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