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Time, Human Agency, and Social Change: Perspectives on the Life Course*

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The life course has emerged over the past 30 years as a major research paradigm. Distinctive themes include the relation between human lives and a changing society, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency. Two lines of research converged in the formation of this paradigm during the 1960s; one was associated with an older "social relationship" tradition that featured intergenerational studies, and the other with more contemporary thinking about age. The emergence of a life course paradigm has been coupled with a notable decline in socialization as a research framework and with its incorporation by other theories. Also, the field has seen an expanding interest in how social change alters people's lives, an enduring perspective of sociological social psychology.

The study of human lives has become a lively enterprise over the past quarter-century, extending across substantive and diverse boundaries in the social and behavioral sciences. With this change has come an appreciation for "the long way" of thinking about human personality and its social pathways in changing societies. Developmentalists have gained more sensitivity to the interlocking nature of human lives and generations, as well as an informed awareness of individuals as choice makers and agents of their own lives.

To grasp the dramatic surge of life studies, consider for a moment where we were 30 years ago. Mills's (1959, p. 149) provocative work, *The Sociological Imagination*, had just proposed an orienting concept in the behavioral sciences—in his words, "the study of biography, of history, and of the problems of their intersection within social structure." The concept of life course, however, as we know it today (Elder 1992a; but see Cain 1964), was not to be found in the scholarly literature. It did not appear in sociological or psychological theory or in the coursework of our leading graduate programs. I left graduate studies without any exposure to, or understanding of, the life course as field of inquiry, theory, or method.

Today we find that life course thinking has diffused across disciplinary boundaries and specialty areas within particular disciplines (Featherman 1983). Application of the perspective in sociology extends across the subfields of population, social stratification, complex organizations, family, criminology, and medical sociology, among others. Beyond sociology, life course studies appear in social history (Elder, Modell, and Parke 1993; Modell 1989), developmental psychology (Bronfenbrenner 1979), and gerontology, where Streib and Binstock (1990, p. 1) refer to the "tremendous increase in attention paid to the adult life course (and sometimes the full life course) context in which persons age."

What, then, is distinctive about the life course in contemporary social science—as concept, theoretical orientation, and field of inquiry?

THE LIFE COURSE: AN EMERGING PARADIGM

The life course represents a major change in how we think about and study human lives. In this sense, it is an emerging paradigm. Broadly speaking, the change is part of a

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general conceptual trend that has made time, context, and process more salient dimensions of theory and analysis. This development has various theoretical strands including the macro world of age stratification (Elder 1975; Riley, Johnson, and Foner 1972), cultural and intergenerational models (Kertzer and Keith 1984), and developmental life span psychology (Baltes 1987). My perspective tends to stress the social forces that shape the life course and its developmental consequences.

Overall the life course can be viewed as a multilevel phenomenon, ranging from structured pathways through social institutions and organizations to the social trajectories of individuals and their developmental pathways. Though social psychological theories generally exist on one level or another, much of life course study crosses levels, as in the relation between historical change and life experience (Elder 1974). Less is known about the effect of personality and life patterns on social structures (Turner 1988).

In concept, the life course generally refers to the interweave of age-graded trajectories, such as work careers and family pathways, that are subject to changing conditions and future options, and to short-term transitions ranging from leaving school to retirement (Elder 1985). Transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning. In terms of theory, the life course has defined a common field of inquiry by providing a framework that guides research on matters of problem identification and conceptual development. These problems have much to do with the impact of changing societies on developing lives.

Unlike the focus on single careers, so widely studied in the past, the life course perspective offers a framework for exploring the dynamics of multiple, interdependent pathways, an increasingly popular research topic (Eckenrode and Gore 1990; Moen, Dempster-McClain, and Williams 1992). Consider the relation between marriage and parenthood. A poor marriage diminishes the quality of birth experiences for women, and new parental responsibilities can diminish the mutuality and companionship of the marriage itself (Cowan and Cowan 1992). Economic pressures accelerate this negative process.

With an eye to the full life course, analysis is sensitive to the consequences of early transitions for later experiences and events. Indeed, we now see that the implications of early adult choices extend even into the later years of retirement and old age (Clausen 1993), from the adequacy of economic resources to adaptive skills and activities. The later years of aging cannot be understood in depth without knowledge of the prior life course. Role histories clearly matter for health (Elder, Shanahan, and Clipp forthcoming) and for adaptations along the lifeline.

The implication of early choices and pursuits brings up a core premise of life course study: developmental processes and outcomes are shaped by the social trajectories that people follow, as through advancement and demotion. Causal influences flow in the other direction as well. Acting-out tendencies, for example, restrict the availability of certain options, such as a stable job. Theoretically informed panel studies (Caspi and Bem 1990) are beginning increasingly to document the mechanisms of reciprocal influence between social and developmental trajectories.

Central Themes of the Paradigm

This is not the place for a detailed review of theoretical distinctions, but four themes deserve special note as central to the life course paradigm: the interplay of human lives and historical times, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency in choice making.

Growing awareness of the link between human lives and their historical times has underscored the multiple levels, social embeddedness, and the dynamic features of the life course. Issues of timing, linked lives, and human agency identify key mechanisms by which environmental change and pathways influence the course and the substance of human lives. To explore this observation, I begin by considering the relation between lives and times in greater detail.

Lives and historical times. Especially in rapidly changing societies, differences in birth year expose individuals to different historical worlds, with their constraints and options. Individual life courses may well reflect these different times. Historical effects on the life course take the form of a cohort effect in which social change differentiates the life patterns of successive cohorts, such as older and younger women before World War II. History also takes the form of a period effect when the effect of change is relatively uniform across successive birth cohorts. Birth

year and cohort membership, however, are merely a proxy for exposure to historical change.

Direct study of such change and its effects on the life course is required to identify the explanatory mechanisms. In inquiring about the personal implications of historical change, long-term as well as short-term, the analyst necessarily addresses the process by which the effects are expressed. Among the most important social changes for American children in the twentieth century, for example, historians have identified the long-term growth of mass media and public education as well as the short-term fluctuations of the economy (Elder et al. 1993). As a rule, any personal implications would be contingent on what people bring to the change process as well as on the nature and severity of the change itself.

The timing of lives. The social meanings of age deserve special mention because they have brought a temporal, age-graded perspective to social roles and events. Social timing refers to the incidence, duration, and sequence of roles, and to relevant expectations and beliefs based on age. Thus marriages may be relatively early or late according to demographic patterns and age norms. Similar observations apply to the birth of children. Some events are timely in relation to age norms, or may be ill-timed and particularly costly; teenage childbearing is an example.

Social timing also applies to the scheduling of multiple trajectories and to their synchrony or asynchrony. Young couples may schedule family and work events to minimize time and energy pressures. Disparities between social and biological timing frequently occur during the early years of development. Differences in rates of physical maturation generate early and late maturers in an age group. Turkewitz and Devenny (1993, p. xii) concede that an understanding of such differences is essential for theories that view development "as the outcome of interactions between a changing organism and changing context."

The timing of life course events and roles tells much about the goodness of fit between lives and work careers. In World War II, for example, some men entered the service at a young age with no family or work responsibilities, whereas entrants in their thirties typically experienced the full brunt of social disruption on their subsequent health (Elder et al. forthcoming). This finding illustrates the importance of life stage at points of social change. According to the life stage principle, the personal impact of any change depends on where people are in their lives at the time of the change.

Linked lives. No principle of life course study is more central than the notion of interdependent lives. Human lives are typically embedded in social relationships with kin and friends across the life span. Social regulation and support occur in part through these relationships. Processes of this kind are expressed across the life cycle of socialization, behavioral exchange, and generational succession. The misfortune and the opportunity of adult children, as well as their personal problems, become intergenerational.

> Failed marriages and careers frequently lead adult sons and daughters back to the parental household and have profound implications for the parents' life plans on their later years. Conversely, economic setbacks and divorce among the parents of adolescents may impede their transition to adulthood by postponing leaving home, undertaking higher education or employment and marriage. Each generation is bound to fateful decisions and events in the other's life course (Elder 1985, p. 40).

More generally, the principle of linked lives refers to the interaction between the individual's social worlds over the life span—family, friends, and coworkers. To a considerable extent, macrohistorical change is experienced by individuals through such worlds (Elder and O'Rand forthcoming). A childhood in the Great Depression often meant hard times, whereas children of World War II frequently experienced employed but absent parents.

Human agency. Concepts of the actor and of human agency have always been prominent in life history studies (see Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–1920), and they are also prominent in the new wave of life course studies that relate individuals to the broader social context. Within the constraints of their world, people are planful and make choices among options that construct their life course (Clausen 1993). Individual differences clearly matter in this research, particularly as they interact with changing environments to produce behavioral outcomes (Elder and O'Rand forthcoming). Selection processes have become increasingly important in understanding life course development and aging.

More generally, theoretical trends in the social sciences favor a constructionist view of

individuals in shaping development and the life course. Examples include the cognitive revolution and Bandura's (1986, forthcoming) pioneering research on personal efficacy, greater knowledge of genetic influences on the selection of environments (Plomin and Dunn 1991; Scarr and McCartney 1983), and the extension of life studies beyond the early years.

As defined by these central themes, the life course paradigm consists of well-established conceptual distinctions (e.g., linked lives), some new or reworked concepts (e.g., the timing of lives, lives and times), and theoretical integrations or syntheses. One important integration with particular relevance to the work I have done is summed up in terms of a merger between two approaches to the life course—generation—and age-based models.

The generation-based model views individual lives in terms of the reproductive life cycle of intergenerational processes and socialization. Insofar as they focus on the life course, two- and three-generation studies tend to address these processes (Rossi and Rossi 1990). Research examples extend back to Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920) classic study on the immigration of Polish peasants to large cities in Europe and the United States. Kingsley Davis (1940) also followed this approach in his comparative and historical study of parent-youth conflict. The generation model contributed to the popularity of socialization research in the 1960s and at the same time, to an intergenerational approach in studies of social change.

An age-based model emerged from the 1960s in a theory of age stratification by Matilda Riley and her associates (Riley et al. 1972; Riley, Waring, and Foner 1988), which relates age cohorts to social structures over the life span. By placing people in birth cohorts that permit analyses of historical effects, the theory advanced a view of age-graded life patterns embedded in cultures, institutions, and social structures, and responsive to social change. Norman Ryder (1965) also contributed to this theory through his writings on a cohort approach to social change and the life course. Another pioneer, Bernice Neugarten (Neugarten and Datan 1973), fashioned a social psychology of age grading across the life course, including a concept of normative timetables. Contemporary studies of life transitions and their timing (Hogan 1981; Modell 1989) owe much to Neugarten's original work.

The generation approach proved to be inadequate for two salient issues in the 1960s—the study of historical influence and adult development. Generational status did not match the historical precision of a birth cohort, and offered very little help in charting the adult life course. A concept of age grading proved to be essential.

For some of these reasons I drew on both models—generation and age—in developing a study of California children who grew up in the Great Depression (Elder 1974). This became an intergenerational and longitudinal study that focused on a birth cohort of children and their life course to the middle years. The basic model traced the effects of the economic collapse through family deprivation and intergenerational processes to the lives of the children and their age-graded life course. Later in this essay I provide more details on how this integration occurred.

Over the years since I undertook this project, a large number of studies have combined the generation and the age perspectives. They include Hareven's (1982) historical study of the family and the life course in the textile community of Manchester, Rossi and Rossi's (1990) three-generation study of the relation between individual aging and kin-defined relationships across the life course, and Moen's two-generation study of women (Moen et al. 1992). Burton and Bengtson (1985) document the value of this conceptual integration by noting the consequences of a disparity between age and generational status among black mothers of teenagers who had just borne a child: most of the mothers refused to accept a grandmother's child care burden.

Up to this point I have mentioned primarily conceptual developments, but these occurred in relation to other advances such as the unparalleled growth of longitudinal samples from the 1960s to the present. Valuable data also came from retrospective life histories, as collected by life calendars (Freedman et al. 1988). This growth spurred the initiation of longitudinal studies and an expansion of their archives (Young, Savela, and Phelps 1991), as well as the development of statistical operations to fit the analytic requirements of event sequences.

The life course paradigm today is rooted primarily in developments that occurred

largely during the 1960s; yet any glance at the record suggests that at that time, human socialization occupied a more paradigmatic role in guiding social psychological research. In the following section I argue that today the field of socialization has been absorbed in other frameworks, including that of the life course.

From Socialization to the Life Course

Social and demographic changes after World War II focused attention on the rising influence of peers and prompted concern about the presumed decline of effective family socialization. By the end of the 1950s, studies by Bronfenbrenner (1961) and Coleman (1961) had explored the relative influence of parents and of peers. This research emphasis continued through the 1960s, coupled with studies of political, deviant, and adult socialization (Brim and Wheeler 1966; Sears 1990). By the end of the decade the field of socialization research and theory had its own handbook (Goslin 1969), with more specialized volumes planned for the 1970s.

Despite this apparent vigor, socialization studies declined in all areas, even in the lively realm of politics (Sears 1990). Midway through the 1980s, the field of political socialization bore an uncomfortable resemblance, as one observer put it (Merelman 1986, p. 279), to "the twitchings of a still-quickened corpse." Life course studies gained momentum over these years, with some attention to matters of socialization, but the growth seemed to come at the expense of socialization research.

Looking back over this era, one is tempted to ask "Whatever happened to the study of socialization?" The decline of socialization as a research paradigm has numerous explanations, though one simple point seems to be compelling: the framework became increasingly less adequate for questions that concerned life span continuity and change. For example, all problem children do not become problem adults (Robins 1966), but how does this occur? Such diversity could not be explained with the behavioral-learning presuppositions of the socialization approach.

The issue of human diversity increased during the 1960s as the scope of study expanded through adolescence to the adult years. As a result, socialization theory became more transactional in concept, with greater emphasis on human agency, but still it failed to provide useful answers to questions of this kind. More attention to age grading, turning points, and social control was needed (Sampson and Laub 1993), along with an appreciation for the role of coping skills and human agency in selecting environments.

These limitations, among other factors, prompted a shift in framework among sociologists from socialization to the life course in the 1970s. Many of the leading investigators of socialization, including John Clausen, Orville Brim, and Alan Kerckhoff, became students of the life course. At the same time, more inclusive, multifaceted theories or models emerged, in which socialization was merely one element. In this category I would place theories of social mobility (Kerckhoff 1976), social structure and personality (Kohn [1969] 1977, 1989; Kohn and Schooler 1983), and age stratification (Riley et al. 1972). Collectively these theories address processes of socialization as well as those of status allocation, career management, psychosocial adaptation, task experience, and decision making.

One of the most vivid examples of this change in social psychology comes from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Committees of the SSRC are typically organized around cutting-edge topics. In 1960 one such committee was appointed on the topic of socialization and social structure; John Clausen served as chairman. In 1977 another committee was appointed on the theme of life course perspectives on human development; Matilda Riley served as the chair. The socialization committee was charged with examining theories, data resources, and methodological issues in "research on the interrelationships of social structure, socialization processes, and personality" (Clausen 1968, p. vii). The committee lasted five years and produced numerous publications, including a volume titled *Socialization and Society* (Clausen 1968).

Over the next 25 years, key members of the socialization committee provided leadership in the life course field. In the early 1970s, for example, Orville Brim organized and chaired an SSRC committee on the middle years, and in 1977 became a member of a newly organized committee on the life course. Brewster Smith (1977), a distinguished social psychologist in psychology, also made the shift from the socialization to the life course

committee. Careers and aging had become a central problem for John Clausen in the 1970s; this work led to *American Lives* (1993), his major empirical study of the life course. Another member of the socialization committee, Alex Inkeles, continued to pursue issues of socialization and personality through the 1970s (Inkeles and Smith 1974), but he did so in the context of modernization.

Brim's career illustrates most vividly the shift from socialization to the life course. In the late 1950s his research agenda included studies of child socialization, particularly family roles (Brim 1957). In the 1960s, an increase in the proportion of aging Americans gave fresh visibility to development across the adult years. Brim broke new ground in this area by addressing the neglected topic of adult socialization (Brim and Wheeler 1966). In doing so, he discovered that a socialization perspective failed to illuminate many fundamental aspects of adult development, such as how lives and careers are managed.

Eventually this work led Brim to an interest in the middle years; he focused on life course issues rather than on processes of socialization. In 1980, with Jerome Kagan, he explored questions about life span continuity and change (Brim and Kagan 1980). Chapters in their volume examined issues of continuity and change in competence, deviant behavior, and cohort influences. Evidence of substantial behavioral change between early childhood and late adult life raised doubts about the strategic value of studying early socialization.

In these brief paragraphs I have argued that the demise of socialization as a major research paradigm had much to do with its limitations in addressing questions that focused increasingly on problems of life span continuity and change. An understanding of these problems requires knowledge that extends beyond socialization to selection processes and human agency, social support and coping strategies under stress, and the task experiences of employment and household. Today more than in the past, socialization is part of other research paradigms, especially that of the life course.

Launching a Life Course Study in the 1960s

At a time of changing paradigms, newly established studies are likely to reflect both old and new ideas. Consider the life course framework that prevailed during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Key elements were in place at the time, but the approach was not always interpreted as a life course perspective within the social sciences. Indeed, *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder 1974) expresses this ambiguity through the dual themes of socialization and life course.

Initially I viewed the study in the familiar tradition of social structure and personality (Elder 1973). Modes of family socialization through parental authority, affection, and example provided a set of cross-level links. From another perspective, however, framed by drastic social change, human lives, and age grading, the study centered on lives in a rapidly changing world. The family and its adaptations became a way of linking severe economic decline to the experience and development of adolescents in the 1930s.

This project began in the fall of 1962, when I arrived at the Institute of Human Development at Berkeley for a half-time research appointment with John Clausen. My assignment was to develop codes for uncoded materials in the longitudinal data archive of the Oakland Growth Study. The approximately 185 members of this study were born in 1920 and 1921. They and their parents provided data from 1931 through the 1930s, and most of the study members were followed up to their sixties.

In developing appropriate codes, I could not disregard the dramatic changefulness of families and lives throughout the Great Depression. But what could I use to represent the change? Useful concepts of family and individual change were scarce at that time. For example, conventional measures of socioeconomic status were not relevant to families that were responding constantly to a fast-changing economic situation. Eventually, notions of the family economy and its multiple actors became a way to conceptualize families as a socioeconomic process.

Drawing on studies of Depression-era households (e.g., Bakke 1940), I found that adaptations to drastic income loss (e.g., cutting back on expenses, altering authority roles) formed a way of thinking about the process by which families could enhance their prospects for recovery or survival by altering family structures. W. I. Thomas's (1909) model of family response to crisis (regarding the relation between claims and resources) proved useful in developing an account of the mechanisms of family adaptation. For exam-

ple, a loss of control over desired outcomes resulting from economic decline can motivate a family's efforts to regain control, possibly by reducing consumption and sending additional workers into the labor force.

Another major challenge, in addition to family change, concerned ways of thinking about the lives of family members. Concepts of the singular career were available in the literature (Barley 1989); notions of life history, life planning, and life organization could be found in *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–1920). The Depression crisis, however, called for analysis of the relation *between* trajectories—between family and work, for example; Wilensky's (1961) notion of interlocking life cycles proved especially convincing on this point.

I also needed to know the ages of parents and children when hard times arrived. Ryder's (1965) essay on cohorts made clear that the meaning of social change depended on one's age status. As I began coding life records according to the age and the sequence of events and transitions, the social and developmental meanings of age acquired theoretical importance. With the inclusion of age distinctions in my approach, I began to join the two research traditions—generation and age.

Some Oakland families lost heavily in the economic collapse; others were largely spared. By taking advantage of this natural experiment, the study devised a comparative design involving relatively nondeprived and deprived families in the middle and working classes of 1929. In each social stratum, the analysis traced the effects of economic hardship through family crises and adaptations to the children's middle years.

I placed the Oakland cohort in historical context by comparing it with a younger cohort of Americans (the Berkeley Guidance sample) who were born just before the 1930s (Elder 1979). The younger Berkeley boys experienced the greatest risk of an impaired future, extending into the middle years. In these ways I joined the initial Depression studies of social change to a study of human lives and development.

A concern about the pattern and content of lives in changing societies is perhaps the most distinctive theme of the new life studies. All other emerging themes—timing, lives linked across the life span, the role of human agency in shaping the life course—are connected to this concern in one way or another. The connection between lives and times also represents one of the defining and enduring features of sociological social psychology, beginning with the Chicago school of sociology. In conclusion I turn briefly to this theme and to issues regarding transhistorical knowledge.

JOINING HUMAN LIVES WITH THEIR TIMES

In an essay titled "The Province of Social Psychology," published around the turn of the century, W. I. Thomas (1905) advocated studies that would examine "the crises or incidents in group-life which interrupt the flow of habit and give rise to changed conditions of consciousness and practice" (p. 445). At that time we did not know that he would carry out the pioneering study of this kind with Florian Znaniecki. Thomas himself (Baker 1973, p. 246) experienced a social transformation as he made his way from the isolated foothills of Virginia to the University of Chicago, a journey that made him feel as if he had "lived in three centuries."

Thomas's advocacy for such studies extended to the 1930s, and work of this type continued in the post-Depression years. *The American Soldier* (Stouffer et al. 1949) and Inkele's (1955) Soviet study are notable examples. Yet a conceptual logic for relating lives to times was not developed until the 1960s, whose intellectual and social milieu included an aging population, the discontinuities of civil strife and rapid social change, and the emergence of a new social history.

From this era of renewed consciousness on matters of social change came historical studies of men's work lives (Thernstrom 1964) and family life (Hareven 1982), of modernization and individual modernity (Inkeles and Smith 1974), and of Americans who grew up in the Great Depression and World War II (Elder 1974, 1979). This social science was clearly attentive to social change in human experience and mentality.

Ironically, these developments coincided with an influential critique of the ahistorical character of psychological social psychology. In "Social Psychology as History," Kenneth Gergen (1973, p. 319) documented the impact of behavioral science on society, challenged the goal of transhistorical laws in

social psychology, and concluded that "social psychological research is primarily the systematic study of contemporary history." Gergen's views are consonant with an intellectual movement (see Gergen and Davis 1985) that depicts human psychology as a historically bounded enterprise.

In 1973 Gergen made no reference to the relevant literature of sociological social psychology. His message had little to offer sociologists who were engaged in studies relating social history to individual lives (also see Gergen and Gergen 1984). In this realm at least, the two social psychologies, sociological and psychological (House 1977), had little in common.

In other respects, however, Gergen's critique brings to mind the intellectual constraints and barriers that arise from what Robert Merton (1959, p. xv) once called "pseudofacts." False or misguided statements about reality sometimes become pseudofacts. In the social and behavioral sciences they tend to produce "pseudoproblems which cannot be solved because matters are not as they purport to be."

In Gergen's judgment, for example, historical change raises serious doubt about the prospects for developing empirical generalizations across historical time. By disclaiming the possibility of transhistorical generalizations, his critique discourages attempts to test such generalizations, thereby inviting a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of course, the boundaries of generalization are uncertain for any study. Historically based studies can proceed only by testing their outer limits.

Consider a replication of *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder 1974; also see Elder 1979) in rural as well as urban studies of the 1980s and 1990s. Two decades after launching the Depression studies, I joined a research team (headed by Rand Conger) at Ames, Iowa, on a panel study of 451 rural families in the great farm crisis of the 1980s (Conger and Elder forthcoming; Elder 1992b; Elder et al. 1992). Land values suddenly had fallen by half, pushing countless families into extraordinary levels of debt. On leading economic indicators, this decline proved to be more severe than any crisis since the Great Depression.

Each study family in the eight-county region of north central Iowa included two parents, a seventh-grade pupil, and a near sibling. Beginning in 1989, the annual data collections included questionnaires and videotaped family sessions. Data also were obtained from local, state, and federal statistical records.

We were concerned about families' adaptations to such drastic change and about pathways to alternative economic options. The Iowa study drew on the basic model of the Depression study, which focused on family interactive processes with an eye to the larger picture of economic decline and its consequences for parents and children.

The model from *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder 1974) that guided work in the Iowa study specified three sets of links between hard times in the family and children's experiences: household economy, family relations, and strains. The family—its structures and processes—became a link between the macroscopic events of economic decline and the micro world of children.

In theory and in reality, severe income loss shifted the household economy toward labor-intensive operations involving more productive roles for the children and a greater burden for the mother. Family deprivation also altered relationships within the family, increasing the mother's centrality as the authority and the affectionate figure. Finally, heavy income loss magnified the risk of family discord, disorganization, and demoralization. Empirical findings from the Oakland study fully document these interrelated family processes as links; we obtained corresponding results from analyses of children in a younger birth cohort, members of the Berkeley Guidance Study (Elder 1979).

In view of the differences between these urban Depression studies and the rural Iowa project, there was little reason to expect similar results. Even so, we tested the generalization issue on the Iowa study by setting up a causal model that resembled the model used in the Depression research (see Figure 1).

The first part of the model assumes that low income, unstable work, and income loss have consequences for marital discord and for parents' emotional distress by increasing economic pressures—the tangible pressures of running out of money and the adjustments of cutting back. Unlike our approach in the Depression studies, we assigned causal priority to changes in the household economy and regarded them as both harming family relations and creating social strain.

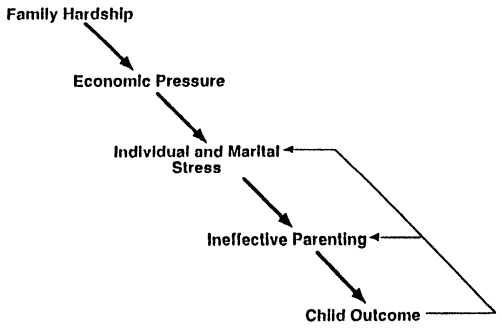

Figure 1. Linking Family Hardship to Child Outcomes

Marital discord and individual distress link economic pressure with ineffective parenting. The latter variable connects marital and individual distress with child outcomes. Here it is assumed that marital conflict and the parents' emotional distress have consequences for children by undermining the quality of the parents' behavior. When played out over time, behavioral outcomes have feedback effects on the interaction processes—for example, from child to parent. Our findings generally support this theoretical formulation.

Consider a study of Iowa boys who were in the seventh grade in 1989 (Conger et al. 1992). Using both observational and family members' reports, the study found that objective family hardship (measured by per capita income, debt-to-asset ratio, instability of work, and reported income loss) increased the risk of a depressed mood among mothers and fathers through perceived economic pressures. Depressed feelings heightened the likelihood of conflict in marriage, and consequently increased the risk of disrupted and nonnurturing behavior by both parents. These behaviors, in turn, undermined the boys' self-confidence, peer acceptance, and school performance. A similar process has been observed for girls (Conger et al. 1993).

Empirical tests of this mediational model have produced results that generally resemble the findings of the Depression studies, with the major exception of mothers. In the Iowa research, as noted above, the mother's emotional distress represents a strong link between economic pressure and marital discord. By comparison, mothers in the Depression studies were less prominent as a social and emotional link between hard times and the child's developmental experiences. Plausible explanations for this difference include historical trends in women's social roles, especially in the workplace. Women in the 1930s were far less deeply involved in the financial support and management of their families than are Iowa women in the 1990s.

In Iowa households under economic pressure, boys and girls also assumed more responsibilities, such as chores in the home, work on the farm, and paid jobs in the rural communities. As in the Great Depression, mounting economic pressures made the children's contributions more valuable. This process was most evident in farm families that embraced most fully the collective ethic of required helpfulness—family members' responsiveness to the collective welfare of the family. Farm boys' contributions in particular were valued by their parents. The more farm boys earned from work and the sale of their animals, the more positive were their parents' evaluations. By comparison, parental judgments of working sons in nonfarm households were more often negative, perhaps reflecting the individualistic nature of work and earnings in these communities.

These studies of economically deprived families in different times and places identify both transhistorical variations and continuities. The Great Depression and more contemporary studies, both rural and urban (Elder et al. 1993; Liem and Liem 1990; McLeod and Shanahan 1993), depict remarkable similarities in the family process whereby economic downturns influence children's developmental course and future. These similarities also extend to the productive roles of children in hard-pressed families. Also worth noting are the differences, such as the variable role of the mother in deprived households.

By testing analytic models of family adaptations in situations that vary in time and place, we are beginning to construct general theories that relate human lives to their changing worlds.

CONCLUSION

Over the past 30 years, sociological social psychology has experienced dramatic changes in prominent theories and lines of empirical research. Few changes document this observation more vividly than the emergence of life course studies as a field of inquiry and a research paradigm. This new development has been attended by renewed emphasis on formerly undeveloped themes in social psy-

chology, from temporality and human agency to social change and contextual variations.

At midcentury the term *life course* was not part of our vocabulary in theory or research, and problems of aging from birth to death had yet to arouse substantial interest among social scientists. Instead problems of child and adolescent socialization occupied center stage, governing theoretical advances and research. Today these problems typically are embedded in more general theories, such as age stratification and social mobility, and have taken a back seat to contemporary issues of life course and human development.

The early wave of life course studies, headed by the work of Thomas and Znaniecki, focused on the family context and the processes of lives—kinship ties, social transmission, intergenerational relations, the life cycle in which one generation reproduces another, and generational status. In the 1960s this family perspective was supplemented by studies of age and the life course, producing a framework that featured paradigmatic themes such as lives and times, the timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency.

Thomas's favored concept—that of social psychology, as the study of macro social change in people's lives,—is being realized with increasing frequency by contemporary studies of the life course. The pace of change has suggested to some observers that social psychological knowledge is circumscribed by the particular times, but in fact this knowledge calls for studies of change processes that extend across time and place. Within the boundaries of current knowledge, for example, the effect of economic decline in children's lives tends to follow a similar course across time and place in twentieth-century America.

The challenge for social psychology as we near the end of the twentieth century is to locate people in relation to the massive social changes under way, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, mass migration, and German reunification. Greater understanding of these changes in developmental processes will enable us to explain why life journeys reflect their historical times. In the words of Everett Hughes (1971, p. 124), "some people come to the age of work when there is no work, others when there are wars. . . . Such joining of a man's life with events, large and small, are his unique career, and give him many of his personal problems."

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