CHAPTER 19

The Life Course Perspective Applied to Families Over Time

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Introduction

One of the enduring puzzles in the life sciences is the description and explanation of change over time. Such change is frequently called “development,” and the metaphors of growth and decline, gain and loss have often been employed to characterize change in structure or function of organisms over time. Cells, individuals, groups, and even social systems exhibit change over time. While most change is orderly, regular, and normative, some change is chaotic, irregular, and unpredicted. Growth or decline at the individual level often has antecedents or consequences at the collective group level.

Similarly, one of the enduring puzzles in family studies is the description and explanation of changes in roles and relationships among family members over time. Here, too, the metaphor of “development” has been used, along with notions of “family cycle” (see Chapter 10, this volume), “life cycle,” and “life span development,” as these have emerged from ontogenetic and psychological paradigms (see reviews by Baltes, 1987; and Hill & Hansen, 1960).

In studying families as they change with time, however, it is necessary to go beyond the individual life span metaphor and beyond the micro-social (family) level of analysis. We need to examine the unfolding history of intimate connections in families and the social context of such long-term relationships in terms of social structure and historical location. We have to explore issues of transition and transmission in families over periods of time and the socially constructed meanings that result from transitions and transmission. We need to refine concepts, methods, and especially theories to understand and explain change over time within families.

Over the past decade or so there has emerged an analytical perspective coming together from several disciplines that seems especially promising in dealing with such issues. This has come to be known as the “life course perspective,” and our objective in this chapter is to apply its insights about change over time to theories and concepts about family structure and relationships. The life course perspective involves a contextual, processual, and dynamic approach to the study of change in the lives of individual family members over time, and of families as social units as they...
change over historical periods. It thus involves both the micro- and macrosocial levels of analysis.

Our purpose in this chapter is to examine the applications of the life course perspective to theory and research in the study of the family. First, we summarize five basic themes of the life course perspective: the importance of multiple temporal contexts; social-structural context; diachronic process and change; heterogeneity and multidisciplinary assessment. Second, we trace the intellectual and empirical history of the life course perspective on the family, which draws from several quite different disciplines and methodological orientations: human development; life span developmental psychology; family development; sociological analyses of age stratification; and social-historical studies. We ask whether the life course perspective is emerging as a new "paradigm" in studies of development. Third, we present four assumptions of a life course perspective applied to families, based on these antecedent approaches, and identify some of the most relevant theoretical concepts in this approach. In the fourth section, we discuss how these basic concepts led to propositions for theory development and describe examples of research applications of the life course perspective applied to the family. Fifth, we discuss research methods characteristic of the life course approach to families using cohort analysis (in determining demographic change, process and transition analysis, cohort variations, family as mediators of change, and qualitative methods). We conclude with some observations about future directions for research and theory using the life course analytical perspective.

Basic Themes of the Life Course Perspective on Development

The terms "life course" and "life span" have been used widely in recent family and developmental research, but unfortunately they are not always defined consistently and often not defined at all. Psychologists have for decades used "life span" as the construct to describe ontogenetic growth and loss in individuals (Schaie, 1967), but only recently have they begun to examine the contextual elements of social structure and history as influencing ontogenetic development (see Baltes, 1968, 1987; Featherman & Lerner, 1985). Family developmentalists for many years have preferred the term "life cycle" as they have focused on patterned stages of family composition and change that affect members' behavior over time (Duvall, 1957; Hill & Duvall, 1948; Hill & Mattessich, 1987). More recently the term "life course" has been advanced by sociologists (Riley, Johnson & Forner, 1972; Bengtson & Black, 1973; Dannefer, 1984a; Elder, 1975, 1991; Featherman, 1983; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Hareven, 1982, 1987; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). The key idea these sociologists have added to analyses of development and change is the importance of social meanings that are applied to life events, individual development, and the development of relationships over time.

This emphasis is not, of course, entirely new. Years ago, the early family developmentalists noted the importance of social meanings and sociohistorical context in development. But what is new is the emphasis on the construction of meaning out of age changes and generational succession; for example, what Bengtson and Kuypers (1971) termed the "generational stake." Or, as Hagestad (1990) puts it, "There is a difference between the span of a life time and the course of a life. The 'life-course' reflects how society gives social and personal meaning to the passage of biological time" (p. 2). Long-term sociodemographic changes are especially crucial in such defining. Moreover, the life course perspective emphasizes the ways in which pathways and transitions are socially organized (Elder, 1991). For example, Plath (1980) suggests that changes in longevity have been so dramatic, recent, and rapid that there is a dislocation between the life span and the life course—a new uncertainty about what it means to mature and age. Dannefer (1984a) has advocated the term "sociogenesis" as a counterpart to "ontogenesis" in conceptualizing human development from birth to death; moreover, he has suggested that this approach may reflect the emergence of a "new paradigm" in the study of behavior over time, as we discuss below.

As we apply the life course perspective to processes of family change, we will be arguing that the family is a microsocial group within a macrosocial context, a collection of individuals with a shared history who interact within ever-changing social contexts across ever-increasing time and space. Our application of the life course perspective to the study of the family reflects the broader contextual view emerging from the liter-