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History and the Family: The Discovery of Complexity*

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New historical work in family studies has produced a greater sense of complexity and differentiation in the course of social change. This perception, which is challenging accepted knowledge and theory, partly reflects a shift in analytic perspective from structural models to a more behavioral thrust that views family units as actors in structured situations. W. I. Thomas's adaptational approach in The Polish Peasant exemplifies this behavioral orientation as does an emerging perspective on the life course of families and individuals. This essay examines the interplay of historical research and theory building, the expanding discovery of complexity in the family life of past times, the potential usefulness of Thomas's theory for such research, and the essential contribution of age and the life course to the historical application of the Thomas approach.

Over a decade ago Richard Hofstadter (1968:442) noted a "rediscovery of complexity in American history—a new awareness of the multiplicity of forces." In this time span, research has profoundly enlarged our knowledge of family variation and complexity across historical time and the life span.¹

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¹The new awareness reflects a number of developments, but especially the rise of quantitative methodology and analyses in studies of social change and patterns. Major advances along this line have come from the social sciences, though appraisals rightly fault its atemporal

Once satisfactory accounts of the transition from tradition to modernity, the legacy of slavery among black families, and the course from marriage to old age in particular times have given way to perceptions of multiple pathways and alternative routes, the interplay between familiar and novel experiences, and the reworking of customary adaptations in new situations. From the vantage point of historical scholarship, there is clearly more to the story of family change than could have been imagined only 10 or 15 years ago. In this essay, some of the theoretical implications of this research are explored, most notably the emergence of a more behavioral approach to the family.

To grasp the remarkable surge of family history, consider for a moment where we were just 10 years ago when Robert Winch (1970)

character. In Barraclough's words (1979:214-215), contemporary social science still lacks the "depth which comes from studying society not as static but as a dynamic constellation of forces manifesting itself in continuous and constant change." Two anthologies of essays on family history (Demos and Boocock, 1978; Hareven, 1978) show developments toward a more dynamic, historical perspective in the field.

began his Burgess address by asking what we know "about permanence and change in the American family. We can be sure," he said, "of only two things." One concerns family structure or the decline in household size, the other pertains to functional change, to the decline in functions. Winch did not cite the new historical studies and with good reason. Most significant work in social history and historical sociology had not been launched, completed, or published at the time. With such developments have come an expanded sense of the problematic, a greater range of inquiry, and discontent with customary paradigms.

Diverse research influences established a context for the new work. The French historical tradition on the study of mentality produced Phillippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), a pioneering history of childhood and youth that has influenced countless students and scholars over the past two decades in Europe and America.² Rudolph Trumbach (1978:xiii), author of *The Rise of the Equalitarian Family*, acknowledges that "like everyone else I began under the influence of Ariès and took for granted that when one studied the family, one studied the history of education." This history is the core of Bernard Bailyn's (1960) programmatic agenda for family and educational studies in *Education in the Forming of America*.

The influence of Ariès and Bailyn, the methodology of family reconstitution developed in France and England, and the historical demography of the Cambridge Group, under the direction of Peter Laslett (with R. Wall, 1972), are variously expressed in published studies on American family history in the 1970s: John Demos' (1970) reconstruction of family life in Plymouth, New England; Lockridge's (1970) study of four generations in Dedham, Massachusetts; Philip Greven's (1970) thoughtful study of four generations in rural Andover, New England; and Daniel Scott Smith's (1973)

²*Centuries of Childhood* (Ariès, 1962) is widely regarded a most important influence on the development of family history within the field of history. However, sociologists tended to view Ariès' work from the perspective of age divisions and social change. Bernard Farber's (1972) *The Guardians of Virtue* is one exception to the sociological neglect of Ariès in historical studies of the family.

unique time series across more than 200 years of family life in Hingham, Massachusetts. One of the distinct beneficiaries of this fresh vigor in family history is our expanding knowledge of black family life since the Colonial era (see especially Gutman, 1976). From the perspective of the 1980s, Robert Winch's two certainties now seem more problematic on empirical detail and interpretation. The scope of knowledge, understanding, and unknowns has increased appreciably over the decade. From the much criticized "modernization" thesis to women and the family economy (Wrigley, 1972, 1977; Hareven, 1976), the new wave of findings has challenged traditional answers to long-standing questions.

Problems of historical change and the family were once prominent in the Chicago tradition of sociological studies prior to World War II, from Thomas and Znaniecki's (1974) *The Polish Peasant* and Frazier's (1966) *The Negro Family in the United States* to perceptive essays by Ernest Burgess, William Ogburn, and others. Burgess's appreciation for historical work is documented by a laudatory introduction to Frazier's monumental study, in which he states that it is the "most valuable contribution to the literature on the family since the publication, 20 years ago, of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*" (Elder, 1978:53). Often deficient in empirical details, Burgess's characterizations of families in past time were occasionally imprecise (Fischer, 1978:238) or simply erroneous. But he firmly believed that family trends (on marital age, divorce, household structure) represented the best documented aspect of family life up to the 1950s. Description is not explanation, however, and one detects in Burgess's thinking an impatience with the countless unknowns on family change, a sentiment that applies equally well today. To promote greater understanding of the family in a dynamic society, Burgess (in Bogue, 1974: 358) urged that priority be given to the formulation of a theoretical approach, one "organized around the concepts of process, action, and development—concepts which take into account the mutability of a changing society."

This task is still before us. We still know little about the interacting and enduring effects of the Great Depression and World

War II, an historical period which Reuben Hill (1981) has called "the watershed of family change in the twentieth century." Nevertheless, research developments have increased our recognition that a satisfactory approach must locate the family in terms of both historical and life time. The historical dimension no longer implies just the distant past which contemporary studies might ignore. New historical understandings of women and the family, of the young and old in family context, and of black families have modified interpretations of *current* observations and trends. A central theme in this new work relates family history to a conceptual approach that links historical and family time: a life-course perspective (Elder, 1975, 1978a, 1978b). Analysts of family history and demography have found the perspective useful in studying the interdependence of family and industrial change (Hareven, 1981), the changing lives of women during the late 19th century (Chudacoff, 1980) and 20th century (Uhlenberg, 1974, 1979), and social change in life transitions (Modell *et al.*, 1976). Across these studies, the life-course perspective has functioned as a theoretical orientation; to use Robert Merton's definition (1968), it has established a common field of inquiry by providing a framework that guides research in terms of problem identification and formulation, variable selection and rationales, and strategies of design and analysis.

My initial orientation to the life course as a focal point of inquiry occurred through the study of socialization as a lifelong, interactive process. This emphasis in my dissertation (1961, published in 1980b), under the direction of Charles Bowerman, was supplemented by exposure to the career analyses of sociologists John Clausen and Harold Wilensky at the University of California and by a growing 1968a, 1968b, 1980a). The historical dimension of age, as birth years, informed research on the Oakland project—published as *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder, 1974)—primarily through Karl Mannheim's essay on "The Problem of Generations" (1952) and especially Norman Ryder's classic essay (1965) on the cohort in the study of social change. The conceptual task of relating the social and historical meanings of age emerged only gradually through the time span of the Oakland study.³ A substantial

³The various meanings and conceptualizations of age

imprint of the early school of Chicago sociology can be seen in many aspects of my work to date, a development which now seems almost inevitable in view of the Chicago alumni who have guided me along the way at critical points.

One approach to the new family history is to take the perspective of research contributions to theory. Over the past decade, historical research has challenged accepted knowledge and the empirical base of much theory building by documenting a more complex and variable course of family life and change. This challenge reflects the behavioral thrust of this new research, *i.e.*, its emphasis on family behavior in relation to social structures, their constraints and options. An approach that has much to offer behavioral research is W. I. Thomas's adaptional perspective on family change; although its usefulness can be enhanced by drawing upon a life-course perspective and Robert Merton's analysis of structured options.

RESEARCH, THEORY, AND HISTORY

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the evolving discipline of family studies has been the simultaneous expansion of two vigorous lines of activity—theory building and historical research—which bear an essential but uneasy relationship to each other. With the growth of empirical studies of the family during the postwar years came mounting pressures for "order-creating" efforts, such as the development of propositional inventories, the construction of taxonomies, and conceptual integration. After more than two decades of such work, it seems no

have a long history, especially in relation to the life span of the social sciences. One of the first known uses of cohort analysis appears in the work of Eilert Sundt (1980), a Norwegian. Sundt explained the sharp rise in number of marriages after 1850 by documenting a preceding baby boom after 1815. Social age in the timing of lives and families has been the target of thought and inquiry for centuries. Demographic work on life events and decisions in family formation is clearly a longstanding source for life-course theory, see, for example, Kingsley Davis and Judith Blake's (1956) "Social Structure and Fertility: An Analytic Framework." Even the idea of family fluctuations between hardship and well-being, based on the changing relation of family composition and economics, can be traced beyond Rowntree's famous York study to the writings of French and English analysts of the mid to late 19th century (communication from Louise Tilly, 1976). The distinctiveness of current work on the life course is that it represents a convergence among these various strands (Elder, 1975), a convergence based on the contributions of multiple disciplines in the social sciences.

exaggeration to describe the period as an unparalleled era "of systematic theory building" (Burr *et al.*, 1979a:10). Conceptual advances have been achieved in the domains of family formation, work and family, marital quality and power, socialization and family crisis. Much of this work is published in the two-volume handbook, entitled *Contemporary Theories About the Family* (Burr *et al.*, 1979 a and b). The most noticeable deficiency is the absence of theoretical developments on family change.

Social theories about family change have not fared well by the judgments of historical research. Theories produce a sense of order, structure, and meaning, while empirical discoveries frequently bring disorder to customary views or models. Thus, once plausible accounts of family evolution portrayed the modern family pattern as an outgrowth of industrialization, an erroneous concept in light of empirical research, reflecting simplistic models of linear change and timing (Hareven, 1976). The viability of generalizations from imaginary, incomplete, or deficient data has diminished in the midst of expanding archival studies. Noting that interpretations of the present always entail "a host of assumptions about the past," Thernstrom (1965:242) argues that the real choice for social research is "between explicit history, based on a careful examination of the sources, and implicit history, rooted in ideological preconceptions and uncritical acceptance of local mythology."

A case that underscores Thernstrom's warning comes from beliefs regarding social change in parental behavior. Since the 1930s age segregation and the expansion of socialization influences outside the family suggest that contemporary American parents are spending much less time with their children than did parents of the 1920s or earlier. Using these observations and the child-rearing literature on permissiveness, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1970:95) concludes that parents used to bring up their children: "While the family still has the primary moral and legal responsibility for the character development of children, it often lacks the power or opportunity to do the job, primarily because parents and children no longer spend enough time together in situations in which such training is possible."

What would the data on this point suggest if we return to the American communities that were studied some 30 to 50 years ago? A University of Virginia research team did just that in a 1978 survey of middle- and working-class parents in Middletown, the city of Muncie studied by the Lynds in the 1920s and 1930s. Comparing items in the surveys of 1924 and 1978, the research team (Caplow and Chadwick, 1979:381) found that "mothers and fathers, in both working-class and business-class families, spent *much more* time with their children in 1978 than in 1924." The precise figures are not reported and we do not know about matters of changing time allocations in parenting. Nevertheless, these findings recommend a more painstaking approach to the historical record.

Research on family, household, and kinship in history has borrowed extensively from sociological theories and methodologies, while sociologists on occasion have characterized the past from knowledge of theory instead of historical reality. Both operations have underscored major theoretical and research deficiencies in charting the course of family change. For example, Weinstein and Platt (1969) used Parsonian theory to outline a model of the traditional family in which male and female roles are not sharply differentiated, in which child rearing and discipline functions are shared by both parents, and in which father plays a nurturant role. This portrait is challenged on all points by the historical literature for it is founded on what the historian Barbara Harris (1976:166) rightly considers "an imaginary past." She argues that the present state of knowledge calls not for "brilliant theory," but for "the facts and modest, tentative interpretations."

A powerful statement of this position is found in Stinchcombe's (1978) *Theoretical Methods in Social History*. He argues that the poor reputation of theory among historical analysts is partially due to theory that "has to ignore most of the facts in order to get its concepts going" (1978:16). The more social theory ignores the details of a setting or process, the more it resembles fantasy or speculation. Such writing is mere "wind," argues Stinchcombe; "the classes it invents are vacuous, and nothing interesting follows

from the fact that A and B belong to the class" (1978:21). By comparison, an adequate theory of social change gives attention to the details of narrative sequences; it builds deep analogies between cases of people and their thoughts about conditions.

Stinchcombe's criticism applies well to grand theories that once occupied center stage as accounts of family history and broad historical syntheses across the centuries (e.g., Shorter, 1975; Stone, 1977). Shorter's well-known book, *The Making of the Modern Family* (1975) is criticized for a "simplicity that at times amounts to simplemindedness" (Scott, 1977). In contrast, Tilly and Tilly (1980) propose a convincing alternative: that we study what actually happened to families and members in specific settings during industrialization and migration by making systematic comparisons across groups defined by social class, place, and period.

Relations between social theory and the historical record identify important issues of problem formulation. When theory is applied to an historical situation, as in Neil Smelser's (1959) classic study of family change in 19th century Lancashire, the research problems are posed by the theory itself. Smelser (1968:77) observes that his model of structural differentiation generated the core problems of his study, not the "period of the Industrial Revolution as such." In this case, the relation between theory and research problem is not problematic, since the problem is defined by theory. What may be problematic is the relation between the theory or problem, on the one hand, and the historical event, on the other. As noted elsewhere (Elder, 1978b), Smelser's theory is not adequately informed by the details of industrial change and family adaptation. A structural theory is not suited to the analysis of family behavior or to its articulation with the economy across the life span.

The expanding enterprises of historical inquiry and theory building in family studies are linked in ways that reflect Thomas Kuhn's (1977) observations on "the essential tension" between tradition and innovation or convergence and divergence in scientific research. As Kuhn makes clear, the very best of such work entails both types of operations. Convergent activities build and draw from a generally accepted fund of principles, procedures, and knowledge, while divergent

activities produce new data, methods, and insights that challenge accepted answers and conventional problem statements. Painstakingly constructed models may be found incorrectly specified through a fresh line of research. The relation between industrial and family change is a prominent case in point. By dating key elements of the modern nuclear family before industrialization (e.g., affective individualism in marriage, a developmental concept of the young child, and fertility control), historical research (Stone, 1977; Wrigley, 1977) should prompt major recasting of theory on the long-term evolution of the Western family system.

Convergent activities develop the core of a field such as family studies—the knowledge and procedures that inform basic education and advanced training. But they also constitute a seedbed of divergent possibilities through the Mertonian process of "serendipity" (Merton, 1968:157) and novel problem identifications. In studies of history and the family, as elsewhere, professional incentives for young scholars favor the innovative formulation of an old problem, the discovery of an unmined archive to probe an unexplored question, or the proposal of new solutions that question established views. (C. Tilly, 1979). If "order-creating" tasks lack priority on this list, they nonetheless remain a prime step toward the puzzles and unknowns that spur innovative work. Kuhn (1977:234), among others, reminds us of the connections between new and old ideas. New theories and even discoveries are not produced "de novo"—they emerge from "old theories and within a matrix of old beliefs about the phenomena that the world does and does not contain." Theoretical limitations are commonly rooted in errors of fact, especially in pseudofacts which have been plentiful in the background of theories on family change. Such facts, as Merton points out (1959:xv), "have a way of inducing pseudoproblems, which cannot be solved because matters are not as they purport to be." Or, as Mark Twain noted: "It isn't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you do know that ain't so."

THE DISCOVERY OF COMPLEXITY

Problems of historical change and the family have been studied from the perspectives of social structure (of institutional

arrangements, authority, social bonds, etc.) and of behavior. Structural accounts of social change which include the family as one element specify constraints and options that impinge on family behavior: for example, the schooling and employment options for older children in urban centers of late 19th century Massachusetts (Kaestle and Vinovskis, 1980), women's employment prospects in textile and mining communities, and the access of families to community services in critical life situations (Anderson, 1971). Theories of declining and expanding options or constraints do not enable us to understand or predict the choices families make from the options available—*e.g.*, how they work out lines of action in periods of economic dislocation. Such questions are characteristic of the new family history which views family action, strategies, and patterns in relation to urban and rural social structures. Concepts of the family and individuals as decision makers have come from historical analysis which views the family from the perspective of actors in structured circumstance. One prominent example is Thomas Dublin's (1979) study of the family ties of women in the Lowell mills.

A clear illustration of the conceptual shift comes from a comparison of two historical studies of family structure in 19th century Lancashire, England, published slightly more than a decade apart: Neil Smelser's (1959) study of family change and growth in the textile industry of Lancashire (1770-1850) and Michael Anderson's (1971) research on rural and working-class families between 1840 and 1860. Lacking data on the workers, Smelser's analysis shows the unfolding process by which industrial change led to the structural separation of family and work roles. Families are not depicted as dynamic social units interacting with situations through their life courses. Family groups and people with careers, histories, and choices drop out of the picture. By comparison, Anderson uses historical materials on workers and their families to study changes at both the structural and behavioral levels, and their relationship. He concludes that migration to urban centers of textile employment altered the availability of kin among young workers and promoted individualism, yet kin support proved to be a critical urban resource in time of crisis. Family studies of this sort,

which utilize both structural and behavioral levels of analysis, bear directly on what Tamara Hareven (1977:69) has called "the discovery of complexity in family behavior in the past."

The compelling attractions of behavioral questions and modes of analysis are reflected by two developments over the past decades: (1) the application of structural generalizations to the behavioral world, which has had unfortunate consequences for the research community; and (2) greater attention on process and dynamics in the form of a shift away from the static concepts of stage and status to more dynamic concepts. Family stage and socioeconomic status are being supplemented by concepts of family transition and economy (Demos and Boocock, 1978; Hareven, 1978 a and b). A brief discussion of these distinctions provides a useful framework in which to illustrate the discovery of complexity through historical studies of family and kinship during industrialization.

Behavioral Inferences from Structural Analyses

The prominence of structural models of family change since the 1940s obscured much empirical complexity and encouraged erroneous accounts through the generalization of modal family structures to the behavioral world of domestic units and people. A particular structural type could readily become a monolithic description of actual family units. A classic example of this misguided practice stems from Talcott Parsons' (1965) concept of the "isolated nuclear family" a depiction of the structurally differentiated position of the conjugal family in the bilateral kinship system of the United States. Dozens of studies tested this structural proposition on the behavioral level and produced findings that had nothing to do with Parsons' theoretical statement. Structural isolation does not ensure or imply behavioral isolation.

Similar opportunities for erroneous inference were presented by Arensburg and Kimball's (1940) classic study of the peasant Irish family in County Clare, a project carried out in the midst of the Great Depression. Their objective was not to conduct a rich ethnography of the peasant family but to apply Radcliffe-Brown's version of structure-

function theory to the construction of a theoretical model of this social institution. Excluding matters of parameter distribution and variability, the model depicted a rigidly structured patriarchy with father as the severe, emotionally repressed and distant authority figure and mother as the principal source of emotional support and the manager of tensions and conflicts. The division of labor in the household and farm economy followed the doctrine of separate spheres for males and females; roles were highly differentiated by sex, age, and relative status.

Nearly 40 years after the Arensberg and Kimball project, an interview survey (Hannan and Katsiaouni, 1977) was fielded in the County Clare region for the purpose of gaining insights into the nature and prevalence of traditional forms of the Irish farm family. The study included interviews with husbands and wives in some 400 families from the 10 least developed counties. Across all families, income depended mainly or entirely upon the farming operation. The re-study did not attempt to establish lineage ties between the current sample families and family units in the 1930s, partly because the original study's emphasis on theory construction did not lend itself to such research. Nevertheless, the intervening years encompassed a striking period of social change for family and patriarchy, rapid growth of the market economy, commercialization of agriculture, and a communications and education revolution. More than a third of the family farms were mechanized in an innovative manner. Close to half of the families used banking facilities, owned a television set, and possessed an automobile. An ideology of personal choice (Goode, 1963) generally governed boy-girl relations and vocational decisions, unlike the custom of family control in the depressed 1930s.

As might be expected from the diversity of postwar change, the study did not come up with a single predominant type of family structure. Only a fifth of the families resembled the traditional patriarchy of Arensberg and Kimball's study, while a third of the families were classified as modern as represented by the sharing of tasks and decision making, mutuality, and emotional support. Within the limits of a cross-sectional sample, modernizing forces seemed to make a difference in the degree of male dominance and in the prevalence of traditionalism, espe-

cially in relation to the level of education, migration experience, economic well-being, and involvement in mass media. Modern family expectations on equality and mutuality were commonplace among men and women in the sample, even among women from traditional homes. The latter felt the strongest pressures for change and ranked highest on dissatisfaction with family roles. The full meaning of these contemporary observations remain as elusive as the historical reality of structural forms among peasant families of County Clare in 1932.

One lesson from the County Clare study applies more generally to the intellectual task of describing and accounting for change processes and outcomes in family and kinship: *the complete dependence of this venture on what is known and understood in the baseline period*. Given the recency of scholarship on family history, one should not be surprised by a widespread uncertainty on what is known and understood. Consider the emergence of subjective themes that are generally attributed to the "modern family pattern in America"—the companionate or equalitarian marriage that is central to the Burgess-Locke thesis, a nurturant concept of parenting, and a developmental concept which distinguishes the young child from adults. Building upon the work of Mary Beth Norton (1980), Robert Wells (1971), and others, Carl Degler (1980) dates the emergence of these themes in the urban middle class of the post-Revolutionary era—up to about 1830. This timing is far removed from old ideas regarding the causal role of industrial change, and there is reason to believe that additional work in the Colonial era may push the date back further, even into the 17th century. Additional complications are posed by the pattern of ideological change. Did the ideas and sentiments of the modern family follow a linear course of diffusion across places and social groups in historical time or is the course cyclical, reaching states of accentuation and disfavor in relation to demographic and economic fluctuations? Unlike individuals and family organization, with their indelible imprint on countless records such as census and local survey schedules, city directories and property rolls, employment files, and vital event records, data limitations make the subjective dimension of family life exceedingly difficult to research.

From an organizational and behavioral perspective, the new historical research has produced a broader, more detailed, and differentiated formulation of change in American families since the late 18th century than is seen in Robert Winch's (1970) overview some 10 years ago, with its emphasis on household shrinkage and functional specialization. A glance across a full list of documented and potential family changes underscores the inadequacy of simple statements about the leading or pioneering role of any class, ethnic, or regional sector on the development of new family forms. The separation of workplace from household appeared first among the lower strata of laborers, while a more prolonged residence in the family household occurred mainly for reasons of work in the laboring classes and because of advanced schooling in the middle class (Katz, 1975). Fertility declines in 19th century America add a good many puzzles to the modernization of family sentiments and structures. Perhaps the surest argument concerns the spread of individualism and preferences of personal choice among the young and the better educated (Goode, 1963). Class and age models of cultural diffusion, whether of the filter down or up variety (Young and Wilmott, 1973), presume a knowledge base and theoretical understanding of change that do not exist. Judging from the work to date, a more profitable step toward explanation entails on investigation of the interaction between families and the variable course of urban-industrial change in specific settings. As Laurence Veysey (1973: 72) has put it, "the fundamental fact of history is the unevenness of rates of change."

Concepts and Pathways of Family Change

Transition and economy depict modes of family change since the 18th century and illustrate basic conceptual features of the new family history—its dynamic, behavioral, and contextual emphases. Transitions to adulthood, to a household without children, and to old age show an historical shift in the transfer of control over life events, from family to organizations and the individual. Owing largely to educational upgrading, young Americans today remain at home longer than their counterparts of the mid-19th century, but they pass through events that mark the adult transition more rapidly (Modell, *et al.*,

1976; Hogan, 1981). The time span between leaving home and establishing a new home and family is much shorter today. This change has direct consequences for the family of orientation, particularly in relation to the launching phase and the empty nest. With greater longevity and a smaller number of children, middle-aged couples today can look forward to a much longer time span after the children leave home (Wells, 1971; Glick, 1977). Turning to old age, the most important economic transition in the late 19th century was the departure of the last child of working age (especially for the working class). Retirement occupies this position among the elderly today (Chudacoff and Hareven, 1979). These contrasts vividly portray the changing relation between family and other institutional sectors of society.

Increasingly, scholars have looked for the imprint of macro-changes in processes of the family economy. This global concept refers to a system of resource allocation in family production, reproduction, and consumption; a system that brings all members of the family and household into the picture, and focuses attention on decision processes, strategies of adaptation, and life plans (L. Tilly, 1979; Bennett and Elder, 1979; Fruin, 1980; Goldin, 1981; Vanek, 1981). Katz and his co-researchers (1981:425) argue that the key to an understanding of change in family organization is likely to be found in the family economy, "in the strains, opportunities, and anxieties induced by the differential social impact of capitalist development upon domestic life." From operations to resources and structure, family economies are known to have varied by economic circumstances and cultural groups, by historical settings and stages of the life course (Modell, 1978). Among Italian women in Buffalo at the turn of the century, cultural traditions influenced work options and choices, as well as the productive activities of children (Yans-McLaughlin, 1977). Such variations restrict generalizations about historical change in the family and its form, whether linear or cyclical.

The concept of family economy in historical studies has supplemented accounts of functional loss and the diminished significance of the family with a concept of families as *regulatory* units, influencing and controlling the activity of members within the

household and in the larger community. Industrialization removed the productive function from households, but families continued to regulate the economic activity of members. Household considerations shaped whether, when, and even where women and children would obtain paid employment in 19th century America. Drawing upon a broad range of historical materials and studies in France and England, Tilly and Scott (1978) identify three general stages of women's work and the family economy (see also Young and Wilmott, 1973) that seem to apply as well to the lower strata in the United States:

Stage I: *The family economy of the pre-industrial world* in which all members of the household worked at productive tasks. "High fertility, high mortality, and a small-scale household organization of production and limited resources meant that women's time was spent primarily in productive activity" (Tilly and Scott, 1978: 227).

Stage II: *The family wage economy.*⁴ Working-class families relied upon the earnings of older children and women. The predominant woman worker was single and a daughter of the working class, though married women did enter the labor force under pressure of family needs. During the late 19th century, older children ranked next to the male head as the principal source of family income (Haines, 1979a and b).

Stage III: *The family consumer economy.*⁵ Households became more specialized units on matters of reproduction and consumption. In this stage, there was the growth of tertiary sector employment for women and the institutionalization of child-labor constraints on children.

Family transitions and economies highlight connections between the multiple pathways of urban-industrial change and family units. Communities that followed the path of "metals and mining" and those that acquired textile mills were at the leading edge of industrialization, yet their evolving economies formed markedly different relationships to the family (Tilly, 1976; Katz *et al.*, 1981). The existence of such differences now seems

⁴John Modell (1979:119) refers to these "cooperative family economies" as a response to the pervasive state of "externally imposed uncertainty."

⁵William Ogburn focused scholarly attention on this emergent stage in his 1929 address to the American Sociological Society, entitled "The Changing Family."

obvious from all that is known about the interplay of work and family, including the imperatives, options, and priorities of each domain and their mutual consequences. Yet their discovery in the course of industrialization has radically altered how the questions on the interplay of economic and family change are framed. Some constants have become variables. Systematic comparison of mining and textile communities in the United States underscores Raymond Grew's (1980:769) reminder that "only comparison establishes that there is something to be explained."

With greater appreciation for industrial variations, issues regarding the family's role as agent or outcome of larger changes are quickly transformed into the task of specifying circumstances which favor the agent role of the family or the dependent, reactive pattern. This step might lead to questions concerning the industrial consequences of family agency, as in textile communities. For example, in the case of textile communities, did particularistic values that typify family relations lead to behavior and choices that conflicted with mill policy and trade union interests? What industrial developments placed family and kindred in a more dependent position, and how were these changes expressed in short-term and long-term family adaptations? Questions of this sort have special relevance to the steel and mining cities of Pittsburgh (Kleinberg, in process) and Scranton (Haines, 1979a), Pennsylvania during the peak years of industrial growth.

Textile communities provide substantial historical documentation of family agency and control over the work process. Compared to areas of heavy industry and mining (Haines, 1979a) or even to commercial centers (Katz, 1975), family and work remained more a part of the same world for mill families throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century. Initially the incorporation of family units into the labor force of textile mills symbolized an early phase of industrialization (Smelser, 1959), though subsequent studies have found a continuation of this practice to the postwar era. Yans-McLaughlin (1977:216) describes silk-weaving firms around 1900 who hired entire family units from local Italian communities,

and Hareven (1981) refers to French-Canadian kin in the Amoskeag mill community of Manchester, New Hampshire (circa 1900-1930) who played the role of broker between individuals and the factory system. Kin recruited family members from Quebec for jobs in the Amoskeag, helped to mediate when work problems arose, and occasionally filled the slots of ailing relatives. A large percentage of the Amoskeag employees worked with relatives in the same mill room. Family ties, ethnicity, and religion formed the basis of communal groups within the Amoskeag.⁶

The formative or adult transition in family development represents one of the most important contrasts between the working class of textile and heavy industry or mining communities. In the textile community, there existed a distinctive pattern of early work for girls, a continuation of employment during the '20s, relatively late marriage, and time-out for childbearing mixed with work re-entry for reasons of family need (Dublin, 1979; Hareven, 1981). With employment opportunities for both young women and men, textile communities attracted rural migrants who did not create an age-sex structure that favored early marriage for women—a surplus of young men. However, rural-to-urban migration did produce such a marriage market in mining and heavy industry communities (Haines, 1979a). This market and few job opportunities for women partly accounted for a generalized pattern of early marriage, rare female employment before and after marriage, and unusually high marital fertility.

The structure of work and family in communities based on mining or heavy industry placed working-class women in a highly vulnerable and dependent position. This life situation is depicted most vividly in

Susan Kleinberg's (in process) *The Shadow of the Mill*, an historical account of family life and steel mills in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Steel workers around the turn of the century could expect a short, nasty worklife marked by the very real prospect of disabling or life-threatening accidents. Judging from the prevailing early marriage pattern, the typical housewife in the steel community of Pittsburgh was much younger and far less assertive than her spouse. She knew little about the world of work through either personal experience or the experiences of her mate, she managed the burden of many children on very scarce resources and lacked employment as an option should misfortune befall her spouse.

Vulnerability seems to apply to much of working-class life during the 19th and early 20th century. This is also true for the mill families of New England up until the 1900s (Dublin, 1979). But the Amoskeag mill families, as a group, show a level of mastery and command on matters of survival that seldom appears in other sectors of the working class. Prolonged work and delayed marriage among the French-Canadian women suggest a life in which married women had strong ties in the community, exercised substantial power or control on family and personal matters, and enjoyed some chance for a measure of economic independence after the husband's death. If the uniqueness of Manchester and Pittsburgh handicaps any comparison, the available facts at least indicate the possibilities of more precise studies of industrial and family change.

Whatever the path of industrial change, the new historical studies support a concept of family interdependence, communication, and geographic mobility between rural and urban populations. Streams of family units and people between Beech Creek, Kentucky and southern Ohio during World War II and the postwar years led Schwarzweller and associates (1971) to think of donor and recipient units as part of a larger social system with bonds largely formed by family-kinship ties. The "parental home," as one Ohio migrant put it, "is a *place* to go if things get rough out here" (Schwarzweller *et al.*, 1971:92). Drawing upon Frederic LePlay's concept of the stem family, this study depicts migration as a system-

⁶Hareven is able to show the variable career of family agency and control over matters of work and earnings by following mill families and individual workers from Amoskeag prosperity during the early 1900s to a major labor strike in 1922 and then to the beginning of the end that finally arrived for the textile firm in the mid-1930s. Though mill families were subordinated to the Amoskeag's powerful interests at all times, their relative influence was far greater during the growth period than during the years of decline and scarcity.

maintaining process involving exchange between stem families and the network of branch units. Stem families facilitated migration according to economic opportunity and provided "havens of safety." Something akin to this dynamic system of transactions between rural and urban families is seen in Anderson's (1971) study of families in 19th century Lancashire and in Hareven's (1981) Amoskeag research.

These and other studies of family, kinship, and migration provide a more differentiated understanding of social change in family development. Unlike notions of a clearly marked transition from rural to urban, recent research stresses the intersection of these diverse worlds and their interaction within the kin system. Rural migrants selectively drew upon and modified customary modes of adaptation in accordance with the demands of the new situation. The old ways determined or shaped the meaning of the new conditions. In study after study (see Glasco, 1978), family and kinship are seen as less the casualty of migration than as the primary mechanism by which 19th century migrants worked out adjustments to the city environment. Migration selectively strained and strengthened family ties. Ties were strengthened through the mobilization of kin resources, but always at a cost. The price paid for this aid is a neglected feature of kinship.

The distinctive focal point of this work is the family and household as domestic units or groups which are embedded in specific times, community contexts, and life trajectories. The behavioral thrust illustrates a general shift from purely structural analyses that exclude people, groups, and their careers. Behavioral research that also attends to social trends and forces has produced a greater sense of the agency and complexity of families in past time. Linear models of family change, a monolithic version of functional decline, the social breakdown of family life among rural migrants in the city, static concepts of family organization—these and other perspectives are now widely recognized as incomplete, misleading or erroneous, or simply inadequate. Structural differentiation represents a central element of family change, as are the decisions and actions of people and groups.

Diverse paths of urban-industrial development raise serious questions about any general theory that links overall change to family change. They push simple themes on social breakdown or innovation during industrialization into a broader context that suggests multiple and even contradictory outcomes. The once prominent thesis of "social breakdown" depicts industrial change as a demoralizing force, leading to family disorganization, loss of kin support and ties, the decline of paternal authority and parental supervision of the young, and the early "forced" departure of children from the home. The danger in critiques of the disorganization theme is that they frequently bring to mind another myth, that of the "over-integrated, ever resilient family." In a perceptive critique of working-class studies, Jonathan Prude (1976:424) correctly notes that research has fallen short of comprehending that "a family could be both affected by and effective in its milieu, that it could be simultaneously unsuccessful in resisting changes in its own traditions and successful in aiding its members to cope with the world in which they found themselves." This thoughtful statement deserves attention by all investigators of race and ethnicity in family life. Victimized and victorious are not mutually exclusive terms in referring to a family's adaptations and outcomes.

Much of what has been discussed under the heading of "discovery of complexity" in family organization concerns the influence of research on social theory, a theme given special significance in Robert Merton's (1968) *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Following Merton's analysis, it is clear that historical research has pressed for a substantial "recasting" of theories or conceptual schemes on social change and the family. It has also generated new theoretical interests within this domain. Merton (1968: 162) refers to the "repeated observation of hitherto neglected facts" as a prime mover of conceptual reformulations. Such facts have appeared throughout the field of modernization. An important type of reformulation involves problem statements. New thinking about old problems may well qualify in the end as the most influential theoretical development from the early studies of families in historical time.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND FAMILY ADAPTATION

As historical inquiry turned to the behavior of families, it did so with remarkably little guidance from seemingly appropriate studies in the sociological literature, such as Thomas and Znaniecki's (1974) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. A project of the early 1900s, *The Polish Peasant* shed light on an historical process of extraordinary significance for the family: the rural-to-urban migration of Polish peasants to urban centers in Poland, Germany, and the United States. In this and other writings, Thomas advanced a dynamic view of the family and individual in changing and historically specific times, a perspective that kept an eye on the broader changes and their concrete manifestations. According to Thomas, a family's behavior is influenced by what it brings to new situations, the demands and options or constraints of the situation, and situational interpretations.

One might say that Thomas followed a synthetic middle course between William Graham Sumner's cultural determinism of behavior and historical events in new situations (*cf.* Park, 1931) and extreme situational interpretations of Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" on American history. In Thomas's view, neither cultural legacies nor the imperatives of new situations are sufficient to explain lines of adaptation among families and individuals. A similar response of families to the same event or influence is unlikely when they enter the situation with different histories. Common histories and different situations likewise identify families who tend to follow different careers. Thomas's interaction perspective on family and situation depicts the family as both product and producer of its career (in Volkart, 1951). These concepts also apply to the reciprocal process between the family as a social group and its members. According to Thomas, family units influence members and are constructed and reconstructed by them along the life span. Shared definitions of the situation illustrate one outcome of this social dynamic.

Some elements of this approach to the family appear in studies by social historians utilizing research strategies ranging from the quantitative to the case-biographical approach (Sklar, 1979; Brumberg, 1980). Yans-McLaughlin (1977:217) refers to the

adaptation of Italian immigrants in Buffalo by noting that they "constructed an interpreted their social reality in terms of past experience. Without taking their perceptions into account, we cannot properly understand them or their history." In this version of the Thomas Theorem ("If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."), families respond to situations in terms of their meanings, and such meanings are shaped by customary beliefs and values. Hareven's (1981) Amoskeag study stresses the selective persistence of old ways in new situations. Pre-migration kin associations and values commonly served as resources and assumed different forms in the mill town of Manchester. Similarly, Scott and Tilly (1975) argue for a model of family change in which behavior is more a product of old ways operating in new situations than of new beliefs *per se*. Despite such correspondence with Thomas's approach, these studies make no explicit or detailed reference to his writings. The same conclusion applies to the sociological literature. Studies of the family in the Great Depression and in World War II had much to gain from Thomas's work, yet none of the major studies followed this model.

Views of Thomas as a proponent of the disorganization model of family change may account for some of this neglect, especially among social historians who observed a more differentiated pattern of family adaptation. Thomas and Znaniecki (1974:1134) concluded from their materials that "emigration of individual family members abroad and emigration of whole families from the country to the city are the two main factors of familial disorganization." However, they also point out that this generalization is too vague and superficial to be anything more than a point of departure for research. Indeed, social disorganization in Thomas's analysis is only one phase of a change process that may lead to reorganization. *The Polish Peasant* examines family "disorganization and reorganization" in Poland and in the United States.⁷ E. Franklin Frazier's (1966) study of black Chi-

⁷Though much analysis in the old Chicago school of sociology seems bound by the "disorganization" theme, including Thomas's own work in *The Polish Peasant*, I believe this bias partly reflects the blinders of cross-sectional research designs. When applied to transitions, a cross-sectional design is likely to be especially sensitive

cago migrants between 1915 and 1940 documents both the disorganization phase in Thomas's formulation and the conditions under which black family life on the South Side was strengthened.

The analytic task is to specify circumstances that increase the likelihood of certain outcomes from the initial stage of disorganization or adaptation. Elizabeth Pleck (1979) used this approach across successive generations in her study of black migration to Boston in the late 19th century. On the basis of three sets of comparisons (northern- and southern-born blacks, blacks and Irish in Boston, and black Bostonians with blacks in other cities), Pleck argues that contradictions between newly acquired values and low, unstable income over a long phase of city life sharply increased marital separations and desertions, producing greater dependence on kin and friends for ways of coping with poverty. The full destructive impact of the city was not experienced initially, owing in part to the collective "needs of the migrants, the pattern of chain migration, and the continued hostility from outsiders" (Pleck, 1979:203). As racially imposed deprivations in the second generation weakened married life and the traditional values of church and community, the cultural pattern shifted toward "middle-class, secular values, a pronounced racial pride, and a willingness to protest against discrimination" (Pleck, 1979:202). In research design and findings, this study and Frazier's early research show many similarities and instructive differences.

The central idea in Thomas's model of change is that of control over the environment, a concept that identifies through diverse meanings a rapidly expanding body of research across the social sciences and humanities. It would be difficult to find another concept that has broader relevance to the human situation or that has served as the focal point of more thinking, writing, and research. Problem foci range from the effects of ownership and possessions on family patterns (Modell, 1979) to psychological representations such as feelings of personal control, self-efficacy, and learned helplessness

to symptoms of disorganization, to the attention-getting elements of family change. Thomas insisted on longitudinal studies and a temporal perspective in family and individual studies more than 50 years ago.

(Furby, 1978; Baum and Singer, 1980). Personal and family control may be expressed as ideologies that incorporate causal perspectives and in definitions of the situation, behavior patterns, and explanations or accounts. On the individual level, sense of control is consistently associated with healthful or developmental outcomes. Concerning future developments, Amitai Etzioni (1968:39) predicts that "the concept of control may well one day provide the elusive key to a unified behavioral science."

The basic human problem for W.I. Thomas is that of achieving, retaining, and restoring control over desired outcomes. One such outcome in the family is cooperative or concerted action. From this perspective, family disorganization constitutes a process in which existing family rules lose at least some of their influence over the behavior of individual members. To use the Polish peasant example, new settlers in urban centers were exposed to individualistic sentiments that weakened the moral force of collective interests. Changes of this sort occurred between husband and wife and between the generations. Disorganizing forces in family life were countered at times by efforts to reorganize or reconstruct. Novel schemes of control and adaptation were devised to meet the new situation. Issues of control emerged through the building up and the breaking down of group life among families. Linkages between the family and the individual are essential in any effort to specify the psychological effects of socioeconomic change on family members, and *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1974) made some headway toward filling this gap. Family disorganization could lead to personal disorganization by preventing individual members from organizing their life for the efficient and continuous satisfaction of fundamental interests. Life organization is structured by self-other concepts, principles of action, and situational schemes that apply to an experienced and anticipated career. The historical actor makes his life as he projects it ahead of him; "he formulates principles of action and organizes his life in ways which seem likely to further his life aim" (Park, 1931:171). Thomas's concept of life organization resembles a "project," as Robert Park (1931:171) once put it; a project that undergoes revision throughout life

whenever new experience cannot be assimilated.

Disorganization and reorganization are only two of a number of processes or potential factors that influence the control a family or individual exercises over its environment. Disorganized families, in the sense of weak normative regulation, would be handicapped in any situation that requires coordinated or cooperative efforts. The rearing of children is a case in point. However, degree of organization may have little to do with the economic welfare of families, especially above a minimal level. For a broader conceptualization of the change process, the organization themes of *The Polish Peasant* must be left and an essay by Thomas that was published in 1909 must be turned to instead.

In this short manuscript, Thomas viewed control of desired outcomes as a function of the changing relation between claims and resources. Control is achieved when resources enable the fulfillment of claims. Goals or standards are specified in a situation by family claims, whether values, beliefs, expectations, or attitudes. Examples include a family's preferred standard of living or quality of life. Another example comes from May's (1980) analysis of divorce records between 1890 and 1920. She concludes that the marital claims of women in Los Angeles shifted from an attitude of sacrificial investment during the late 19th century to an expectation of personal fulfillment. In Thomas's formulation, resources include all potential means to the satisfaction of claims, both psychological and socioeconomic. Family organization, emotional support, and income are all resources, though perhaps for different targets of control.

"Disturbances of habit" arise when an event or process widens the gap between claims and resources. Three historical models illustrate different forms of this gap and call for different types of adaptation: economic depression, prosperity, and social discontinuity. In the *depression* model, heavy income loss produces a disparity between claims and resources. An Oakland (California) study of Depression families (Elder, 1974) recorded two major responses to this loss of control: the generation of additional sources of income, as through maternal employment, and the reduction of expenditures. The *prosperity* model follows Durk-

heim's (1951:248) analysis of "the malady of unlimited aspiration." During periods of rapid economic growth, material aspirations are likely to rise faster than real income. A good many Depression families experienced this strain after living with hardship for most of the 1930s. As in *The Polish Peasant*, the *discontinuity* model is best illustrated by the emigration experience in which new claims (e.g., self versus family interests) are paired with resources that are suited to an agrarian world.

Nonhistorical events can also generate adaptive problems that resemble those associated with economic depression, prosperity, and discontinuity. Normative events in the life span, such as retirement, often bring less control for the individual. The same is true of idiosyncratic events, those which follow no particular timetable over the life span. The latter is best illustrated by an automobile accident. Thomas briefly mentions the destabilizing effect of such events, though historical change is the primary impetus for family change in his account. The nature of this change depends on the adaptational course of the family in efforts to regain or restore control. Economic deprivation might lead to multiple earners, the pooling of resources among relatives, or the sharp reduction of expenditures. Each response and general configuration charts a different path of family change and development.

Family decisions on types of response vary by the type of problem or crisis and by the resources families bring to the new situation. Both influences appear in a study that draws upon the conceptualizations of W.I. Thomas, the Oakland research on Depression families and their adolescent offspring (Elder, 1974). With older children at home during the 1930s, the Oakland mothers were more available for paid employment than were younger mothers. Type of employment or job depended on the educational level of women and their past work experience. Within the family economy, these working mothers of the 1930s could rely upon the household assistance and modest earnings of their adolescent offspring.

Beyond the issues raised thus far, Thomas's behavioral approach to family change is limited in four general respects. First, the changing balance of control over

desired outcomes refers to only one of the more prominent dimensions of change processes in families and the larger environment. Second, study of the adaptational process of families in new situations should be coupled with awareness of the behavioral constraints or structured options in that situation. Available options are historically structured, a point clearly seen in *The Polish Peasant* but not adequately developed in theory. Third, lines of family action or adaptation in a changing situation entail consequences, and these consequences give structure to the evolving life course of family units. The fourth and last point centers on the temporal limitations of Thomas's theoretical framework, on the deficient concept of family change across the life span and on its use of generational analysis in the "timeless realm of the abstract." The first three points shall be addressed by drawing upon the writings of Robert Merton. The last point brings us to the sociology of age and the life course.

In *Social Structure and Social Theory*, Merton (1968) expands upon Thomas's ideas on various topics. Thus Thomas's definition of the situation serves as a point of departure for analyzing the social implications of Merton's self-fulfilling prophecies: the false definitions which elicit behavior that eventually make the definition come true. Family definitions of this sort in periods of change can be viewed as means of controlling social reality. More basic to our purposes is the relation between the means-end perspectives of Thomas and Merton that link crises or pressures to adaptations in established and changing situations. Merton's (1976) concept of sociological ambivalence nicely supplements Thomas's view of crises and loss of control, and his modes of adaptation represent options that are not developed in Thomas's approach. Merton gives more emphasis to structured options, to the intended and unintended consequences of action, and to temporal considerations (Sorokin and Merton, 1937). Each of these distinctions suggest points of elaboration in subsequent work on processes of family change.

Social Ambivalence and Change

Pressures embedded in social structure appear throughout Merton's writings and he

refers to them as indications of *social ambivalence*. The core type of ambivalence confronts the occupant of a single status with contradictory demands. Other types include conflicts between roles that are linked to a status (such as the role conflicts experienced by married women in the household); the conflicting values held by a person or family; the gap between cultural goals and legitimate means; and the marginal position of a person who remains committed to the life style of two cultural worlds, the case perhaps of Polish peasants in urban Germany.

Some of these types of ambivalence bear directly upon the ability of individuals and families to control their environment, though control and ambivalence refer to largely independent aspects of social and family change. In *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder, 1974), it is pointed out that family linkages between drastic income loss and the lives of family members generally involved control adaptations and social ambivalence. Adjustments through a changing division of labor (such as maternal employment or household chores of children) and modifications of family authority and affection have much to do with processes of losing, gaining, and restoring control over outcomes. Economic pressures were also expressed through social strains, the social ambivalence of conflicting expectations, status inconsistency, and conflicts along generational and marital lines.

In the writings of Merton and Thomas, social ambivalence and loss of control have their psychological counterparts. In many cases, inconsistent or contradictory feelings arise from situations that are structurally ambivalent or contradictory in expectations. The greater family influence of women in the 1930s undoubtedly increased the emotional ambivalence of marriage, as did the addition of a grandmother to hardpressed households. The wife's mother placed men in the midst of cross-pressures as to the behavior of son and husband. A good many examples of social and psychological control also come to mind. Loss of social control through prolonged unemployment often meant despair and a sense of utter helplessness. Conceptual relations of this sort provide a fruitful base from which to assess the interacting trajectories of family and individual.

Structured Options

Merton's analysis shifts attention from the life history influences that are so prominent in Thomas's account of family adaptation to the range of established or institutionalized alternatives they encounter in the new situation. While Thomas stresses the process by which families and individuals work out adaptations to the times that find meaning in the past and present, Merton underscores the social givens that make certain lines of adaptation and their consequences more probable than others. Such givens or options as financial credit, paid jobs for women, and public assistance have differentiated the historical times of deprived families, as well as their course of action in specific settings. Alternatives of this sort are socially structured because they entail important institutional consequences (Stinchcombe, 1975). Specific historical examples include programs for the unemployed or social security in the 1930s, as well as the massive recruitment of women workers during World War II (Campbell, 1979) and the institutional support of child-care centers.

Established alternatives and their variation by social location represent an important theoretical supplement to Thomas's more behavioral approach. But the usefulness of this perspective requires a more precise specification of family location. Families are positioned according to the social structure and the ecology of historical time and place. Thus, established lines of choice on social roles for married women differed sharply between prewar and postwar America, between the middle and working class, and between large and small communities from one region to another. Social change is prominent in Merton's account of structured choices.

The innovative adaptation in Merton's scheme (accept goal, select other means) has special relevance for understanding family careers whenever social change sharply diminishes control over outcomes. With established or routine solutions no longer working, the times press for new ways of achieving family stability or mere survival. Family innovations of the 1930s included those of sterilization and abortion efforts to control fertility as well as the single status "masquerade" of married women who were seeking jobs. Without its deviant connota-

tion, the innovative response applies to a broad range of partial solutions to family hardship in the 1930s. A good many innovative responses entailed the use of old or traditional practices in modified ways—the taking in of boarders and lodgers, the pooling of kin resources, movement back to rural areas, and subsistence farming.

Both Thomas and Merton refer to the lowering of claims or goals as an adaptation to structured disparities between means and ends. As the disparity increases, "expecting less" becomes a more compelling solution to the strain. In this category we find Merton's ritual and retreatist adaptation. The "ritualist" lowers goals as well as perhaps the investment while maintaining a commitment to established means. This outlook has much in common with the "security-conscious" ethos of the 1930s. In rejecting both goals and means, the "retreatist" is viewed by Merton as following an uncommon solution (1968: 207): "defeatism, quietism and resignation are manifested in escape mechanisms which ultimately enable one to avoid the requirements of society." In the 1930s, both the rejection and neutralization of success goals among families and their members took the form of heavy drinking, social withdrawal, and psychological immobilization.

The Consequences of Family Action

Family action in constructing the life course, as seen in Thomas's approach, depicts a cumulative sequence of strain, adaptation, and consequence. From the point of drastic change or crisis, initial lines of action produce consequences that generate other actions which in turn have consequences for a new round of interaction between adaptation and situation. Merton's distinction between manifest and latent functions brings valuable insights to such interactions. Consider the persistence of family strategy which has more to do with its latent consequences or benefits than with the manifest purpose of restoring family well-being. Women's employment in the 1930s was prompted in large measure by family need, and yet its other consequences provided incentives for continuing this line of activity regardless of family circumstances (Bennett and Elder, 1979). The working mother took a more central role in making family decisions, acquired more independence on matters of

family support, and increased labor demands that brought older daughters into household responsibilities. Economic pressure initiated family change through the medium of maternal employment.

Any review of Thomas's approach to family change must deal with the temporal issues that make it distinctive and limited. In particular, there are the two temporal dimensions that are now portrayed in theory and research as interrelated—historical time and life or family time. Families simultaneously move along the two temporal dimensions. Change in family time is coupled with change in historical time. Historical influences are thus present in *any* temporal contrast of family structure and process. Despite this interdependence, historical contrasts still occasionally ignore matters of family time, and historical pressures seldom appear in accounts of differences between older and younger families. Thomas tends to err in the former direction by presenting historical accounts that were poorly informed by considerations of family time or lifetime.

W. I. THOMAS, AGE CONCEPTS, AND THE LIFE COURSE

The Polish Peasant does not portray family units and members at different stages of the life course and their differential response to the experience of mass emigration from Europe and settlement in urban America. The study treats immigrant adaptations in the new environment as a function of what families brought to this situation but fails to develop the adaptive implications of family position. No reference is made to the developmental cycle of families, such as stages of parenthood, and their relation to economic well-being and options. Instead of linking historical and family time in the life course, sequences of family disorganization and reorganization—of loss and then partial recovery of control—are viewed across historical transitions and situations. Thomas's thinking on family history and lives had some distance to go in order to establish explicit connections with the historical record.

An explicit theory of how family or individual careers are structured cannot be found in Thomas's writings, apart from brief general statements regarding the imprint of institutional arrangements. He wrote that,

for individuals and groups, institutional patterns specify "a determined frame of organized activities which involves in advance a general succession of influences—early family education, beginning of a definite career with determined openings, marriage, etc." (in Volkart, 1951:152). This observation clearly refers to age-graded influences and more generally to age differentiation in social structure and the human biography. At the time, anthropological studies of age and sex represented a valuable source for theoretical accounts of families and individuals over the life span. However, Thomas left no record of such exploration or influence despite mastery of the literature on primitive societies. Even Margaret Mead's (1928) cross-cultural studies of the age-patterned life course do not appear in Thomas's writings on life records. The study of social age had not yet become a vital part of the study of families and individuals across the life span.

There is much irony in this limitation since no sociologist at the time even approached Thomas's sensitivity to matters of life-span development and family dynamics. Thomas was far ahead of his time in calling for longitudinal samples and analyses of individual and group development and in proposing temporal concepts, such as life organization and lines of development. Over 50 years ago, Thomas (in Volkart, 1951:93) urged that priority be given to "the longitudinal approach to life history." Research should investigate "many types of individuals with regard to their experiences and various past periods of life in different situations" and follow "groups of individuals into the future, getting a continuous record of experiences as they occur." Unfortunately, this methodological directive never led to a conceptual model of the stream of experience so recorded, whether that of families or of individuals.

Additional limitations from Thomas's neglect of age involve the concept of historical age, as generally indexed by birth year. People are located in the historical process according to birth year; with age mates, they are exposed to a particular range of historical experience along trajectories from birth to death. Events, circumstances, and trends shape this experience, along with the size and social composition of the cohort. This meaning of age can be traced to European social

thought of the 19th century, though its most systematic formulation is found in Karl Mannheim's classic essay on "The Problem of the Generations" (1952), an essay completed during the 1920s.

Mannheim emphasized the process by which historical forces give rise to distinctive mentalities in birth cohorts and their subgroups. Each cohort in succession makes "fresh contact" with the historical world and works it up in ways that stratify collective experience and outlook. A cohort perspective of this type offers a degree of precision in locating people in historical time that cannot be matched by a generational approach, as in *The Polish Peasant*. With an age spread of at least 30 years, members of a generation are not placed in history so that particular events can be traced to specific families, people, and actions. Historical variation within a generation may exceed the largest intergenerational difference. The limitations of generational and lifetime analysis may not have troubled Thomas's study of mass migration and family change, but they could not be ignored when studying the Great Depression in family and life experience (Elder, 1974). The multiple distinctions of age provided a way to think about changes in the family during the Depression.

Age differentiation is expressed in historical placement through birth year and cohort membership and in age expectations, options, and turning points. Both forms of age differentiation, historical and socio-cultural, depict connections between age and time which are crucial to any study of historical change and the family. Age information enables the analyst to specify where families are positioned *in relation* to particular historical times and transformations, such as economic declines, mass migration, and institutional reform or expansion. From this vantage point, family change is seen as an outcome of the relation between concrete forms of general change processes (economic, demographic, and institutional) and families in different career stages. The precise meaning and consequence of such change depends on one's social position or career stage at the time. Families at each stage or stratum bring different resources and options to the same situation. As such, variations in family location differentiate the meanings and effects of the

same historical event or change, leaving what Modell (1975) has called a "multi-layered" imprint.

Families and Children in the Great Depression

In *Children of the Great Depression*, the timing of family and individual careers proved crucial to understanding hard times and its lasting effects. The central figures were born in 1920-1921 and thus encountered family deprivations during the transition from childhood to adolescence. They were beyond the critical early years of development and largely escaped the painful experience of job seeking when jobs were not available. However, the parents were more directly involved in hard times and became the primary link between economic loss and the lives of their offspring. The Depression experience of the young depended on whether their families lost income, the degree of loss, and the nature of their response.

Thomas's adaptational model offered some guidance in conceptualizing modes of family adaptation such as the simultaneous and successive family responses to problems of economic hardship and recovery. One line of adaptation involved change in the division of labor, such as the employment of women and children; another took the form of change in family influence and decision making; and a third dealt with social and psychological strains of one sort or another. The consequences of such responses for families and individuals over time led to questions about the structure of careers and lives.

By what process might early life changes during the 1930s influence developmental paths in adulthood? Are security priorities in childhood likely to persist in the lives of adults regardless of their career experiences? Any effort to link the Depression experience to the middle years of postwar Americans called for knowledge of the sequence of events, activities, and contexts that defined their intervening careers.

Some assistance along this line came from the literature on age grading—on the hierarchy of age divisions and transitions, age beliefs and norms—but this cultural perspective slighted the problematic relation between age-graded careers and the *actual* behavioral careers of individuals. Some people and families follow the normative

script, while others do not. Over a decade ago, Bernice Neugarten introduced the useful distinction between on-time and off-time events. With Moore and Lowe (1968:23-24), she wrote that

there exists what might be called a prescriptive time-table for the ordering of major life events: a time in the life span when men and women are expected to marry, a time to raise children, a time to retire. . . . Men and women are aware not only of the social clocks that operated in various areas of their lives, but they are aware also of their own timing and readily describe themselves as 'early,' 'late,' or 'on time' with regard to family and occupational events.

This perspective plus demographic and social research on age variations offered insights on age differentiation and the life course that distinguished between *cultural* and *behavioral* versions of life course.

The drastic change of the Depression era brought to mind the potential for restructuring the usual course of regimes by which the young are socialized—the established cultural model—an impact which seemed most plausibly expressed through the economic, role, and emotional alterations of family units. Anthropological models (Goldfrank, 1945) of sequences of childhood socialization, from strong to weak discipline or the opposite, had nothing to say about the adaptational requirements of economic survival. In *Children of the Great Depression*, both cultural and behavioral distinctions were applied to an investigation of the hypothesis that Depression hard times led to the downward extension of adult-like tasks and experiences.

According to this theory, hardship in the family economy enhanced pressures for the young to earn money while labor-intensive operations increased the household demand for children's labor. These historical effects challenged a cultural model of age-graded tasks, specifically the notion that children and younger adolescents are not expected to carry major household or economic responsibilities. The study found that economic loss markedly increased the prospects of gainful employment among boys and girls, as well as the involvement of girls in household operations. These changes accelerated socialization and attachments to the adult world. In word and deed, children from hardpressed families tended to grow up more rapidly than

the offspring from more affluent homes. Their schedule differed from the normative time-table.

A complete analysis of the Depression's effect on tasks in the life span would identify two analytical models and their hypothetical interaction:

1. An *historical* model which simply estimates the effect of Depression hardship on task distributions across the 1930s, such as the yearly percentage of gainfully employed females.
2. A *cultural* model which depicts the established arrangement of tasks across the life course.
3. *Interaction* effects, the hypothetical interactions of the historical and cultural models, as expressed in behavioral trajectories or life patterns.

The historical model simplifies reality by ignoring life-course variations before the Depression decade, while the cultural model ignores the complications of historical change throughout the decade.⁸ A conceptualization of their interaction brings much needed analytical sensitivity to the outcomes that are possible from the interplay of social change and life stages. In the Great Depression, heavy income loss *prolonged* the economic dependency of young couples on their parents, *accelerated* the economic dependency of families on the margin of survival, and *reversed* the usual life course for older men who were forced to return to a state of dependency after many years of self-support. These trajectories are coupled with different histories, options, and consequences relative to family change.

⁸Explicit connections between history and the life course represent a small but noteworthy advance beyond research that once centered on a single domain. For example, Wight Bakke's (1940) 5-stage model of family adaptation in the working class of the 1930s completely ignores the adaptive implications of career stage before the Depression. Well-established and young families seem to follow the same pathway. The family career begins with "momentum stability" in which savings, credit, and income are sufficient to maintain family standards and then shifts to an unstable state followed by disorganization, experimental reorganization, and permanent readjustment. Bakke's neglect of life-stage considerations is matched by Ruth Benedict's (1938) neglect of history in her classic account of the cultural life course. Reflecting an emphasis on primitive cultures, Benedict's essay conveys a sense of permanence and invariance in life structure. Ironically, Benedict stressed the irresponsibility of youth at a time that placed heavy demands on young people in the household and community.

Leslie Tentler's (1979) account of working-class women between 1900 and the Great Depression provides a normative backdrop for some historical effects of the subsequent decades on women's work. She writes that "women moved from school through employment and into marriage, much as their mothers and grandmothers had passed through a domestic apprenticeship on their way to husbands and child-bearing" (Tentler, 1979:8). From all we know about the Depression and World War II on the homefront, this "bust and boom" shattered the predominance of such life paths. Wartime pressures lured some women into marriage at an early age, followed by home leaving and full-time employment (Campbell, 1979). Others entered the labor force while living at home and married after setting up an independent household. Dependence from home may have led to full-time work or to marriage. In these and other ways, drastic change ruptured the correspondence between norms and behavior.

A vivid example of the complexities that arise from interaction between cultural scripts and historical realities comes from the idea of a preferred residential ladder of life and Depression pressures. Residential histories and evaluations about people who rent and own suggest a cultural model of the life course that specifies how families should order their career on place of residence: from renting an apartment and possible moves to better quality rentals during the early years of singlehood and childless marriage to homeownership before or during the childbearing and rearing stage (Perin, 1977; Dillman *et al.*, 1979). The script reflects the usual schedule of family events with an appropriate time for renting and for owning. From interviews with housing specialists, Perin (1977:34-35) obtained a colorful age-graded portrait of the residential ladder. The renter is "young," "just keeping afloat," "could be gone tomorrow," and "not saving"; while the owner is characterized as "independent," "nontransient," "proud of residence," and likely to take "better care of property."

Perin refers to homeownership as a transition to full personhood or citizenship. Ownership subjects the family to greater social control through mortgage debt, while enhancing its control over living conditions. The Depression brought disruption and

disorder to this residential concept of the life course. Judging from scattered evidence, a good many families ended up off-time and out-of-order on matters of residence. Severe income losses meant that some couples had little choice but to continue to share the crowded home of parents, while other families were pressed to give up their own home for a rented flat or apartment. The meaning of such losses depended on the family's career stage, but all instances of residential alterations from the normative pattern had consequences for decisions and options.

The proposed strategy in linking history and the family necessarily works from causes to outcomes, thus centering attention on the explication of change. Elsewhere I have referred to this design as an "inverted tunnel," narrow at the outset and broad at the end (Elder, 1974). What is the process by which historical trends and forces are expressed in family organization and functioning? To identify and understand potential outcomes, one must specify the proximal and more distal implications of historical change. Within a broad temporal design, initial outcomes become antecedents in the next phase. The focus on causal factors generates knowledge of the change process that extends well beyond the insights one might gain from an investigation of the determinants of a single outcome.

The Life-Course Perspective

Studies of age and the life course have brought greater attention to temporal connections between history and family and to a research emphasis long favored in Robert Merton's middle-range theory. The objective is to study expressions of the general course of change in particular settings; to represent the process of how and under what conditions families have changed over the life course and in historical time. The historical and social facts of age place families and households in precise contexts defined by historical time and cohort, ecology, and the life course.⁹ The

⁹Three concepts have been used to refer to a temporal perspective on the individual and family: life span, life cycle, and life course. I have discussed the relation between a life-course and family-cycle perspective in "Family History and the Life Course" (1978a). Other discussions may be found in Vinovskis (1977) and Hareven (1978a). As a concept, life span merely establishes the temporal scope of interest or study. This scope may

explanatory requirements of linking historical and family change call for an approach that shifts research from the aggregate level of whole cohorts and large-scale institutions to variation within successive cohorts. In this framework, the effects of historical events and processes are traced over time through evolving family structures and generational relations within successive cohorts. The comparison of whole cohorts restricts what we can learn about social change in families and lives by obscuring historical variations within cohorts.

A life-course approach to the family views the individual as the elementary unit, thus reflecting some defining facts and *meanings* of age. The developmental meaning of age refers to the position of individuals in the aging process, social age concerns the social timing and structure of lives, and historical age places people in historical context through membership in specific birth cohorts (Elder, 1975). All three dimensions locate people and through them their families, *e.g.*, a family is placed historically in terms of the head's birth year. The individual as focal point does not steer analysis away from the collective nature of family and kinship, though it does make this nature problematic. Emphasis centers on the formation, maintenance, and breakdown of domestic units.¹⁰

indeed lead to a body of research knowledge, concepts, and principles that differs sharply from age-specific fields of inquiry, as seen in the rapidly expanding domain of life-span developmental psychology (Baltes *et al.*, 1980). Though life cycle is commonly used to refer to the life span of an individual or family unit, it refers to processes that occur in populations: to sexual reproduction and mortality, to social reproduction or socialization, and to material transfers. Life-cycle processes are intergenerational. In my usage, the concept of life course refers to age-structured pathways across settings from birth to death. The life-course perspective is rooted in the sociology and anthropology of age.

¹⁰Choice of the individual as unit of analysis is frequently interpreted as ruling out analysis of group-level phenomena (Watkins, 1980), but this assumption ignores emergent processes and social forms. In family studies as in the study of small groups generally, research must come to grips with emergent forms, *i.e.*, with the construction (a marital bond, etc.), alteration, and destruction (divorce, etc.) of social forms. Emergent forms link the individual and group levels of analysis. Unlike structural approaches to the family, the life-course perspective represents a behavioral approach to emergent forms and social disintegration. There is much in common here with the old Chicago school sequence of organization → disorganization → reorganization.

How are family agreements made and changed? How are relationships formed and dissolved?

Throughout the lifespan, family units are socially constructed and reconstructed, often in response to the addition or departure of a member or to external social change. Emergent patterns of family interaction are foci of analysis. Much like an interactionist, the life-course analyst moves back and forth between the individual and group level. The resulting portrait depicts "family in people and people in family." Life-course analysis keeps in view the collective aspects of family and household, the actions and lives of members, and their interplay, placing all of this in relation to macro trends and their local expressions. To paraphrase Georg Simmel, the researcher is led to ask how families, households, and kindred *are possible* as groups, networks, and cultures. The family as a social unit becomes an achievement, not a given. Age and the individual unit in life-course research bring a dynamic or process perspective to the study of families.

The formation of a marital relationship entails the development of shared rules, understandings, and modes of discourse. In Berger and Kellner's (1970) analysis, a shared world or reality evolves through conversation and is sustained thereby. The same sharing that occurs in the day-to-day world also extends into the past. "The two distinct biographies, as subjectively apprehended by the two individuals who have lived through them, are overruled and reinterpreted in the course of their conversation. . . . The couple thus constructs not only present reality but reconstructs past reality as well, fabricating a common memory that integrates the recollections of the two individuals' pasts" (Berger and Kellner, 1970:62). Shared definitions and meanings form the basis of coordinating the multiple careers of husband and wife, and for working out the problems of interdependent careers in strategy and planning, timing and synchronization. The task of establishing a first

Consistent with the discussion of Thomas's adaptations and Merton's structural options, the life course is structured by institutional arrangements and by the actions of individuals and family units. Particular attention is given to the interaction of family or individual action with structured pathways that offer particular options and constraints.

marriage is multiplied by an unknown factor in the case of remarriage. As Furstenberg (1981) notes, entry into a second marriage joins two processes of life-course formation: the construction of a new marital reality and a reworking of the worlds on which the past marriages were based. Interactions among these operations may alter self, others, and immediate family relations. The restructuring of conjugal relations in the second marriage may bring discontinuities as well as greater kinship complexity.

When followed over time, households present analytical problems that have much in common with these features of the life-course perspective (Vinovskis, 1977). Consider, for example, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics at the University of Michigan. Over the past 12 years, a team of social scientists headed by James Morgan (Duncan and Morgan, 1980) has been following a large, nationwide sample of American families. From the earliest phase of this study, the problem of tracking ever-changing domestic units made the individual the most feasible unit of study and data collection. Some original households spawned new units, others subdivided, and still others moved back and forth between different social structures, but none of these complexities handicapped the longitudinal study of individuals, their life course across diverse families, households, and settings. To study household change in the panel design, one could not rely upon households as the unit of analysis.

A similar conclusion comes from an historical study of households in Northern Italy. Kertzer and Schiaffino (1979; also Kertzer, in press) argue that "the focus on the household over time utilizes a unit of study which is ill-suited for diachronic analysis; only in abstract, reified terms can the household be seen processually." Their preferred alternative is one that centers on the life course of actors, their choices and lines of actions that structure the form and course of marital, family, and household units. Estimates of the prevalence of specific family forms are most useful when calculated in terms of probabilities for the individual life course. Instead of cross-section or point estimates, what is needed are estimates of exposure across the life span, *e.g.*, the probability of residence in a stem family.

Cohort studies of the life course show projected trends to 1990 in the United States that give even more incentive to the life-course study of individuals and their coresidential situations. The evidence assembled by Cherlin (1981) and Masnick and Bane (1980) forecasts an increasingly more diverse residential world among Americans of the same age and across the life span. Projections describe cohabitation as a more common initial stage of conjugal relations in the future and document a continuing decline in the survival prospect of first marriages. Households of the future will include fewer people and more workers on the average. By the time American youth reach the 1990s, estimates suggest that a majority will have experienced either marital disruption in the parental family or divorce in their own marriage. Cherlin (1981:28) argues that "one can no longer define 'the family' or 'the immediate family' except in relation to a particular person."

The processual thrust of life-course analysis has strengthened the trend toward panel or longitudinal studies, with their challenging requirements for data collection, management, and analysis (Masnick, 1980). Problems of assessing change—personal, social, or family—represent one part of the cutting edge of life-course research. New developments along this line include advances in causal modeling (Rogosa, 1980), the dynamic analysis of event histories (Tuma and Hannan, 1979), and microsimulation. On the conceptual front, life-course research has called for a shift from static to more temporal concepts that represent family and individual change. With few exceptions, sociological concepts depict states rather than process, and in some cases a measure of a state, such as socioeconomic status (Duncan's SEI), is used to index a temporal concept, *e.g.*, a person's career stage. The professional classification of a couple, based on occupation of husband and wife, does *not* indicate where that couple is in terms of career stage and advancement.

Beyond the global concept of career, how can activities and relationships be represented in process terms? Harold Wilensky (1960) was one of the first sociologists to broaden and differentiate conceptual thinking about careers—family, work, and leisure, and their interlocking temporal pattern.

More recently, Robert Kahn (1979) has provided an example of the direction such work might follow in his concept of the "convoy of social support": a person's network of significant others through life who give and receive social support. Network properties also apply to the convoys of individuals and families, *i.e.*, their size, homogeneity, stability, and internal and external connectedness. Explicit linkages between individual aging and social relations would seem to distinguish the convoy idea from the static concept of network or role set. Family and kin relationships are continually subject to modification as people advance in years and in the course of aging. Kahn has not as yet elaborated this feature of the convoy perspective.

Attention to social process and timing in families and lives adds up to a revealing way of thinking about their social position and welfare. From a temporal perspective, the class or socioeconomic history of a family has particular relevance to the meaning of its current status, as does the time or date of its attainment. An early advance is not comparable to a later advance for the well-being of a family. Related to this observation is some new work on the family economy which investigates the changing relation between income and household composition (Katz *et al.*, 1981). As a rule, the peak economic needs of a household, usually during the early years of childbearing and child rearing, do not correspond with the highest years of earning for the head (Oppenheimer, 1974). The poor match is directly affected by the timetable of childbearing and the number of dependents; for example, the younger the start of childbearing, the stronger were the economic pressure and privation among working-class families during the late 19th century. Strategies of production, reproduction, and consumption are played out in the timing and allocation decisions of individuals and families.

Some of these strategies, with their interdependent decisions and plans, are expressed in the patterning of life transitions, in the scheduling and arrangement of events. Transition refers to both the single event, to circumstances before, during, and after, and to concurrent or multiple events and career changes. Life-course models stress the latter

ation of complex societies, *e.g.*, the multiple careers of individuals and their various timetables. The full significance of single events involves their relation to other events and career lines. From the work of Dennis Hogan (1981) and others (Modell *et al.*, 1976; Winsborough, 1979), more has been learned about the transition to adulthood than about any other transition across the male life course. Compared to cohorts in the late 19th century, males now encounter a more compressed set of familial and nonfamilial events enroute to full adult status. Military service in World War II and in the Korean War introduced a measure of disorder to the transition. Veterans were most likely to marry before the completion of schooling and labor-force entry, a nonnormative sequence that has consequences for career mobility.

Increased understanding of the cognitive and normative character of the life course suggests that transitions, and their antecedents, circumstances, and consequences, vary according to when they occur. Some life events are age-graded in the sense that they usually follow an established or normative timetable (grade school, exit, marriage, departure of children), while others are more erratic or unpredictable, *e.g.*, an automobile accident, death of a child, or acute illness. Age-graded events enhance the moderating influence of anticipatory conditioning and social support, processes that are less likely when an age-graded event occurs off-time or out of sequence (*e.g.*, early death of husband). The unpredictable or nonnormative event tends to be most stressful (Brim and Ryff, 1980) or disruptive to families and lives.

Whether life events vary by age or not, they are likely to be age-graded as to antecedents, effects, and overall meaning. All too frequently, especially in the recent past, analysts have proceeded to study the effects of life change and status inconsistency (Elder and Rockwell, 1979) with no apparent recognition that they vary by life phase or that the life course is socially structured. Widowhood, for example, is more traumatic for the young women than for the older woman. Likewise the meaning of status incongruence (*e.g.*, education above occupation), depends on where people are located in the life course. A job that is not equal in

prestige to educational level is common during the early phase of professional career development. Such placement at midlife is more likely to signify personal failure or discriminatory barriers.

Life transitions are commonly perceived as isolated events. The passage of young people to adulthood is somehow unrelated to the entry of parents into middle age; schedules of starting out in life have no bearing upon the timetable of later life. Life-course studies have begun to challenge this view through attention to timing and adaptational considerations. Off-time events during the early years of adulthood (*e.g.*, from job entry and school leaving to family events) frequently mean a continuation of this pattern during the middle years. A late start in family building may require some delay on decisions to retire. Within the family environment, such interdependence is played out in complex ways across the generations (see Rossi, 1980). Connections of this sort bring up the task of specifying how effects are channeled and expressed across time. What are the causal linkages and chains? With the outpouring of research on life events showing no end, a point has been reached that calls for more general approaches to life-course transitions (see Clausen, 1972), their antecedents, character, and consequences.

The life course as a theoretical orientation has much in common with family-development theory, as Hill and Mattessich (1979) point out in a lengthy essay. Future theoretical developments may well eliminate a good many of the basic points of differentiation, though one fundamental difference seems likely to remain. Hill and Mattessich (1979:190) argue that

if the developmental perspective is to have utility, then whatever intervenes between these two time points (the beginning and end of the developmental course) *should in some way be similar for all families* (italics added). . . . Do life-cycle regularities exist regardless of historical context? The central challenge is to sift invariances on the individual and family developmental levels from the peculiarities and uniqueness of cohorts on the historical level.

Such cohort variation represents a primary target of investigation for life-course analysts who focus on the description *and* explanation of historical variations in the family and

individual life course. The aim is to arrive at generalizations from an understanding of the empirical facts of family change and stability. The developmental invariance theme is consistent in some respects with the family-cycle concept of parenthood stages (Elder, 1978a). The temporal structure of childbearing and the inevitable march of aging establish a predictable developmental sequence.

Twenty years ago C. Wright Mills (1959) proposed an orienting concept of social science that centered on the life course of individuals and families, a concept well-suited to the "sociological imagination" through its representation of the interplay of history and social structure in human trajectories. Today the social sciences seem more fragmented than ever, though integrative forces are at work across certain problem areas, such as the life course. This multidisciplinary field is distinguished by the models and designs of various disciplines.¹¹ In some cases, the same problem is analyzed in terms of contrasting disciplinary models or the territory is divided according to specialties and expertise. An analytical framework for the study of age owes much to the pioneering sociological work of Matilda Riley (see *Age and Society*, 1972); the social psychology of age and adult development, to the influential essays of psychologist Bernice Neugarten (with Hagestad, 1976); and the evolution of life-span developmental psychology, to Paul Baltes (with Reese and Lipsitt, 1980), a developmental psychologist.¹²

These strands have converged to some extent in applications and in theoretical work. The need for such convergence in my study of Depression families stemmed from the requirements of viewing families in

¹¹Theodore Hershberg's (1981) thoughtful account of the Philadelphia Social History Project, "an experiment in collaborative, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary research," should be read and discussed by all scholars in family studies who value cross-disciplinary work.

¹²Erik Erikson is occasionally identified as a main intellectual source; indeed, one scholar concludes that the life-course concept is "clearly derived from Erik Erikson's idea on life stages and identity-forming crises" (Rebel, 1978:26). Erikson's ideas concern psychosocial development, not the social course of families and lives. Erikson offers no theory as to how the life course of families and individuals is structured, a problem that is fundamental to the domain of life-course research.

historical context, of relating historical change to family patterns and lives, and of linking family and individual development. As expressed in *Children of the Great Depression*, the life-course perspective represented an effort to deal with these problem foci. A subsequent essay, entitled "Age Differentiation and the Life Course" (Elder, 1975), attempted to clarify the theoretical strands and convergences in these perspective and to establish a point of departure for new research. Increased exchange with social historians at this stage soon led to essays on the life course and family cycle (1978a) and on the life course as an approach to social and family change (1978b). A central theme across this work is the interaction of family and individual development and its relation to historical change and specific contexts. This emphasis has been extended in more creative ways by a number of social historians (Hareven, 1978; Modell, 1979), demographers (Sweet, 1977), and anthropologists (Kertzer, in press). Linking history and the family requires a synthetic approach that crosses disciplinary boundaries.

OVERVIEW

The critical thrust of the new history and the family has much in common with an earlier time of appraisal, the early 20th century. During that period, the noted anthropologist, Franz Boas, was hard at work in a critical assessment of evolutionist theories of family development. Referring to the sketchy base of information on the family in past time, Boas (1948) laid bare the tortured logic, undocumented assertions, and missing links that typified grand models of societal and family evolution at the time. Consistent with the discovery of complexity in the new family history, Boas stressed the variety of history, the multiplicity of outcomes from a single event or change, and greater attention to the causal process or sequence through field studies. The pursuit of general laws, he claimed, should be grounded in empirical facts and the research process. A similar break from the wide expanse of time to the concrete setting appears in the problem foci and research style of the early Chicago school of sociology and its behavioral approach to the family.¹³

¹³What is needed is a thorough examination of the intellectual parallels between the 1920s-1930s and the

Within this school of sociological analysis, family studies gained new discipline from more precise question formulation, sounder research design, and empirical observations. Much less an end in itself, social theory on the family became a modest aid for systematic inquiry and explanation. Research problems were identified and specified from observations and theoretical premises so as to permit measurement and empirical tests. This creative interplay of theory and research in family studies during the Chicago era largely disappeared in postwar America as Parsonian theory and quantitative surveys went their separate ways. Efforts to put an end to this strange divorce, between theory and research, were expressed in a good many essays of the 1950s, from C.W. Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* to Robert Merton's eloquent call for "middle-level theory."

The broad terrain of family studies since 1960 displays the accentuated features of two contrasting and equally basic activities. One field has a convergent emphasis through new perspectives and questions and the codification and consolidation of knowledge, the other a more divergent orientation through the emergence of new perspectives and questions, the reformulation of conventional issues, and empirical critiques of accepted knowledge. The discovery of complexity in historical research will eventually play a substantial role in recasting theory. Historical studies have borrowed extensively from the conceptual models of social science and, in turn, challenge theoretical understandings through new and unanticipated findings. As common products of the past decade, both **family history and systematic theory building** should profit from more effective cross-fertilization.

Single theories have not proven adequate to the task of historical research. Whether structural or interactional, developmental or exchange, a given theory generally covers only a small part of the research territory. Thus the County Clare study of the Irish farm family offers a penetrating view of structured relationships but not of social process and behavioral variation. Likewise, Smelser's

1960s-1970s on critical shifts in analytic perspectives. A good beginning is provided by Edward Kain's (1979) essay on the early evolutionary perspectives and their broader implications.

structural assessment of industrial change and family patterns is unable to trace the effect of change to behavior. By comparison, theoretical concerns cut across historical time and levels of analysis in *The Polish Peasant*. The study defies satisfactory classification by conventional frameworks. At various points and in different combinations, the project draws upon the principles of normative theory, interactionism, structure-function analysis, developmental perspectives, and phenomenology. By returning to this classic work as an exemplar of historical research on the family, this present paper has stressed what might be gained from applications of Thomas's adaptational approach and its extension with ideas from Merton's structural theory and the literature on age, time, and the life course.

The starting point in family history should be the originating question and problem statement, not theory, method, or the data archive. Matters of theory, research design, and analysis are specified in terms of the problem at hand. Historians of the family in the quantitative school tend to follow this script, at least when compared to sociologists who use historical facts to test a theory. History in family studies has focused overdue attention on problem identification and formulation: the processes which Thomas once called the 'hunting activity' of creative social science (in Volkart, 1951:114). Some of this attention stems from the discovery of new sources or archives which cast doubt on prior assumptions, and some is due to pioneering lines of inquiry. More questions than answers frequently emerge from historical studies and thus rework the agenda of future research. Instructive examples come from fine-grained, contextual studies which have identified diverse causal processes in the fertility decline of the 19th century that bear little relation to demographic-transition theory.¹⁴ The diver-

¹⁴Ewbank's (1980) thoughtful essay on fertility research in historical demography makes a number of critical points that correspond with the general theme of this essay. He writes that "instead of producing nice simple models of the relationship between economic development and the corresponding social changes and the decline of fertility, recent historical research has documented a wide variety of complex interactions which often appear to offer more diversity than consistency" (Ewbank, 1980:322). The more contextual study of small areas has yielded a greater sense of complexity and more understanding of the analytic task.

sity has produced new unknowns as well as greater insight concerning the actual process of social change.

The remarkable growth of historical work on the family has brought matters of social change to the forefront of social science. These include greater awareness of the bond between age and time in the life course which sensitizes analysis to connections between age differentiation in historical and social time, the conceptual task of thinking about the family in a temporal framework, and the methodological challenge of studying change processes. I believe that historians will one day view such trends and activities as symptomatic of a time when social scientists began to confront both the problems and promise of studying change in society, family, and lives.

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CORRECTION

Due to a printing error, part of a sentence was omitted from the article, "The Structure of Families' Ties to their Kin: The Shaping Role of Social Constructions," by Mary Ellen Oliveri and David Reiss (*JMF* 43, 2, May 1981, pp. 391-407). On page 398, top of the right-hand column, third line down, the sentence beginning "Of the three. . ." should read "Of the three, coordination comes closest to tapping a global property; closure is comprised of a mixture of analytical and global measures; the measures of configuration are the most exclusively analytical, but their ability to tap more global family properties has been supported in previous studies by showing associations with other theoretically pertinent variables measured in more truly global ways (Costell *et al.*, in press; Reiss *et al.*, 1980; Reiss *et al.*, in press)."