norms of egalitarianism and familism, and changes in marital stability.

Because of their historical circumstances, Baby Boom women seemed more advantaged than earlier-born cohorts of women. Growing up in the prosperous postwar period, they experienced, in early adulthood, favorable economic conditions, expanded opportunities for higher education and professional achievement, and changing gender norms. The question is whether by midlife Baby Boom women were better off in terms of their psychological well-being than earlier-born cohorts of women had been in midlife.

The answer is no. Indeed, findings indicate that Baby Boom women were significantly more depressed and had lower self-esteem in midlife than Silent Generation or Depression Era women at the same life stage. Several factors contributed to Baby Boom women's lower psychological functioning. In contrast to the earlier-born cohorts of women, Baby Boom women experienced greater stress in trying to balance the demands of work and family, and this contributed to their higher depression. As one Baby Boom mother put it, "I feel too much pressure between work and family" (p. 146). Results show that having a close supportive relationship with parents positively affected women's professional achievement and psychological well-being. For Baby Boom women, weak affective bonds with their father in late adolescence contributed significantly to lower self-esteem and higher depression when they were in young adulthood, twenty years later. Conversely, affective closeness with father in youth contributed to positive mental health outcomes in young adulthood. In midlife, the quality of Baby Boom women's relations with their fathers remained a significant predictor of their psychological well-being, with those having weaker emotional bonds with their fathers being significantly more depressed. Parental divorce also seems to be playing a role. Consistent with other research (Amato, 1994; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), findings indicate that parental divorce adversely affected the quality of Baby Boom women's relations with their fathers in midlife. (For Generation X women, incidentally, having close affective bonds with their mothers contributed to their higher self-esteem and lower depression in young adulthood.)

Marital dissatisfaction contributed significantly to Baby Boom women's higher levels of depression. In contrast to Silent Generation women, Baby Boom women were not only less satisfied with their marriages in midlife but also felt that their satisfaction had significantly declined from what it had been in young adulthood. The emotional responsiveness of Baby Boom women to being dissatisfied in their marriages seemed more volatile than that of Silent

Generation women. Marital dissatisfaction contributed to midlife Baby Boom women being significantly more depressed than midlife Silent Generation women at a comparable level of dissatisfaction. This suggests that the meaning or expectations of marriage may have shifted, which lends empirical support to observations that marriage has changed in the past few decades (Cherlin, 1999; Giddens, 1991).

Stronger egalitarian views contributed to younger cohorts' professional achievement and psychological well-being. This was especially the case for Baby Boom and Generation X women, but also for Silent Generation women. In the last decade, all female cohorts in the study became slightly more traditional in their gender role views although younger cohorts remained more egalitarian than earlier-born cohorts, suggesting both period and cohort effects. Familism increased among Baby Boom and Generation X women in the past decade, and for these two younger cohorts familism is associated with higher self-esteem.

Reflecting a core principle of the life course perspective, biographical and historical timing appears to have mattered for the mental health outcomes of the Baby Boom and Silent Generation cohorts in midlife. Both cohorts were affected by the rapid social and economic changes of the 1970s and 80s. However, the two cohorts encountered these changes at different stages in the life course. Silent Generation women, having completed their heavy child-rearing responsibilities, did not have to juggle the demands of work and family in the same way as did Baby Boom women. Having generally started their childbearing at a later age, Baby Boom women were then confronted by the dislocations of economic restructuring and other dilemmas they could not anticipate: the intensified demands of work and family and the increasing contingency of employment and marriage.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A major aim of contemporary research on multigenerational families is to investigate changes in family intergenerational dynamics within the context of changing historical times. This research objective highlights the importance of the life course perspective for guiding family research today. The life course perspective emphasizes the importance of historical events and conditions for understanding people's lives. We discussed a number of demographic and social trends and their implications for families. These trends—population aging, marital instability and single parenthood, changes in life cycle boundaries and family roles, and women's increased labor force participation and its effects on the family kinkeeping—are affecting family structures and dynamics today, with consequences for future intergenerational relations and support.

First, population aging during the last half-century has changed the age structures of societies and families, the living arrangements between generations, family roles in the provision of elder care, and government policies toward the elderly and their families. Greater longevity has meant a growing number of three-, four-, and even five-generation families, and the longer years of joint survivorship are increasing the pool of kin resources and the potential for mutual support and assistance. Second, macrolevel trends in family formation, marital instability, and childbearing have dramatically altered the configurations of families, resulting in an increasing diversity of family forms. A major consequence of divorce or single parenthood is that mother-maintained families and their children are far more likely to live in poverty. Third, the life cycle boundaries of active parenting have been extended out and have become more fluid in the last two decades. Less favorable labor market conditions and the need for additional years of education have meant adult children are remaining "in the nest" longer or are

returning to the nest when things don't work out. There is a bright side to this trend, however. Additional years of parent–adult child coresidence mean more intergenerational exchange and support, which tends to promote long-term family attachments. There has also been a dramatic increase in the number of grandparents raising their grandchildren, a reflection of the increasing importance of grandparents for family well-being. Fourth, women's increased commitment to full-time market work may affect family kinkeeping, a role traditionally carried out by women. Changes in gender roles and preferences suggest that younger women may not be as available to do the work of kinkeeping in the future as they have been in the past. This has implications for intergenerational family relationships and for the likelihood that family members will be able to support and care for one another in time of need.

We then discussed a theoretical and methodological approach used in life course research on intergenerational relations, with specific reference to the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG). The theoretical development of a model of family solidarity and conflict and the elaboration of relationship “types” have yielded important understandings with respect to the complexities and contradictions of family relations. With 30 years of panel data collected from multiple generations of families, the LSOG has sufficiently matured to support generation-sequential and cohort-sequential designs for investigating the effects of macrosocial changes on family relationships and individual development. We presented two studies to demonstrate how the life course perspective is being applied in family research.

## **The Meaning and Function of Families**

The study of multigenerational families is concerned with the nature and strength of bonds between older and younger generational kin and the consequences of these bonds for individual well-being, the propensity of members to provide care and support to one another, and the significance of kinship relations and roles for members as they respond to changing socioeconomic, cultural, and historical conditions. Research demonstrates the continuing influence and importance of families for the nurturance and socialization of its youth, for the care and support of elders, and for the long-term well-being of family members. Our life course research of intergenerational relations shows that the family is still fulfilling its basic functions, but in a world very different from that of the 1950s. There is much greater diversity in family forms. Kin resources today may include not only grandparents, great-grandparents, grandchildren, and siblings, but also step relatives, ex-relatives, or fictive kin. We suggest that at the beginning of the 21st century multigenerational families and other kinship systems are taking on greater importance as sources of stability and support.

## **Future Directions**

Future life course research on intergenerational relations should give attention to several issues. First, there is a need to explore how trends in longevity, elder health, the verticalization of the multigenerational family structure, and the aging of Baby Boomers are affecting intergenerational solidarity and support. Second, research should examine whether families who are experiencing changes in structure or roles, through events such as divorce, are adapting by extending and expanding functions across generations. As family forms have diversified, multi- and inter-generational exchange and support over the life course of children must also become an important object of study. Third, the relationships that children and parents

have with their grandparents following divorce should be carefully explored. Fourth, we need to confirm whether familism is truly on the rise among young cohorts, and if it is we need to investigate why this is occurring and what it portends for the multigenerational family. Finally, comparative and cross-national research on the effects of historical trends on multigenerational families is needed. Research within single societies often fails to reveal the influence of culture as a social force. Comparing caregiving in Eastern and Western societies, for example, would help us to examine the underlying importance of values. Cultural values prescribe different roles and responsibilities for families and government in caring for the needs of dependent family members, and this in turn has important implications for the kinds of policies that are put in place.

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