CHAPTER 6

Family Context and Individual Well-Being

Patterns and Mechanisms in Life Course Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The assertion that the family environment experienced by an individual at any point in life has consequences for her/his subsequent life course outcomes is not likely to provoke much disagreement. Nevertheless, there are some important and interesting questions related to linkages between family context and subsequent outcomes. How significant is the family in shaping the life course? What aspects of family have genuinely significant implications for particular outcomes? What are the implications of changing family behavior in one generation for the well-being of those in other generations? These questions have received a good deal of research attention and are the subject of this essay. Before reviewing existing research findings on the role of the family in determining life course outcomes, several preliminary observations on this topic may nevertheless be useful.

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Preliminary Notes

First, we will not argue that the family has been a major force leading to the institutionalization of the life course in modern society. It has been the institutionalization of formal education, the organization of work, and the development of the welfare state that have encouraged the division of life into distinct stages based on chronological age (Kohli, 1988; Meyer, 1986). As several authors (Best, 1980; Riley & Riley, 1994) have pointed out, the ideal of childhood involving education, adulthood involving work, and old age involving retirement and leisure became normative over the twentieth century. This socially constructed life course pattern is now generally considered "natural". The family, as a social institution, has probably not played a major role in structuring this basic form of the modern life course. However, within this broad normative life course trajectory, individuals experience diverse outcomes. Some experience "failure" in education, work, health, and social relationships, some experience "success", and others fall somewhere in between. In this chapter we focus on the role of the family in determining how successfully individuals navigate the culturally prescribed life course. The particular life course outcomes that we examine are discussed below.

Second, one should not discuss consequences of family context for particular life course outcomes as if those relationships were universal. The significance of any specific family environment may vary markedly across societies and across time (and even across individuals *within* the same family) (Dannefer, 2001). Consider, for example, the future educational achievement and marital prospects of a young girl growing up in a family where the only parent is a poor, unmarried mother. In no case may this family context be advantageous, but how much of a burden it presents for future achievement clearly depends on the society in which it occurs. In contemporary Pakistan this situation may present overwhelming obstacles, while in Sweden they may only be moderate and in Jamaica only minor. Our focus in this chapter is on the effects of family context in contemporary American society. Even with this restriction, however, attention will need to be given to ways in which the effects of a particular family environment may vary across social classes or across racial/ethnic groups. In other words, the relationship between family context and particular outcomes may be contingent on other economic, social, cultural, and psychological factors.

Third, the effects of specific family environments on life course outcomes can only be studied by comparing individuals who experience different family types. For example, one cannot gain insight into consequences of parental divorce for children by studying only children whose parents have divorced. One cannot understand the effects of childhood poverty by looking only at lives of children who grow up in poverty. But recognizing the need for comparisons immediately leads to the question of what aspects of "family context" we should examine. Family environment includes a wide array of factors. Family structure, family dynamics, and family resources may each have independent, as well as combined, influences. Theoretical discussions of the family have identified each of these as being potentially significant, and we will review research dealing with each. The multiple dimensions of family context are discussed more fully below.

Life Course Outcomes

What life course outcomes should receive attention? At any stage of life, one can think of an almost limitless range of individual outcomes that might be examined. For children, one could ask what determines whether one chooses blue as a favorite color, whether one prefers to wear

shorts or long pants, and whether one usually takes a bath or a shower. But these are not the questions that receive research attention. Rather, a great deal of research effort has been directed to such things as what determines school performance, "normal development," health, and socioeconomic status. In general, the outcomes that capture attention in social science research (and funding) relate to the *well-being* of individuals. One might argue that "well-being" is a subjective term; that each person has his or her private definition of what this involves. In reality, there is little disagreement regarding what outcomes are important and desirable. We focus on outcomes that are widely agreed upon as indicators of well-being.

One category of outcomes deals with survival and physical health. Determinants of health and longevity have received a great deal of attention and research support in recent years. Among the most interesting findings is that social factors, including family environment, play an important role in determining physical well-being. For example, the lower death rates experienced by married adults compared to unmarried adults is a solidly established research finding (Lillard & Waite, 1995). The challenge confronting social scientists is to explicate the mechanisms that relate an individual's family context to his or her subsequent health.

A second category of well-being relates to emotional and mental health. Do particular family environments contribute to depression or mental illness? Or, more positively, are there aspects of family context that facilitate having a joyful, optimistic, and exuberant attitude toward life? Although there is a tendency for research to focus on social problems and failure to achieve "normal" outcomes, it is no less interesting to ask what conditions lead to especially positive and desirable outcomes.

A third category of outcomes concerns socioeconomic status. Any observer of contemporary American society must be struck by the vast differences in income and wealth between individuals. Related to these differences, there is heterogeneity in levels of educational attainment and occupational status. As has been true throughout history, the family one is born into has implications for the level of economic success and social status that one is likely to enjoy over the entire life course. Further, family context during early adulthood may have implications for later life economic security. How important is the family in comparison to other factors in determining socioeconomic status (SES), and what aspects of family are most important?

The final category of outcomes that we discuss relates to success in social relationships. One aspect deals with establishing stable, positive relationships with other people and maintaining adequate social support networks. Of course the most common means of developing enduring, intimate relationships is through marriage, and we look at this as one outcome. In this case, family context during one phase of the life course is considered as a determinant of family context at a later time. Another aspect of social engagement involves relationships with the larger community—functioning as a responsible citizen versus engaging in anti-social and deviant activities. Again, more attention is given to factors leading to delinquency and criminal behavior than to positive civic engagement, but both are important issues.

Family Contexts

As already indicated, we are interested in how the family context an individual experiences at one point in life is related to subsequent life course outcomes. But "family context" is a complex term, involving several different dimensions. In an essay on family and delinquency, Lawrence Rosen (1985) points to the fundamental difference between research focusing on family "structure" and that focusing on family "function." Because these approaches look at different aspects of the family, they reach different conclusions about the mechanisms through

which the family influences children and what efforts are needed to reach more positive outcomes. The "structure" approach might see the advantages of promoting marriage and keeping families together, while the "function" approach might emphasize quality of parent–child relationships and social support for single-parents. There is no reason, of course, to anticipate that one approach is "correct" and the other "incorrect." Three aspects of family context will be included in the discussion that follows: family structure, family interactions, and family resources.

Although "family" is not synonymous with "household," family structure most often refers to household composition. For children, family structure deals with number of siblings and, above all, with parents in the household. Are there two biological parents? A mother only? A stepparent? A parent and her cohabiting partner? One might also ask whether a grandparent or some other adult lives in the family. A great deal of literature from this perspective focuses on the consequences for children of being born out-of-wedlock or of experiencing a single parent family because of parental divorce (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Family structure questions for adults relate to marital status (never married, cohabiting, married, divorced, widowed, re-married), and parental status (childless, children in the home, empty nest). In some cases family structure is viewed as extending beyond the household to include parents or parents-in-law or adult siblings who are living.

An advantage of focusing on family structure is that measuring family structure at a given point in time is more straightforward than measuring other aspects of the family. Consequently, there are a number of large, nationally representative data sets that include good measures of family structure. A major disadvantage, however, is that family structure is in fact fluid rather than static. Unfortunately, social science lacks the theory and measurement tools to effectively capture the complexity of family life (Shanahan, Sulloway, & Hofer, 2001). Most researchers oversimplify family structure by using a static measure of parent's marital status. This approach ends up grouping all single-parent families together, whether the source was divorce, widowhood, or nonmarital childbearing. However, parent's marital status at a single point in time is found to be only slightly predictive of subsequent household composition (Wu & Martinson, 1993). Family structure is dynamic in that as parents divorce and remarry both adults and children move in and out of the household. Often the timing and history of family structure transitions turn out to be the factors that really matter. For example, Ryan (2001) found that among girls who live with a single parent, the greatest risk of experiencing emotional problems occurs when their family structure history entailed multiple transitions or they had always lived with a single mother, rather than experiencing a single divorce or separation.

The second dimension of "family" involves the dynamic quality and character of relationships between family members. For children, much of this topic is covered by research on socialization. Socialization concerns both intended and unintended transmission of attitudes and behavior across generations (Clausen, 1968). What are the effects of differences in parental discipline, teaching, and modeling of behavior? But socialization is not a one-way process. One may also ask how children shape the lives of their parents. (For example, do children teach men and women how to be mothers and fathers? [Bell & Harper, 1977; Clausen, 1968].) Not only relationships between adults and children, but also those among adults in the family may be consequential. The quality of a relationship with a spouse or adult children or adult siblings may have consequences for later life. In general, because family dynamics tend to be "backstage behavior," they are difficult to measure. Therefore, researchers may find it easier to form hypotheses regarding implications of family interaction patterns than to empirically study them. Nevertheless, some interesting and provocative studies dealing with this aspect of family will be reviewed.

Family resources, the third aspect of family context distinguished in this chapter, have two major components. One component refers to economic capital—the family's income, wealth, housing, and other physical resources. A life course perspective anticipates that living in an economically advantaged family context at one phase of life would predict more positive outcomes (health, income, marital stability, etc.) at subsequent periods of life. The other component of resources refers to social capital. Social capital has become a popular term in sociological literature only in recent years, although the basic concept has always been central to sociological theory. Social capital involves the access to benefits that comes through inclusion in social networks. The social capital of a family thus consists of the various networks (kin, friend, political, employment, etc.) that members of the family belong to, and the resources available from others in these networks. The resources involve not only potential financial assistance, but also such things as knowledge, information, influence, and support. However difficult social capital may be to measure, there are theoretical reasons for thinking that this aspect of family context may be very important in shaping life course outcomes.

FAMILY OF ORIGIN AND CHILD OUTCOMES

From the beginning of life, different children experience vastly different childhoods. In the first days after birth, some children die and others survive. By age one, some children are happy, well nourished, and can communicate with words, but others are sullen, sickly, and cannot talk at all. A typical class of first graders contains children with widely ranging academic and social skills, and this diversity among children increases as they move to higher grades (see Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, this volume). There are, of course, factors other than family context that determine which outcome a particular child will experience. But the type of family into which a child is born, and her family context during early years of life, are among the strongest predictors of how healthy and socially and academically successful she will be during childhood.

One thing a family determines is the economic environment within which a child will develop. Sophisticated analyses of high-quality survey data by a number of researchers reported in *Consequences of Growing Up Poor* (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997) confirm what may seem obvious—poverty has significantly adverse consequences for children. Compared to non-poor children, those who have lived in poor families are more likely to perform poorly on tests of cognitive ability and academic achievement and to have more health and developmental problems (also see Klerman, 1991; Mayer, 1997). Childhood poverty is directly linked to family structure. Eggebeen and Lichter (1991) estimate that child poverty rates would be only about 60% of the 1988 actual rate if family structure had not changed after 1960. Additionally, they claim that changing family structure accounted for nearly 50% of the increase in child poverty overall between 1980 and 1990, and further widened the black–white economic gap for children.

Plausible linkages between economic resources available from the family and successful childhood outcomes are straightforward. Children in more affluent households receive better nutrition, better quality health care, and have greater access to educational resources both in and out of the home (books, computers, classes). But economic factors do not matter only for the material goods and services they afford the family. Children are more successful when their parents relate to them in a warm and responsive way (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997). A good deal of research has established that low income, as well as significant drops in income, tend to create stress on parents and children that undermines effective socialization.

Economic stress affects children's lives both directly and indirectly. Research by both psychologists and sociologists has established a direct link between economic hardship, parental stress, and ineffective parenting styles. Parents who experience financial stress are more likely to adopt harsh and coercive parenting styles, using anger, violence, and other behaviors that undermine socially integrative parent–child relationships and interactions (Conger et al., 1992; Elder, Caspi, & Downey, 1986; Elder et al., 1992; Sampson & Laub, 1994). Economic stress also may affect children *indirectly* through the toll it takes on their parents' marital relationship. When the parents' relationship is strained, children perceive less involvement and support from their parents, which often results in low self-esteem and subsequent problem behavior (Skinner, Elder, & Conger, 1992; Whitbeck et al., 1991). Ultimately the family systemic nature of psychological maladjustment and poor interpersonal relationships of parents leads to the transmission of problems across generations (Caspi & Elder, 1988).

In addition to family economic status, family structure also is strongly associated with the well-being of children. The infant mortality rate is 1.8 times higher for those born to unmarried mothers than for those born to married mothers (Monthly Vital Statistics Report, v. 46:12). Several literature reviews (Amato, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Seltzer, 1994) provide abundant research evidence that children in single-parent families, compared to children who live with continuously married parents, tend to score lower on measures of academic success, have more problematic social behavior, and suffer more health problems. Further, those living in stepfamilies do not, on average, experience better outcomes than those in single-parent families (McLanahan, 1997). In other words, children who grow up living with both biological parents are more likely to experience positive outcomes on a wide range of indicators than children in other family structures.

The question of why family structure correlates with childhood success generates a great deal more controversy than the question of why family income does (see McLeod & Almazan, this volume). As divorce and out of wedlock births increased rapidly after the 1960s, some social scientists emphasized that these trends reflected the increasing freedom in choice of lifestyles that adults were experiencing, and they minimized any possible negative consequences these trends might have for children. They argued that the association between single-parent families and problems for children was simply a consequence of the vastly higher rates of poverty for children without fathers present in the household. Although clearly differential poverty by family structure is a factor, few researchers now deny the important role that family structure plays. To argue that what matters is economics rather than family structure is misleading. If one finds that the coefficient for family structure is reduced when family income is entered into an equation predicting adverse child outcomes, it does not follow that absence of a parent is unimportant. As long as father absence is a cause of lower family income, family structure does matter. Equally important, economic factors account for only about half of the disadvantages associated with growing up without two parents. Researchers now recognize that children often suffer from the emotionally stressful experience of having their parents divorce, and that not living with a father often leads to disadvantages by reducing parental supervision and access to social capital (Booth & Amato, 2001; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Seltzer, 1994).

Scholarly interest in fatherhood and the influence of fathers on children's well-being grew rapidly in the decade of the 1990s (Marsiglio et al., 2000). The important contribution that fathers make through economic support of the family has long been recognized, but three other aspects have only recently received serious attention. First is the finding that children had fewer behavior problems and were more responsive when their fathers were involved with

them and helped supervise them. Positive outcomes are associated with such paternal behaviors as spending time with children, supervising and disciplining children's behavior, and providing emotional support (Parke & Buriel, 1998). Of course not all fathers in two-parent families actively engage in their children's lives, and some fathers who are not living with their children manage to remain highly involved in their lives. Nevertheless, intact families are conducive to fathers playing a greater direct role in their children's lives.

A second way in which a father may have a positive effect on his child's outcomes is through being supportive of the child's mother. Providing emotional support to a mother and backing up her authority have been found to be important. The quality of interactions between the parents is related to behavior of the child both within the family and outside of the family (Amato, 1998; Cherlin, 1998; Parke & Buriel, 1998). In other words, fathers can play an important role in shaping the family dynamics that in turn influence child development.

A third, and increasingly recognized, way in which fathers potentially influence child outcomes is through contributing social capital. James Coleman was the first to explicitly articulate the importance of social capital for "the creation of human capital in the next generation" (Coleman, 1988). Sociologists have recently noted the special potential fathers may have to create social capital for children. Fathers can foster positive outcomes for their children when they connect them to their own social networks that provide access to information and resources. Given the importance of social capital, one might think that single fathers would have an advantage over single mothers in promoting positive outcomes in their children. However, research has shown that fathers do no better than mothers in raising their children outside of intact home environments (Harris & Ryan, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Several caveats in the research on family structure are important to note. First is a question regarding the assumption of unidirectionality. For example, it is possible that an overaggressive child, combined with financial stress in the home, may actually *lead* parents to divorce. In some cases it is possible that negative child and adolescent outcomes associated with certain family structures may be due to other factors related to both the child's behavior and parental divorce, such as financial stress (Sampson & Laub, 1994) or a conflictual home environment (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). Second, measures of family structure variables are often problematic. Family structure is not static—families move in and out of categories and this fluidity of family life is not well-captured by most models (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufler, 1998). Additionally, by focusing on family structure alone, the larger *context* in which these families are situated is obscured (Edwards, 1987). This is particularly important when trying to use explanatory models based on white middle-class norms to understand influences among non-white urban youth (Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995). Third, the negative relationship between non-intact biological families and disadvantage for children may be affected by the prevalence of disapproval of alternative family forms in the society. If so, one might anticipate change in the future as alternative families (e.g., single professional women with adopted children, homosexual couples with adopted children) become increasingly common and tolerated. Finally, what matters may not be family structure per se but the *amount* of contact and *quality* of the parent–child relationship. Regardless of family structure, both time spent with parents and perceived emotional support from parents are associated with a number of psychosocial outcomes such as anxiety, depression and psychological well-being (Ge et al., 1994; Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995). Fathers in intact families may have a positive impact even when they do not spend more quality time with their children than absent fathers. Beyond his mere presence, a father who lives with his child tends to have a level of commitment and involvement in that child's life that is effectual in development (Bianchi, 2000).

ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Although a fixed chronological age (18 or 21) is often used as a legal definition of when adulthood begins, there seems to be a good deal of ambiguity regarding when young people complete the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Numerous markers may be used to signal the transition to adulthood, including leaving school, entering the labor force, leaving the parental home, and perhaps forming a second family (Shanahan, 2000). However, given the decreasing "chronologization" and increasing "individualization" of the life course in contemporary America (Modell, 1989), there is little uniformity in the timing and sequencing of these various events. There is no standard trajectory that leads from adolescence to adulthood in contemporary American society (Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987). Thus, rather than separating these phases of life, we combine our discussion of adolescence and adulthood into one section centering on the transition between the two life stages. This approach is consistent with the recognition of the life course as both a social and developmental process (Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996; Hogan & Astone, 1986).

Not only is the transition from adolescence to adulthood ambiguous, but also it is the most pivotal turning point in the life course. This "transition" involves *multiple* transitions in such areas as education, work, and family, and outcomes in each of these areas have important consequences for future options (Hogan & Astone, 1986). The complex combination of events and the decisions one makes during the transition to adulthood have the potential to determine much of the subsequent course of one's life. With this perspective, we address several questions in the following section. In general we want to understand the role one's family of origin plays in these processes. Specifically, what aspects of family life foster "successful" or "unsuccessful" adolescent outcomes? How does one's family influence how he or she navigates the various transitions to adulthood? How critical are these transitions for the subsequent adult life a person lives?

We do not intend, of course, to argue that there is an optimal pathway from adolescence to adulthood that everyone should follow. We simply recognize that in contemporary American society, most people value a life course trajectory that includes completing one's education, obtaining suitable work, entering into a stable and satisfying relationship, and enjoying good health. Alternatively, most would agree that "unsuccessful" outcomes in adolescence and young adulthood include such things as poor health, delinquency, dropping out of high school, unemployment, and teen pregnancy. Using this popular perspective on indicators of an ideal early life course helps to organize the voluminous literature on family influences on adolescent and young adult outcomes.

Health and Emotional Well-Being

An obvious aspect of "health" in adolescence and young adulthood deals with general physical health. The family's location in the social structure is known to have strong direct and indirect effects on general health of people at all phases of life, including adolescence. Mechanisms through which social status affects health include knowledge about diet and exercise, access to medical care, quality of health insurance, preventative measures, etc. (Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997). But two other aspects of "health" are especially salient for young people—emotional well-being and health behaviors.

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING. High levels of parental involvement are associated with such indicators of adolescent emotional well-being as self-esteem and life satisfaction (Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987; Wenk et al., 1994). There is a great deal of documentation on the relationship between parental divorce and children's self-control, aggressive behavior, and delinquency. Father absence, or a negative father relationship, often results in lower self-esteem (Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995) and in male children's difficulty in forming peer relationships (Edwards, 1987). On the positive side, perceptions of parental warmth and support can moderate the impact of stressful life events on depressive symptoms in adolescence (Ge et al., 1994).

HEALTH BEHAVIORS. Adolescent health behaviors are shaped, to a large extent, by the family environment they have experienced. Children are directly and indirectly affected by such parental health behaviors as smoking, nutrition habits, and routine care. Even before birth, a mother's behaviors, such as smoking and drinking, may compromise fetal in utero development and result in low birth weight and respiratory illness. Throughout childhood and adolescence, poor nutrition and quality of life further compromise development and are associated with later adult health risks. At the same time, children who are sickly tend to do poorly in school and have lower levels of educational attainment. Lower education is often related to less secure employment, and unsteady work lives are directly associated with poor health and reduced life expectancy (Mutchler et al., 1997; Verbrugge, 1983). Further, there are specific health behaviors of parents that are directly correlated with the health behaviors of their adolescent children, such as exercise, smoking, drinking, and diet (Wickrama et al., 1999). Also, early family experiences, such as divorce, attachment to parents, father's absence, and general home atmosphere are related to levels of drug and alcohol addiction (Nurco & Lerner, 1996; Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995).

Health patterns in adolescence often cumulate and become even more visible in adulthood. In a comprehensive essay on health inequalities over the life course, Wadsworth (1997) illustrates the complex interlacing of influences that lead to the striking relationship between childhood family environment and adult health: "It may be concluded that social factors probably operate in a cumulative fashion. …(V)ulnerability to physical ill health in childhood and later adult life is associated with poor parental socioeconomic circumstances and low levels of parental education and concern, and consequent lower levels of educational attainment with chances of lower occupational status, greater vulnerability to unemployment, risk of more adverse health related behaviour in adulthood, and poorer health" (p. 863).

Relationships with Others

DELINQUENCY. The relative influence of family versus peers on adolescent behavior is a hotly debated topic (Harris, 1998; Harris, Furstenberg, & Marmer, 1998). Parents may have more influence on long-term issues such as family formation plans while peers prevail over short-range behaviors in adolescence such as daily tastes and preferences. Generally, the influence of friends on these behaviors peaks in adolescence and declines through the transition to adulthood (Crosnoe, 2000). A strong family context often protects against negative peer influences, but when parent–child relationships are weak, adolescents and young adults are highly susceptible to the influences of their peers (Berndt, 1996; Warr, 1993).

Three aspects of family life are closely associated with adolescent delinquency. First, when parent–child attachment is absent, the child often fails to internalize a set of socially accepted norms and values (Sokol-Katz, Dunham, & Zimmerman, 1997; Paschall, Ennett, & Flewelling, 1996). Second, the structural disadvantages associated with poor and single-parent families often lead to poor parenting practices. A lack of parental supervision and formal social controls in these situations results in ineffective inhibition of impulsive and antisocial behaviors (Sampson & Laub, 1994). Finally, disruptions in the family and transitions in family structure interfere with the socialization processes, resulting in poor decision-making and coping strategies in adolescents that may persist throughout the life course (Coughlin & Vuchinich, 1996; Paschall et al., 1996).

No matter what the measure, children living in families with their two biological parents are far less likely, on average, to exhibit delinquent behaviors in adolescence than children in other environments (Coughlin & Vuchinich, 1996). Studies rarely report a direct effect, but rather find that family structure, particularly father absence in single-mother households, has an *indirect* influence on delinquency. Mechanisms that link father absence and delinquency are parental attachment (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Sokol-Katz et al., 1997) and parental supervision (Sampson & Laub, 1994). Also, there is evidence that the psychological effects of experiencing divorce produce unhealthy externalizing behaviors in boys, such as drinking and aggressive behavior, and internalizing behaviors in girls, such as depression and low self-esteem (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990). In his chapter in this volume, Uggen discusses how family formation in adulthood can serve as a protective factor for adult trajectories of criminality and deviance.

Marriage and divorce. The intergenerational transmission of divorce, sometimes referred to as the "legacy of divorce", has been well documented (Cherlin, 1992; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Figure 6-1 suggests ways in which parental divorce may increase the risk of offspring divorce.

We will comment briefly on the linkages between parental divorce and offspring divorce. Age at marriage is the strongest predictor of marital dissolution, and women who experience childhood divorce are more likely to marry early (Amato, 1996; Feng, Giarrusso, Bengtson, & Frye, 1999). Children of divorced parents tend to have lower incomes and levels of education

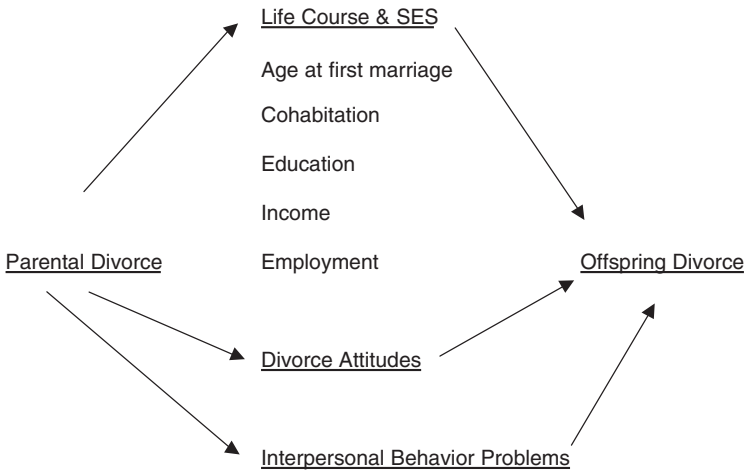

Figure 6-1. Ways in which parental divorce may increase the risk of offspring divorce.

in general, which are risk factors for subsequent divorce (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Feng et al., 1999). The risk of divorce is especially high when there is both an early marriage and when both partners have limited education and compromised prospects for economic stability (Mueller & Pope, 1977).

Cohabitation as a linking mechanism between parental divorce and offspring divorce raises interesting questions. A number of studies have established both that coming from a divorced family increases the likelihood of cohabitation, and that couples that cohabit before marrying are more likely to divorce than couples that did not cohabit (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Manning & Smock, 1995). There is disagreement, however, over whether or not cohabitation actually has a causal influence on divorce. Clearly couples that select to cohabit often have characteristics associated with greater probability of divorce (coming from divorced families, being less committed to permanence of marriage, having low religious commitment). But does self-selection fully account for the relationship between cohabitation and divorce? Or, does the cohabitation experience have a feedback effect, signaling to the couple a lack of commitment to marriage and increasing acceptance of divorce and setting up expectations for gender equity that may change with marriage and children, thereby increasing the likelihood of actual divorce once the couple transitions to marriage? Probably cohabitation does change the way individuals view marriage and divorce in ways that lead to more frequent divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992).

Aside from sociodemographic factors, certain social-psychological variables are also important to consider. Experiencing conflict in the home may lead to problems with intimacy and trust which ultimately strains marital relations and may result in subsequent divorce (Amato, 1996; Tallman, Gray, Kullberg, & Henderson, 1999; Tallman, this volume). The findings are mixed for divorce attitudes. Some research suggests that adult children of divorced families are more pessimistic about marriage and less negative about divorce while other research finds no evidence for a link between parental divorce and attitudes about divorce (Amato, 1996).

Parenting. Fertility behaviors, and ultimately family size, are shaped by the intergenerational transmission of norms, values, and preferences (Anderton, Tsuya, Bean, & Mineau, 1987). Whether an individual chooses to have children and the timing of parenthood are both significantly influenced by family context. A great deal of attention has been given to adolescent pregnancies. Although the rate of teen pregnancy in the United States declined in the 1990s, it is still far higher than any other industrialized nation. Family environments characterized by single parents, lack of parental supervision, poor parent–child communication, and economically deprived households, are strong risk factors for teenage pregnancy and childbearing (Moore & Sugland, 1999; Forste & Heaton, 1988). Subsequently, teen childbearing is linked to lower educational attainment, limited employment prospects, and lower incomes in adulthood. However, teen childbearing may not really be the primary cause of these poor adult outcomes. A good deal of evidence suggests that the predisposing conditions of poverty and low school achievement are the fundamental causes of low economic achievement in adulthood. The originating situations of teenage mothers is often so bleak that they are already on a trajectory that is likely to leave them in a state of relative disadvantage in later life, regardless of whether they have a child in adolescence (Geronimus & Korenman, 1993; Luker, 1991). When youth perceive little opportunity and lack bridges to social networks outside their impoverished community that control access to a larger set of resources and opportunities, they often are not motivated to avoid early childbearing (Fernandez Kelly, 1994). However, when girls perceive that they have good employment opportunities, they are less

likely to have a child in their teens. Because lives are linked, teenage childbearing has consequences for the children as well as the parents. Children born to teenage parents are at greater risk of low birth weight, poor cognitive functioning, behavioral problems, and poor school performance (Moore & Sugland, 1999).

Regardless of age at first birth, parenting practices are in part a function of childhood experiences. Parents may transmit their parenting orientations, including their goals for their children, directly to the next generation. For example, significant relationships are found between parents' parenting practices and adult children's parenting practices (Simons, Beaman, Conger, & Chao, 1992, 1993). Maternal attitudes about marriage and parenting influence children's, particularly daughters', union formation behavior above and beyond the children's own attitudes (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Starrels & Holm, 2000). Socialization within the family is also in large part nonverbal and *indirect*, through experience and observation. Children often observe and experience the consequences of their own, as well as their parents' behaviors, learning what is and is not appropriate behavior. Simons et al. (1992) find no association between parents' beliefs about parenting and adolescents' beliefs once parental *behavior* is taken into account, indicating that parents convey their parenting beliefs to their children *indirectly* through parenting practices.

Domestic violence. Some effects of growing up in a home with domestic violence are not manifest until the child reaches adulthood. Witnessing violence against a parent (usually the mother) and actually experiencing physical abuse as a child are both influential factors in understanding violent relationships in later life. As one would expect, witnessing marital violence as a child is related to attitudes toward women and attitudes about violence in adulthood, while the experience of physical abuse is directly related to men's adult violent behavior (Alexander, Moore, & Alexander, 1991; Kalmuss, 1984). However, one should remember that even among adults who experienced child abuse, most do not continue the pattern and abuse their own children as adults.

Educational Achievement

In his 1966 report on *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, James Coleman concluded that family background matters more for school achievement than any school-level factor. Although family resources and school resources interact, children in *any* school tend to fare better when they come from strong family backgrounds as opposed to weak ones. Christopher Jencks' subsequent research on inequality and education supported Coleman's conclusions that family background has the largest influence on school achievement, and that on their own, educational reforms have only a marginal effect on inequality (Jencks et al., 1972; see also Hofferth, Boisjoly, & Duncan, 1998).

What is it about family background that matters for adolescent school achievement? As with many outcomes, family structure, family income, and parents' educational attainment are all related to adolescent school achievement. Children from disadvantaged and single-parent or step families are consistently more likely to drop out of high school than are other children (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Hofferth, Boisjoly, & Duncan, 1998; Lichter, Cornwell, & Eggebeen, 1993).

Intact and higher-income families not only have more time and resources to invest in children, but they also are more likely to be embedded in social networks that facilitate the development of human capital in their children. Social capital *outside* of the family, such as

that generated when the family is embedded in social relationships with other families and community institutions, is crucial for understanding the relationship between family social context and adolescent development (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Hofferth, Boisjoly, & Duncan, 1998). Besides having lower incomes and mothers who are over-extended, children in divorced families tend to move much more frequently than do children in intact families. Migration results in changing schools and leaving neighborhoods, which effectively dissolves the social capital available from community ties. The negative effects of migration are even more pronounced in families with uninvolved fathers (Hagan, MacMillan, & Wheaton, 1996; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998).

Community-based sources of social capital, such as neighborhood organizations and schools, potentially augment parents' efforts to both support and monitor kids. But all neighborhoods are not created equal. Being deeply embedded in poor neighborhoods may actually inhibit adolescent development (Fernandez Kelly, 1994). In studies of how families manage risk and opportunity in disadvantaged neighborhoods, Furstenberg and his colleagues demonstrate that parents who effectively link their children to wider social networks and organizations *outside of* the immediate residential neighborhood foster successful development in their adolescent youth (Furstenberg et al., 1999). Community ties are also transmitted across the generations with parental community involvement associated with feelings of community connectedness and involvement in adolescent offspring (Fletcher & Shaw, 2000).

Many of the same family factors that predict whether or not a child will graduate from high school also are relevant for attending college. Family SES, parental divorce, mother's and father's education, and embeddedness in social networks all contribute to the probability that a high school graduate will attend college.

Education is one outcome for which *mother's* status is particularly important, at times having substantial effects that are independent of the influence of fathers. In terms of gender effects, mothers who hold more egalitarian roles in their families and mothers with higher educational and occupational status tend to have daughters who fare better in school (Updegraff, McHale, & Crouter, 1996). But the positive relationship between mother's educational attainment and child's achievement holds for both sons and daughters and the relationship may actually be stronger than the effect of family structure alone (Garasky, 1995; Kalmijn, 1994).

Parents' attitudes toward school and their expectations for the child also matter. Attitudes and expectations are likely a function of the parent's own educational attainment and family context, particularly economic stress. In a study of inner-city black youth, Reynolds and Sukhdeep (1994) find that school achievement can be explained by differences in *attitudes* and educational *expectations* rather than specific behaviors. Parents with high expectations are likely to set high educational standards for and convey the value of doing well in school to their children. Again, context matters, and parent expectations may have the greatest influence on the school achievement for youth in low-income families.

One additional family variable influencing school achievement that has been given considerable attention is family size, or number of siblings. Judith Blake's 1989 study on *Family Size and Achievement* analyzed several data sets and consistently found a significant negative relationship between family size and educational performance. Other researchers have replicated her results with the conclusion that parents with fewer children produce "higher quality" children (Downey, 1995; Powell & Steelman, 1993). However, longitudinal research using repeated measures shows no decrease in intellectual development of older siblings as younger siblings enter the family and family size increases over time (Guo & VanWey, 1999). Thus other time-invariant family factors, such as home environment or genetic heritage, may explain the relationship between family size and children's intellectual development.

Work and Status Attainment

Blau and Duncan's (1967) classic work on status attainment, and the subsequent Wisconsin Model (Sewell, Hauser, & Alwin, 1975), state that one's educational and occupational attainment are primarily a function of the father's educational and occupational statuses. Ultimately, family factors influence the status attainment of children through educational attainment. Blau and Duncan (1967) concluded that, "the family into which a man is born exerts a significant influence on his occupational life, ascribing a status to him at birth that influences his chances for achieving any other status later in his career" (p. 295). However, given the growing diversity and rapid social change in recent years, especially the dramatic gains in female labor force participation, the classic status attainment model may no longer be adequate. In particular, are there other family factors that matter for adult work life?

One line of research has focused on parental attitudes and has found strong relationships between parents' and children's attitudes toward employment. Mother's attitudes about maternal employment are found to have a particularly strong effect on daughter's attitudes, and these effects continue well into adulthood (Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997; Sandberg et al., 1987; Starrels, 1992). In adulthood, this intergenerational relationship also holds for mother's employment experiences and daughter's own life experiences. We also see high levels of attitude similarity on maternal employment between parents and children over time (Moen et al., 1997). Mother's attitudes about work, marriage, and childbearing have especially strong relationships with daughter's attitudes toward maternal employment (Steele & Barling, 1996). The unanswered question remains whether parent–child attitude similarities persist because of effective socialization processes, or because adult children often end up at the same socioeconomic status position as their parents, which leads to them having similar life experiences (Starrels, 1992). Similarity with their parents is least among children who go away to college, suggesting that family socialization is quite strong and more than education, living away from home provides a hiatus from the home environment that allows daughters to change their attitudes about maternal employment (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991).

A process of cumulative advantage and disadvantage over the life course becomes evident as we track individuals through adulthood. Attitudes about school influence school performance, which determines whether or not an individual graduates high school and attends college. In turn, these educational experiences have long-term consequences for adult work trajectories and opportunity for "success" in life. The earlier work on the status attainment model, which claims that much of the variance in adult status attainment can be explained by father's occupational status and educational attainment, misses much that sets a child on a particular course. Some of the other relevant family factors are family structure, race, religion, social capital, and gender. Regardless of which variables are used to predict status attainment, the predominant mediator continues to be educational attainment (Powell & Parcel, 1997).

There are many subtle ways in which parents transmit advantages or disadvantages to their children. Parental resources influence adult children's "employability" through the cultivation of skills, self-esteem, aspirations, attitudes toward work, and school performance (Caspi, Wright, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998; Ryu & Mortimer, 1996). The more time parents spend with their children working on projects together enhances their problem-solving behaviors and the way they approach dilemmas. Parents who are successful in their own careers and transmit positive attitudes about work to their children may encourage high work aspirations. Both mothers and fathers play important roles in the transmission of work attitudes and occupational attainment (Biblarz, Raftery, & Bucur, 1997; Steele & Barling, 1996).

If childhood family context influences adult work status, it may also influence the risk of becoming welfare-dependent in adulthood. Most of the research on welfare has looked at the relationship between family poverty and childhood outcomes (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Public discourse has assumed a strong intergenerational transmission of welfare dependence but empirical evidence offers mixed support. Only one fifth of children in "heavily dependent" homes, that is, homes in which AFDC income was reported for all three years of the study period, grow up to be heavily dependent on welfare as adults. While the majority of women who grew up in homes high on welfare receipt are not heavily dependent on welfare as adults, about 40% of these women *are* moderately to highly dependent on welfare later in life, meaning they receive AFDC income during at least one of the three subsequent study years (Duncan, Hill, & Hoffman, 1988). Cultural theories have posited that counterproductive attitudes and values of parents are passed onto their children and that these attitudes persist into adulthood. A structural view, however, looks at how these children end up confronting the same kinds of structural barriers to getting jobs, such as discrimination and lack of opportunity in their neighborhoods, that their parents faced.

LATER LIFE

A great deal of research has demonstrated that family context, past and current, continues to affect the well-being of persons in their later years of life. The risks of experiencing a wide range of adverse outcomes (death, health problems, poverty, depression, institutionalization) vary by marital and fertility history. For married persons, retirement experiences are partially shaped by the spouse's behavior (see Moen, this volume). Experiencing widowhood can profoundly alter the life course of the surviving spouse. Relationships with adult children are affected by past family experiences and by marital transitions in either generation. In other words, family context tends to be an important factor influencing the life course in old age.

Mortality

Lillard and Panis (1996) clearly are correct when they write, "One of the most robust findings in demographic research is that married individuals' mortality rates are lower than those of their unmarried counterparts" (p. 313). Not only has this finding been replicated by numerous studies in the United States, but also with data from a wide range of other countries (Hu & Goldman, 1990). Most of the early research on this subject was based on cross-sectional analyses, often using information from death certificates to examine marital status differentials. More recently, however, advances have been made by examining data from longitudinal studies (Kotler & Wingard, 1989; Lillard & Waite, 1995; Rogers, 1995; Schaefer, Queensbury, & Wi, 1995). These studies find the same basic relationships, but in addition allow analyses that control for baseline information. Using longitudinal data, interest has shifted from establishing that married people experience lower mortality rates (no one questions this), to explaining why this relationship exists. Several possible mechanisms linking marital status and mortality have been suggested.

One possibility is the selection explanation, which argues that unmarried individuals who are at greater risk of dying are less likely to marry or remarry. If the higher mortality of unmarried persons is simply a consequence of selectivity into marriage of healthier, more robust individuals, then marriage is not a cause of the differential mortality. As far back as

1858, researchers were suggesting that because those in poor physical or mental health were at a disadvantage in the mate selection process, a disproportionate number of unmarried persons would have a short life expectancy (Goldman, 1993). In addition, others have noted that those who are poor or who live high-risk lifestyles might both be less prone to marry and more likely to experience higher death rates (Pienta, Hayward, & Jenkins, 2000). An interesting empirical examination of the "selectivity" hypothesis was based on a study of nearly 2000 men who attended Amherst College in the nineteenth century. Using a measure of health status in early adulthood, Murray found that selectivity into marriage did account for some of the lower mortality experienced by those who married. However, he also found that marriage had an independent effect on lowering mortality risk (Murray, 2000). Because a number of studies have found that controlling for premarital factors does not eliminate the survival advantage of married compared to unmarried persons, there is general agreement among researchers that marriage provides some protection against premature death.

There are several ways in which family context may play a role in health and survival outcomes for individuals in later life. First, living with a spouse (especially for men) appears to reduce the likelihood of engaging in risk taking behaviors such as excessive drinking, substance abuse, and reckless driving (Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1990; Umberson, 1987). On the positive side, being married encourages a healthier lifestyle (better diet, more regular sleep patterns, wearing seat belts, regular doctor visits) (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The health and survival advantages of living a healthier lifestyle should accumulate over the life course, so those who have maintained stable marriages should be most advantaged in old age. This is the result that Lillard and Waite (1995) found for both men and women (also see Pienta, Hayward, & Jenkins, 2000).

A second possible reason why living with a spouse might reduce risk of death is that marriage facilitates social integration (Kobrin & Hendershot, 1977; Sherbourne & Hays, 1990). The important role that social support plays in preventing illness and in facilitating recovery is well established (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Thoits, 1995). A spouse not only may provide support, but also may link one to the support of a larger kinship network. A third contribution of marriage to lower mortality rates comes from the economic advantages enjoyed by married persons. Research clearly finds both that there is a positive relationship between socioeconomic status and health (Feinstein, 1993) and that married people tend to enjoy higher standards of living than unmarried (Uhlenberg, 1996). The study by Lillard and Waite (1995) concludes that marriage improves the life chances of women primarily through improving their economic position, but other factors associated with marriage are more important for men.

Institutionalization

When older people suffer disabilities that leave them dependent upon others for care, family structure is a strong predictor of whether they will receive care at home or will be institutionalized. Studies have repeatedly found that living alone increases the risk that an older person will be admitted to a nursing home at some future time (Newman & Struyk, 1990; Steinbach, 1992). Further, older people living in the community with disabilities are much less likely to become institutionalized if they have either a spouse or an adult child who functions as their caregiver (Pearlman & Crown, 1992). Freedman (1996) reports that after controlling for health, age, sex, and income, married persons are only about half as likely as unmarried to be admitted to a nursing home. Further, she found that having a daughter or a

living sibling reduces the chances that an older person will enter a nursing home by about one-fourth.

Why does having a family structure that includes a spouse and/or a daughter lead to a lower risk of being institutionalized? The most straightforward explanation is that these family members provide the care that enables the older person to remain at home. The importance of informal caregiving in meeting the needs of disabled older people is widely recognized, and without this it is estimated that the demand for nursing home care would be much greater than it now is. The National Academy on Aging reports that among older people with long-term care needs, half who lack family caregivers are in nursing homes, compared to 7% of those with family caregivers (1997). But two other potentially important reasons why older people with supportive family members are frequently able to avoid institutionalization also have been suggested (Freedman, 1996). One is the assistance that kin may provide in obtaining home and community-based services that enable a dependent older person to remain living at home. The other way in which a spouse and other kin may help an older person avoid institutionalization is by the positive effect they have on her health. The better health of those who are married (Pienta et al., 2000) and those who have adequate social support networks (Bosworth & Schaie, 1997; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988) suggests that being embedded in a family may reduce the likelihood of becoming disabled and requiring regular care from others.

Older people not only receive care from family members, but also they provide care (see Bengtson, this volume). Older parents often care for their adult children who are developmentally disabled or who suffer from chronic mental illness (Freedman, Krauss, & Seltzer, 1997; Smith, Tobin, & Fullmer, 1995). And a great deal of attention has been given to grandparents who care for their grandchildren, either as surrogate parents or as regular child care providers (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2001; Pruchno, 1999). Most attention has been given to the burden that these types of caregiving place upon older people, but research also finds that caregiving often brings positive things into their lives (Pruchno, 1999). There is satisfaction from meeting needs of someone you care about, and this can provide purpose in life.

Intergenerational Relationships

Intergenerational relationships potentially contribute to the well-being of people in later life. Not only can children and grandchildren bring social and emotional support, but also they can provide much of the assistance required by dependent older people (Horowitz, 1985; Stone, Cafferata, & Sangl, 1987). But how much support an older person receives from children and grandchildren depends upon past family experiences. At a most basic level, the existence of intergenerational relationships depends upon prior childbearing. Older people without children do not have parent–child or grandparent–grandchild relationships. Further, those who have several children receive more intergenerational support than those who have only one child (Uhlenberg & Cooney, 1990). Beyond that, several other aspects of family behavior are relevant for intergenerational relationships.

The quality of parent–child relationships in later life is affected by the marital history of both the parent and the child. Older men who are divorced tend to have much poorer quality relationships with their adult children than those who are still married to their child's mother (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Seltzer, 1994). The divorced fathers have less contact with their children (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Webster & Herzog, 1995), have more strained relationships (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Umberson, 1992), and are less likely to receive assistance (Furstenberg, Hoffman, & Sherestha, 1995; White, 1992). The negative effect of

parental divorce is smaller for the child–mother relationship than the child–father relationship, but nevertheless is significant (Aquilino, 1994). A child's divorce also may have negative consequences for the quality of intergenerational relationships (Hagestad, 1988; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998). However, some survey data suggest that divorced daughters have more contact with their parents than their married counterparts (Spitze et al., 1994).

The structure and dynamics of the family system shape the quality and type of relationships that a person in later life has with grandchildren. First, the number of grandchildren in the kin network affects the relationship. The more grandchildren there are in the family, the less involvement a grandparent is likely to have with any particular grandchild (Elder & Conger, 2000; Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). Second, the quality of the grandparent–parent relationship has a significant effect on the amount of contact and the type of relationship between grandparent and grandchild (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986, King, Russell, & Elder, 1998; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). The person in the middle generation functions as a gatekeeper, either encouraging or discouraging the relationship between her child and her parent. The better the relationship with the parent, the more likely the adult child is to promote the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Third, the matrilineal tilt of American kinship networks (Hagestad, 1986) results in somewhat greater involvement of maternal than paternal grandparents with their grandchildren (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). This is especially evident when divorce occurs in the parent generation. Fourth, divorce in either the grandparent or the parent generation can greatly alter the grandparent–grandchild relationship (Johnson, 1998; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). Divorce in the grandparent generation is associated with decreasing involvement of grandfathers with their grandchildren. Divorce in the parent generation tends to increase involvement of grandparents if their child has custody of the grandchildren, and reduce it otherwise. However, when the grandchild is already an adult at the time of her parent's divorce, the grandchild–grandparent relationship may not be affected (Cooney & Smith, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay we chose to look at effects of family context over the entire life course. By taking this broad perspective we were unable to discuss much of the detail that has emerged from recent life course research. But looking at the big picture enables us to appreciate the profound significance of family environment in shaping the lives of individuals. Life course research has firmly established that well-being from birth until death is related to the family context within which one has lived. And family research has been very generative in proposing mechanisms that produce continuities and discontinuities in the life course. Reflecting on this literature, we conclude by suggesting four challenges that face researchers who study linkages between family and individual outcomes.

First, what outcomes should receive attention? Reviewing the existing literature, one discovers that research tends to be driven by a "problems" perspective. What causes health problems and premature death? What is responsible for educational failure and poverty? What leads to delinquency and drug use? What are the causes of teenage pregnancy? What increases the risk of divorce? Future research might give greater attention to family factors that produce positive outcomes. This is not the same question as asking what allows individuals to avoid undesirable outcomes. Among those who are not depressed, some are joyful and exuberant. Among those who are not sick, some have strength and vitality. Among those who graduate from college, some are well educated and interesting. Among those who are not divorced,

some experience rewarding and intimate marriage relationships. Among those who are not delinquent drug users, some contribute to the civic life of the community. By more carefully conceptualizing and measuring positive life course outcomes, future researchers could add to our understanding of what would facilitate the development of rich and meaningful lives.

Second, life course research has made an important contribution by calling attention to ways in which the lives of individuals are linked. Research within families finds both that parental behavior affects the lives of children, and having children affects the lives of adults. Siblings are sources of mutual influence across the life course. Behavior of one spouse can have profound implications for the life of the other spouse. In many ways adult children can influence the quality of life of their parents in old age. But the importance of family is not only in the various dyadic relationships. We must give greater attention to the family as a dynamic system to appreciate the full force of family context on individual lives. For example, the quality of the marriage relationship of the parents may affect the well-being of a child. An adolescent becoming a mother may alter the life course of the adolescent's parents. A change in the marital status of an older person may significantly impact the life of an adult child. Thus in multiple ways, an individual's life course may be shaped not only by her own family context, but also the family context of others to whom she is tied. And this web of relationships is dynamic, continuously changing in character over time. Obviously the methodological challenge of how to measure such a complex, time-varying set of family relationships is immense.

Third, the role of family structure versus family resources and family functioning in determining life course outcomes is tricky. A great deal of high-quality research has established that family structure is related to well-being at all phases of life. Most simply, children living with their two biological parents tend to do better than children in alternative families; adults living in non-disrupted marriages tend to do better than those who live in alternative arrangements; older people who are married tend to do better than those who are not married. Some would say that this is evidence that supports a conservative political agenda that privileges two-parent households. Others discount the importance of the link between family structure and well-being, and argue that resources and family functioning are all that really matter. There may be little hope of compromise between these two camps, but some middle position makes sense. Other things being equal, there seem to be real advantages associated with stable marriages, both for adults and children. At the same time, there is no reason to doubt that more positive life outcomes would be facilitated by improving interpersonal relationships in all family types and by increasing resources available to the disadvantaged.

Finally, how important is the family? Research has repeatedly found family context to have significant effects on a wide range of outcomes, such as health, socioeconomic status, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships. However, the variance in models predicting outcomes that is explained by family variables is not overwhelming. Does this mean that the family is less important than is generally assumed? Before reaching that conclusion, two weaknesses of the research literature need to be considered. First, a particular family context could have strong effects, but those effects could differ across individuals. For example, poor parenting may interfere with one child developing effective parenting skills, but may motivate another child to strive to not reproduce the same family environment for his children. Thus a weak association between quality of parenting in two generations might not mean that parenting in one generation does not have a strong effect on parenting in the next generation. A seemingly "null relationship" may need to be explored more carefully to adequately understand how family context influences subsequent behaviors. Second, much of the conceptualization and measurement of family context is crude. The family is often elusive and some of

the most salient experiences we have in our families may not be captured by either our measures of the family, or the stochastic models we impose upon the data. Further, family life is fluid—both the structure of a family and interactions within a family change over time. Thus to expect that a snapshot of family context at one point in time would be adequate to explain some outcome at a later time is simplistic. We expect that patterning in the *history* of lived family experiences and the *timing* of family transitional events matter, not simply the state of the family at any given point (Wu, 1996). Thus relating family context at one point in time to specific outcomes at some later time is a gross simplification of the actual process linking family and outcomes.

One must also acknowledge that there may be substantive reasons why research so often finds only modest effects of family on various outcomes. Outside of the family, the independent and combined influences of other *institutions* such as schools, neighborhoods, and religious organizations, as well as other *individuals*, such as peers, nonrelated adults, significant others, and work colleagues, matter. The family is one of many institutions in which the life course is embedded. Taking a life course perspective, one recognizes that many potentially deleterious experiences in the family (e.g., parental divorce and subsequent loss of income) can be countered by later, positive experiences in some other institution. For example, academic success in college no doubt has a much stronger direct relationship to occupational status at mid-life than does stability of parents' marriage during childhood.

Obviously there are other important determinants of outcomes (genetic makeup, luck, non-family networks) than the family. But research over the past several decades has established that the family does play a critical role in shaping the lives of individuals. A fuller understanding of the significance of the family may be gained as family researchers develop better theories and methodology. Existing research makes clear, however, that one has a better understanding of the determinants of life course trajectories if one has information regarding preceding family contexts.

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