



FAMILY HISTORY AND THE LIFE COURSE

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Change within families over the life course has been documented by studies since the turn of the century, in particular the sequential change in family relationships, adaptive options, and material welfare that occurs through the addition, aging, and loss of members. Rowntree's study of York, England (1901) is generally acknowledged as the earliest antecedent of research in the family cycle tradition, most of which has been carried out since 1955. Recent evaluation of the family cycle model¹ has served to underscore two re-

¹The family cycle was examined critically in some papers that were presented at the 13th International Family Research Seminar, Paris, France (September, 1973). A selection of these papers have been published by Mouton (Cuisinier, 1977). In a forthcoming essay (1978), I describe the emergence of a temporal perspective on the family life course as one of the turning points in the trend among sociologists toward genuine historical research on the family.

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quirements that are basic to a process-oriented perspective on the family in historical context.

First, and most important, is the development of constructs and models that represent processes of family adaptation and change over time; the timing, arrangement, and duration of events in the life course; the ever changing pattern of interdependence and synchronizaton between the life histories of family members; and the cycle of generational exchange and succession. The second requirement concerns the need for greater sensitivity to transactions between historical change and the family unit, to the historical location of husband and wife (as defined by their birth cohort, for example) and their career stage at points of change.

The first part of this essay reviews basic distinctions, concepts, and analytic strategies that define the life course as a framework for the study of individuals and families over time, within a single generation and across the historical contexts of successive generations. I begin with the life course of the individual: the life path or career line and models of role transitions; the interdependence of multiple life paths or careers, with their problems of coordination and resource management; and normative influences in the timing and arrangement of events. The life course of the family is viewed in terms of the interdependent life histories of its members. This approach brings sensitivity to the continual interchange between the family and other institutional sectors, to the interdependence of individual life history and family history, and to the impact of

historical change in life patterns.

In the last half of the essay I turn to a critical examination of the most popular concept of the family through time, that of the family cycle, and relate it to the more general life course formulation. As a concept, the family cycle offers a distinctive analytical contribution to the study of family change when it makes explicit reference to cyclical *intergenerational* processes: 1) generational succession through childbearing and socialization of the young to maturity; and 2) the intergenerational flow of resources, including inheritance. However, typologies of the family cycle generally represent static models which provide "snapshots" of family structure in particular stages; they tell us very little about the course of a family's history. Families with an identical history, as defined by a sequence of stages, vary markedly in their respective life course. Much of this variation is due to life course differences in the timing and arrangement of events, variables typically excluded from stage classifications of the family cycle. Operational models of the family cycle primarily depict stages of parenthood—before the birth of children, the child bearing and rearing years, and the postparental phase which begins when the last child has left home. Though seemingly obvious, this interpretation has not been applied to theory on the relation between family stages and behavior. The focus on stages of parenthood suggests another limitation: that stage models of the family cycle neither represent nor sensitize research to the multiple, interlocking career lines of a couple and the family unit as a whole. A final restriction also applies to the emphasis on parenthood; most stage models of the family cycle are based on the conventional script of a marriage that bears children and survives to old age.

In life course and family cycle studies, observed variation in family patterns by stage (whether defined by role structure,

the timing of marriage or ages of marriage partners, or both) are subject to interpretations that are based on historical context and change (Berkner, 1972; Hareven, 1974). With the emergence of a cohort-historical approach in life course analysis, sociologists have become more attentive to historical location and change in family life (see Elder, 1978, forthcoming). Historians have recently applied the life course approach to the analysis of cross-sectional data for late-nineteenth-century Massachusetts communities (Hareven, 1978, forthcoming). Hareven (1977) has applied the life course approach to the understanding of different patterns of timing of family transitions and Vinovskis (1978, forthcoming) has reviewed some implications of a cohort-historical approach to family and intergenerational patterns. As those studies make clear, to understand the impact of historical change on family life, we must know something about the process by which this effect occurred, a process which varies according to both family stage and individual situation at the point of change.

The conceptual framework of life course analysis is deeply rooted in the study of individual histories and careers, particularly within the Chicago tradition of sociological analysis (with such major figures as W. I. Thomas, Ernest Burgess, and Everett Hughes). Significant features of the early Chicago school of sociology includes its orientation toward the study of individuals, groups, and social organizations in concrete social situations; its sensitivity to historical context and interest in processes of social change; and its pragmatic approach to method and theory.²

²In a historical review of the early years of Chicago sociology (1920-32), Robert Faris (1967:128) writes that the faculty "renounced the principle of authority and encouraged open, modest searching in the spirit of an inductive science. Their students were taught to venture into the complex world of actuality, to bring in new information in quantities, and to



From the standpoint of life course analysis, the most important early work is *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William I. Thomas (with F. Znaniecki). This project opened up new vistas in relation to the study of individuals and groups in situations of drastic change.

Five developments in sociology since 1960 bear upon the life course as a framework for the study of lives and families: the evolution of family development as a theoretical framework, cohort analysis of life patterns, life-span developmental psychology, life history methods in data collection and retrieval, and time allocation research. Over the past decade temporal aspects of family life (the sequential phases in role transitions, the multiple, interlocking career lines of the family unit, etc.) have become central to the developmental approach to family studies. This process view of the family is represented by Rodger's (1973) overview of the developmental literature and by Reuben Hill's (1970) three generation study. As outlined in this essay, the life course perspective is consistent with the developmental approach to the family and builds upon the newly emerging sociological specialty of age stratification (Riley, Johnson, and Foner, 1972). An important contribution of the latter is the development of methods and concepts for research on cohort life patterns. Rapid social change differentiates the historical context of successive birth cohorts, and even of individuals born within the same time interval. Successive cohorts encounter change at a different life

stage and are consequently influenced in different ways. As Ryder (1965:846) observes, "the cohort is distinctly marked by the career stage it occupies when prosperity or depression, peace or war, impinge on it." The importance of this contribution will become apparent in our examination of historical change in life patterns.

Within the field of developmental psychology, life span theoretical interests have generated research that extends beyond specific age categories such as childhood and old age (Goulet and Baltes, 1970; Nesselrode and Reese, 1973; and Baltes and Schaie, 1973). Programmatic statements attribute to this approach a concern with the description and explanation of age-related behavior change from birth to death. In practice, however, most life span studies have neglected tasks that are basic to life course analysis; they are insensitive to the diverse career lines of individuals and their psychological effects, and have generally failed to explicate the process of developmental change. To date, little progress has been achieved in linking historical conditions with age-related behavioral change. We still find major studies of personality development from childhood to the adult years (Kagan and Moss, 1962; Block, 1971) which have been carried out as if human behavior could be understood without reference to historical context and the varied sequence of life events.

Life history analysts have developed methods that facilitate the collection, retrieval, and quantification of detailed life history information. Sophisticated data collection forms have been constructed so as to link events and transitions in the life course (changes in jobs, marital status, number of children) to both chronological and historical time.³ Significant contribu-

devise and improve methods of extracting durable generalizations from it." Within the Chicago tradition, other significant contributions to the temporal study of lives and families have been made by Leonard Cottrell (1942), Reuben Hill (1970), Bernard Farber (1961), John Clausen (1972), Erving Goffman (1961), Harold Wilensky (1960), Howard Becker (1960), and Anselm Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1971), among others.

³In addition to the use of life history information to characterize the course of a person's life, the sub-



tions to this method and its application have come from the Johns Hopkins project (Blum, Karweit and Sorenson, 1969; Karweit, 1973), the Monterrey study of occupational histories (Balan et al., 1969), and from the Norwegian life history study (Ramsøy, 1973). In view of the material cost and time required for longitudinal research, this approach offers a valuable alternative in generating life records. Some of the difficulties in analyzing life history data are discussed at length by Carr-Hill and MacDonald (1973) in a survey of the literature and of work in progress.

Studies of the temporal structure of life events are paralleled on the micro-sociology level by the analysis of time allocation in activities. This field of research is concerned with the daily round of activities, with the behavior patterns that emerge from individual and collective activity over the course of a day (Szalai, 1972:1, and Robinson, 1977). Types of activity are viewed in terms of their timing, duration, and frequency; their synchronization, management, sequential order, situational context, and participants. Time budgets have been used in cross-national research

on the activity patterns of male workers in different occupations, and of housewives and employed, married women.

I. The Life Course as a Perspective

The life course refers to pathways which individuals follow through age-differentiated roles and events. The timing of an event may be as important for life experience as whether the event occurs at all, and the degree or type of change. Age variations in expectations and options that impinge on decision making and the course of events give shape to life stages, transitions, and turning points. Such differentiation is based in part on the social meanings of age and the biological facts of birth, sexual maturity, and death. These meanings have varied through history and across cultures, as is documented by evidence on socially recognized age categories, grades, and classes. Childhood, adolescence, youth, and old age are major foci of research on stages of the life course in American society (Elder, 1975a, 1975b; Hareven, 1976). Very little is known about the role of age criteria in structuring life patterns in the middle years, a period characterized by substantial variation among age mates in social roles and accomplishments. Over the life course, age differentiation also occurs through the interplay of demographic and economic processes, as in the relation between economic swings and the timing of family events. Sociocultural, demographic, and material factors are essential elements in a theory of life course variation.

An individual's life course is multidimensional since movement through successive life stages entails the concurrent assumption of multiple roles, from those of son or daughter, age-mate, and student during years of dependency to adult lines of activity in major institutional domains of society. One's life history is thus a product of multiple histories, each defined

jective biography has long been regarded by some clinical psychologists as "the ultimate criterion of truth about an individual" (Dailey, 1971:xii). As one of the pioneering analysts, John Dollard (1949:3) viewed the life history as "a deliberate attempt to define the growth of a person in a cultural milieu and to make theoretical sense of it. It might include both biographical and autobiographical documents." A life history is not merely "an account of a life with events separately identified like beads on a string. . . . The material must, in addition, be worked up and mastered from some systematic viewpoint." Within this framework, retrospective biographical descriptions have been employed in the study of aging (Lieberman and Falk, 1971) and in research on psychopathology (Roff and Ricks, 1970; Roff, Robins and Pollack, 1972). For an overview of methods in the use of life histories for the study of lives, the most thorough current source is Dailey's *Assessment of Lives* (1971).



by a particular timetable and event sequence—histories of education and work life, marriage and parenthood, residence and civic involvement. The utility of a differentiated concept of the life course is suggested by the biography and anticipated pathways of adolescents in complex, industrial societies.

Late adolescence or youth is characterized by a high degree of social differentiation along institutional sectors: differentiation of life paths increases sharply as the child becomes an adolescent and then enters young adulthood. The late adolescent is in the process of entering multiple lines of adult activity—of work and civic responsibilities, marriage and parenthood. At any point in time, a cross-section of the youth population would show wide variation in stage across dimensions of the life course. Marriage may occur before economic independence or the completion of education, and parenthood before marriage. For the individual, the stage of youth frequently provides striking examples of asynchrony and their implications for social identity, public approval, and opportunities.

Differentiated paths in the life course imply competing demands for the individual's scarce or limited resources—his time, energy, affections. The demands of parenthood are frequently in conflict with those of marriage, work, and civic duties. In a theoretical essay on role strain, Goode (1960) argues that an individual's system of relationships is both "unique and over-demanding." Since it is not possible to satisfy all demands, he must "move through a continuous sequence of role decisions and bargains, by which he attempts to adjust these demands." Within the constraints of social structure (e.g., the interests and sanctioning power of third parties such as kin, friends), the individual may attempt to reduce strain by scheduling or selecting relationships which are most supportive or least conflicting,

and by working out the most rewarding bargain with each significant other. An obligation to another party may be accepted in order to weaken the onerous claims of present involvements. The filtering or buffering function of an intermediary, compartmentalizing conflicting demands, delegating responsibility, and withdrawing from interaction, represent other strategies in the management of finite resources and role strain. Both choice and circumstance in shaping the life course are expressed in strategies of this sort, particularly at points of role transition.

The full significance of event timing in the life course is seen within the context of interdependent careers and their scheduling problems. Scheduling involves the timing, spacing, and arrangement of events across life paths; the life stage in which to marry, for example, and its temporal distance and order relative to other events, such as the bearing of children, employment, and material acquisitions. As shaped by choice and circumstance, the decision process of life course management takes the form of event patterns across career lines—the relation among marital, parental, socioeconomic, and consumption events.⁴

A. The Timing and Order of Events: Cause and Consequence

Demographic, material, and normative forces shape both the temporal structure of the life course and its consequences.

⁴The literature includes a number of variations on the career theme. For example, Hanson and Simmons (1968) have proposed the concept of "role path" in depicting migration to urban communities. A role path "specifies the history of events and associated attribute changes depicted as movements within and between role contexts. A role path traces the flow of experiences producing changes in personal attributes and related life condition variables. A regular, generalized sequence of events leading to a change within a role context is a social process which is part of the total larger process of urbanization" (155).



Demographic constraints are expressed in the age-sex structure of a social context, in size variations across successive cohorts, and in the changing social composition of cohorts across points in time. Within a specific birth cohort, the usual mating gradient on age (men select younger mates) has direct consequences for the marital options of women who delay marriage until their late 20s or early 30s; the greater the delay, the more restricted the pool of age-eligible men. Material influences are illustrated by the well-known correlation between cyclical variations in the economy and rates of marriage, child-bearing, and divorce. Normative expectations and institutional constraints specify an appropriate time for the completion of education, for leaving home and achieving economic independence, for marriage and the bearing of children, for the post-parental years, and for retirement (Neugarten and Danan, 1973). As individuals move through the age structure, they are made aware of whether they are early, on time, or late in role entry and accomplishments by an informal system of rewards and sanctions.

Normative influence, proscriptive and prescriptive, represents a favored explanation of patterned choice in the life course among sociologists and demographers. Failure to take this influence into account has been cited as a major weakness of the new economic models of fertility and life course events. If such norms were "fixed in time and space, one could readily take them as given (meaning essentially to forget them), but they vary from culture to culture, from subculture to subculture, from class to class, and they vary through time. . . . So thoroughly are they embedded in our lives that they verge on the invisible, and this is one of the major sources of their strength" (Ryder, 1974: 77). Unfortunately, empirical evidence regarding normative influence also verges on the invisible; assertions or platitudes far

exceed demonstrable evidence. Far more is known about demographic constraints.

Instead of measuring norms, sanctions, and control networks, and including such measures in the analysis, studies have tended to offer general statements based on imprecise or sketchy documentation; for example, reference is made to a "normative life pattern" or to the presumed fact that "society expects the birth of a first child early in the childbearing years" (Ritchey and Stokes, 1974). Claims of this sort completely disregard normative variation by social context—between the South and the non-South, small towns and metropolitan areas. Available evidence clearly points to community size as a key variable in the normative regulation of life events, from the cultural homogeneity and informal control networks of rural communities to the cultural diversity of large urban centers. At present, however, the literature does not include even one large-scale study of age expectations and sanctions relative to events in the life course. This deficiency is a matter of some irony when we note the longstanding prominence of cultural norms in social theory.

The preferred sequence of events and activities implied by a normative timetable suggests a number of problems that warrant investigation; in particular, deviant sequences or disarrangements, such as motherhood before marriage, which may arise from external pressure, social disruptions and disorganization, and faulty socialization (Furstenberg, 1976). The effects of a deviant sequence are contingent on its timing. In this respect, unwed motherhood represents a very different event for the adolescent than for a woman in her late 20s or early 30s. Through its social stigma and burden, teenage illegitimacy deprives the mother of social support and severely restricts access to training and developmental experiences that determine life prospects.



Without substantial evidence on age norms and sanctions across historical time and place, it is difficult to judge the significance of other deviant or atypical sequences, such as marriage before economic independence or completion of education. In particular, the meaning of such arrangements may have little to do with norms *per se*; events may depart from shared understandings of the usual life course and entail hardships of one kind or another, but not as a result of normative sanctions. Judging from the evidence at hand, event sequences appear to have become more variable since the nineteenth century in America. The transition to adulthood is characterized by less temporal differentiation between events (leaving home, marriage, completion of education, entry into work) among contemporary young men, when compared to the experience of their counterparts in late nineteenth-century Philadelphia (Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg, 1976), and is thus distinguished by a greater probability of variant sequences—of completion of education after marriage and even parenthood, and of parenthood before marriage.

B. Temporal Patterns in Marriage and the Family

In applying the life course perspective to marriage and the family unit, we begin with the interdependent life histories of their members; problems of coordination and resource management emerge from this interdependence. Analysis of the young couple centers on the social patterns formed by the joining of life histories through mate selection and their consequences for marital interaction, child rearing, and kin relations. Each status relation between husband and wife acquires distinctive meaning within a particular social and cultural configuration. Thus the significance of marriage into a lower-status family is partly contingent

on the relative education and occupational achievements of each spouse.

Marital life is shaped by subsequent developments in the interdependent careers of husband and wife. A life course framework views the family unit in terms of mutually contingent careers, their differentiating characteristics and problems of management. It facilitates study of divergent or non-conventional family patterns, as well as the conventional, by working with the life histories of individuals; and brings greater sensitivity to the continual interchange between family and other institutional sectors—marriage and the economy, child rearing and formal schooling.

The joining of life histories in marriage presents two major lines of inquiry;⁵ on the determinants and consequences of conjugal patterns. Mate selection and resulting patterns of social homogamy (with respect to class, education, age) have been viewed generally in terms of cultural norms and ecological factors (e.g., propinquity) which structure the field of eligibles. More recently, interest has centered on the extent to which marital choice is influenced by its timing within a specific historical context. The marriage market changes from early to late marriage; as unmarried members of a cohort age, marriageability declines and marital pressures increase. The usual mating gradient (men marry younger women) suggests that the selec-

⁵Ernest Burgess consistently emphasized the marital significance of the pre-marriage life histories of husband and wife. Among the domains that warrant study, he cites "the relative status of husband and wife which may involve initially and perhaps permanently the difference in standing of the families of the couple" and the "relative cultural transmission" through the husband and wife which stems from the fact that at marriage each is "already a person with a history." The formation of particular social patterns in mate selection thus represents a strategic point at which to study marriage as mutually contingent careers (Bogue, 1974:209).



tion of younger husbands is most prevalent among women who marry relatively late and that husbands are more likely to be older in couples among whom the wife married relatively early. These differences were observed in a nationwide cohort of white women who were born during the late 1920s (Elder and Rockwell, 1976). Irrespective of any advantage of family status and higher education, late-married women were far more likely than other members of the cohort to secure through marriage a position in the upper-middle class.

Life course analysis underscores the implications of status relations in marriage. We see this in the social pattern established through mate selection and in career management. Status differences between partners favor marital incompatibility to the extent that they produce divergent interests or conflict with valued expectations (Pearlin, 1972 and 1975). Marriage also establishes a set of mutually contingent careers (Farber, 1961), with their problems of career management: the timing of marriage and births, the spacing of children, the acquisition of goods and services according to need and income, the husband's employment and job changes, the wife's entry and reentry into the labor force, and decisions regarding residential change. In a study of three generations of families from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, Reuben Hill (1970) observed wide variations within each generation in career management and the achievement of long-term goals. Some families perceived themselves as being "ahead of schedule," others "on schedule," and still others "behind schedule." Family progress in achieving goals on schedule was dependent on effective career management; the synchronization of transitions and activities in a manner which enables the multiple career lines of

the family to be mutually supportive of movement toward life style objectives.

The "scheduling dilemma" in life course management is a common theme among families in which both husband and wife are involved in occupational careers—the dual-career family (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1969; 1975). The peak demands of work life generally occur during the early phase of career establishment and advancement, a phase which frequently corresponds with the peak demands of child bearing and rearing. Any decision to arrange in sequence the demands of parenthood and occupational career entails both costs and rewards. If children are postponed until the pressures of career advancement have diminished, problems may arise from the difficulty of adapting established routines to the needs of dependents and from the wide age difference between parent and child. Other costs are encountered in the sacrifice of one partner's career prospects for the advancement of the other, and in the placement of preschool children in day care centers.

Through the early death of one partner, divorce and remarriage, some persons are affiliated with different family units and forms over their life course. With the expansion of historical and comparative work on the life course, we have become more aware of the necessity for conceptual models and modes of analysis that take such variety into account. For example, Uhlenberg (1974) has identified five life course types in a comparison of white and nonwhite cohorts of American families, 1890-1894 through 1930-1934: *early death*—female dies between the ages of 15 and 50; *spinster*—female survives, does not marry before the age of 50; *childless*—female survives and marries, but has no live births; *unstable marriage, with children*—female survives, marries, bears at



least one child, but first marriage is broken before the age of 50; and *preferred*—female arrives at age 50 living with first husband and as parent of at least one child. A comparison of the successive birth cohorts shows a trend toward the preferred form among white and nonwhite women. These types present an illuminating portrait of the diversity of cohort life patterns. Further work along this line should incorporate other data to flesh out the course of each life pattern; in particular, information on variations in the timing and arrangement of events.

Life course analysis directs research toward temporal assessments of interactions between the family and its environment, such as the economy and social institutions. The general tendency has been to view the intersection of family and economy at a point in time (e.g., family head's income and work status) instead of as a sequence of interchanges and reciprocal adaptations over time. For the most part, the impact of occupational or economic position on family patterns has been studied without considering the socioeconomic history of the family. From a historical standpoint, the lower-middle class includes families that are upwardly and downwardly mobile; some have experienced the social and economic insecurity of a disorderly worklife, and others a steady advancement in living standard. The same imprecision is found in generational comparisons which include only parents and offspring. Some parental families are the first generation to be members of the middle class, whereas others have a middle-class background of three or more generations.

Relevant to this potential diversity is Wilensky's assertion (1960:549), that "a man's current job, his immediate work situation, place of residence, even his class position, while they count for something, tend to be ephemeral. . . . Yet no studies have focused . . . on the interdependence

of behavior and attitude in the separate spheres of modern society over the life span of the person—interlocking cycles of work, family life and consumption, and community participation." With few exceptions, this conclusion also applies to the contemporary literature (Young and Wilmott, 1973; Kantor, 1977). Wilensky's own study of worklife and social integration (1961; Pahl and Pahl, 1971) suggests some of the advantages of taking a life history perspective on contingent careers. Men with orderly careers (jobs which are functionally related in a hierarchy of prestige) tended to participate in more social activities than workers with disorderly work lives, even apart from variations in age, income, and occupational status; they were more likely to be involved in local church and school functions, to be members of friendship circles, and to have a wide range of social contacts both within and outside the family and kin network.

Examples of the interplay between work and family include the problem of "role overload" in the dual work patterns of husband and wife (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1969), the timetable and demands of women's gainful employment as factors in childcare and marital relations (Hoffman and Nye, 1974), and the effect of economic dislocations on worklife and family (Gore, 1973). The impact of an irregular work schedule on family activity is suggested by Young and Wilmott's study (1973, Chapter 7) of shiftworkers in London, England. These men claimed twice as frequently as other workers that their job markedly interfered with family life, with their social roles in the home, and with family routines. A high level of strain also occurred between career lines in families where the wife was employed full-time in a professional career. Among well-educated couples in England (Bailyn, 1970), some evidence suggests that marital satisfaction and the wife's career prospects are most heavily contingent on the husband's mode



of relating to work and family; both outcomes are enhanced when the husband assigns priority to the family and is able at the same time to achieve rewards in his worklife.

Since age locates the individual in a specific historical context, age differentiation also takes the form of differences in historical experience. This brings us to the problem of social change in the life course, and more specifically to a methodology for linking historical events to life patterns.

C. Social Change in the Life Course

Everett Hughes' observation on historical events in life experience (that "some people come to work when there is no work. . . .") reflects a more general sensitivity among life history analysts to historical forces (Hughes, 1971:124). This consciousness is found in notable early works, such as Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20) and Mannheim's essay on "The Problem of Generations" (1952, orig. 1928). But the most cogent statement of this perspective was made some years later by C. W. Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959:175): ". . . the biographies of men and women, the kinds of individuals they have become, cannot be understood without reference to the historical structures in which the milieu of their everyday life are organized. Historical transformations carry meanings not only for individual ways of life, but for the very character—the limits and possibilities of the human being."

Such awareness of the historical imprint was uncommon among sociologists up to the 1960s, and consequently had no visible effect on research. Most studies of life experience and family patterns were conducted without any appreciation of historical context and variation. By the late 1960s, a rudimentary approach to the study of life course change had emerged in the form of a cohort-historical framework (Ryder, 1965; Riley, Johnson and Foner,

1972; Elder, 1975a). This perspective employs age and vital data as social indicators and biological facts in the study of life patterns, age cohorts, and their corresponding age strata. Chronological age provides a rough index of life stage, while birth year or entry into the social system (through marriage, for example, or graduation from secondary school) locates the individual in historical context as a member of a particular cohort. Three sets of issues, in particular, warrant consideration in the study of historical events and the life course: (1) cohort and subgroup comparisons, with emphasis on the explanatory advantage of intra-cohort analysis; (2) the problematic meaning of age differences which reflect both historical context and career stage; and (3) cohorts and generation-lineage as social units in the study of change in the life course.

Cohort Life Patterns and Subgroup Variations. With cohort members, the individual is exposed to a slice of historical experience in the process of moving through a sequence of roles and events. The meaning and significance of birth year and cohort membership are derived from knowledge of historical events and trends at the time, and from cohort characteristics (such as composition and size), which are themselves a product of historical circumstances. Successive birth cohorts encounter the same historical event at different points in their life course, which suggests that the impact of the event is contingent on the career stage of the cohort (indexed by age, social roles) at the point of historical change. In this regard, Hill (1970:322) observes that each cohort in periods of rapid change "encounters at marriage a unique set of historical constraints and incentives which influence the timing of its crucial life decisions, making for marked generational dissimilarities in life cycle career patterns." Two birth cohorts of American women illus-



trate this point: 1915-18 and 1925-28 (Elder & Rockwell, 1976). The oldest cohort attained the usual age of marriage during the worst years of the Great Depression, under economic conditions which often required the postponement of matrimony and child bearing; whereas the younger cohort came of marriage age during World War II, a period of rapid economic growth, full employment, and a decline in the age at which women entered marriage.

The complexity of assessing social change in family patterns stems in part from the diverse life stages, social roles, and historical experience of family members at points of change. The presence of older adolescents or youths, in particular, adds a significant dimension to the process by which historical events impinge on family life beyond that of the social roles of parents. Along with their mothers, they have played a role in the multiple-earner adaptation of hard pressed families during periods of economic depression—the 1870s, 1890s, 1930s, etc. This suggests that in specifying the outcomes and process of social change in family patterns, we must begin with knowledge of the historical event and its relevance to the interdependent careers and life stage of family members.

Historical change also differentiates the life experience of social groups or categories *within* each cohort. Experiences in the Great Depression are known to have varied by age and sex, rural and urban residence, ethnicity, and social class. Middle-class families entered the Depression with social and economic aspirations that placed them in a more vulnerable "psychic" position with respect to income and job loss than families in the lower strata. But not all urban families in the middle class suffered heavy economic losses; with the decline in cost of living, some actually achieved a higher living standard. Economic sectors within class

strata thus provide a degree of analytic precision which is essential for relating the experience of deprivation to family structure and the life course. This approach was employed in a longitudinal study of persons who were born during the early 1920s in Oakland, California (Elder, 1974). Within the middle and working class as of 1929, the study compared the life experience and personality of persons who grew up in relatively nondeprived and deprived families. The income loss of nondeprived families averaged slightly less than 20 percent of 1929 income, which is roughly equivalent to the reduction in cost of living. Most deprived families in both social classes received losses that exceeded half of their 1929 income. At the time of maximum hardship in the early 30s, the Oakland children were old enough to contribute to the household economy.

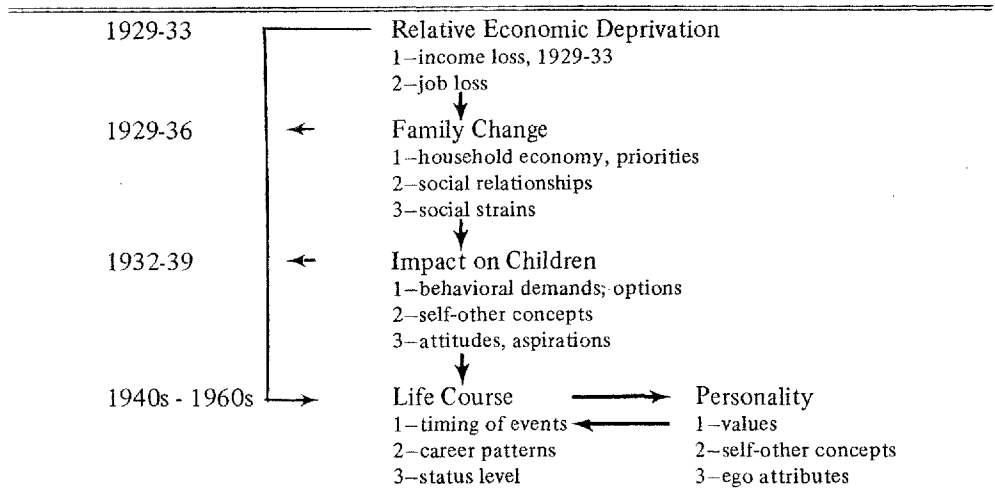
Family adaptations and conditions were viewed as linkages between economic deprivation and life experience among members of the 1920-21 cohort (see figure 1). In this context such linkages provide answers to the question of how and why economic loss influenced life patterns; they represent an interpretation of the relationship, an account of the mechanisms or process through which this historical change shaped the course of life events and development. Three general types of linkage were tested: (1) change in the division of labor—sudden loss of income called for new forms of economic maintenance which altered the domestic and economic roles of family members, shifting responsibilities to mother and the older children; (2) change in family relationships—father's loss of earnings and resulting adaptations in family maintenance increased the relative power of mother, reduced the level and effectiveness of parental control, and diminished the attractiveness of father as a model; and (3) social strains in the family—social ambiguity, conflicts, and emotional strain, as a



consequence of resource losses, parental impairment, and inconsistency in the status of the family and its members. These family conditions were associated with economic deprivation in both social classes, and emerged as significant linkages between family hardship and life experience in the Oakland cohort.

born in Berkeley, California shortly before the 1930s; an outcome which reflects their vulnerability to family disruption and relatively prolonged exposure to privational circumstances (Elder & Rockwell, 1978, forthcoming). The Depression also had profound consequences for the worklives of a large proportion of older

FIGURE 1. BASIC MODEL: CHILDREN OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION, 1974



The full array of findings from this study inevitably raises questions concerning their generality. What about the uniqueness of the 1920-21 cohort's experience in the Great Depression, a uniqueness in developmental age at the time of economic crisis and in opportunities at the end of the 1930s? In many respects, this cohort occupied a favorable position relative to depressed conditions in the 1930s; the members were old enough to cope with family misfortune and yet too young to enter the adult marketplace of marriage and work at the bottom of the economic cycle. In terms of future prospects, mobilization for war occurred at a critical point and undoubtedly neutralized or at least weakened the adverse effects of starting out life with a background of family privation. By comparison, Depression hardship entailed more adverse consequences for the life course and psychosocial development of males who were

men, including some fathers of the Oakland and Berkeley children. Thernstrom's mobility study of Boston men (1973) documents the constraints of the 1930s in the worklives of men who were born in the first decade of the twentieth century, a group which had just entered lines of work and family roles prior to the economic collapse.

The Problematic Meaning of Age Differences. Age differentiation in family patterns is often unclear as to its meaning since age indexes historical location as well as career stage. Are observed differences an outcome of historical change, of life stage, or of both? An answer to this question should have priority among the objectives of multi-generation studies, and yet it remains elusive in the cross-sectional designs that have been employed (see Bengtson & Lovejoy, 1973). Such ambiguity is candidly acknowledged by Reuben Hill (1970:30) in relation to his cross-



sectional study of three generations: the "extent historical circumstances have affected these three generations will be difficult to disentangle from other influences which come with maturation and aging."

Unfortunately, there are many other studies in which the analyst shows little awareness of the interpretational problem. Leonard Pearlin's study (1972) of Turinese families (Italy) is one example. Within the middle and working class, Pearlin found a sharp decline in marital companionship between couples in which the husband was less than 45 years of age and those in the older age category. Without any reference to evidence on the decline in marital companionship over the life course (see Dizard, 1968) or to career stage explanations, Pearlin (1972:159) advanced an interpretation which is based on the presumed effects of historical change: ". . . age differences capture a myriad of conditions attendant upon increased urbanization and industrialization; early exposure to these conditions, in turn, shapes attitudes toward marriage. The younger husbands, socialized and married at a time of heightened material and social development, are more disposed toward companionship. In this way age is related to companionship in marriage, but the relationship is quite indirect." The relationship is also subject to a number of other interpretations, including cohort differences in career stage and education.⁶

⁶Comparison of birth cohorts within a cross-sectional or longitudinal sample should be also informed by knowledge of the criteria employed in the recruitment of families or individuals to the sample. Even more important is the need to examine the implications of these criteria for the outcomes under study. Lewis Terman's (1938) longitudinal sample of highly intelligent children and their parents represents a case in point. Terman assigned the mothers to three birth cohorts (1880-89, 1890-99, 1900-09) and found a pronounced increase between the latter two cohorts in premarital intercourse. This outcome has been used as the basis for a strong generalization concerning change in sexual behavior.

Generation-Lineage and Cohort as Social Units. Historical change in the life course has been viewed from both a generation-lineage and cohort perspective. The former approach tends to focus on modes of association and social transmission; examples include Kingsley Davis's provocative essay (1940) on parent-youth conflict, Eisenstadt's research (1956) on socio-cultural conditions in generational cleavages and the rise of youth movements; and Hill's study (1970) of social transmission within three-generation lineages.

A substantial literature has developed on the intergenerational or lineage transmission of education and occupation, as reviewed by Haller and Portes (1973), but we have no reliable evidence on the transmission of timetables. Generational differences in social position may be the most important source of intergenerational variations in the timing of life events, but it is also conceivable that parental interpretations of experienced events are influential in forming the expectations and plans of the young. Are the meanings women place on events in their life course instrumental in orienting their daughters to a particular life pattern? The evidence for an answer to this question is not available, although it is clear that the timing of events is a matter of concern among middle-aged, American women (birth-dates, 1925-29) and that they share a general notion of the ideal or preferred life

Thus Peter Filene concludes that "the generation of women born between 1900 and 1909 did indeed mark an abrupt fork in the history of sexual behavior" (1974:150). But the women were selected by Terman because they had a child in secondary school, and consequently are likely to vary systematically by marital age across the three cohorts—late marriers would be more probable in the oldest cohort than in the 1900-09 cohort. If this reasoning applies, the observed change in sexual behavior may be partly a reflection of cohort differences in marital age; premarital intercourse and pregnancy are most prevalent among early marriers.



course (Elder and Rockwell, 1976).

Though generational studies are attuned to the transmission process, they tend to neglect the realities of historical context. Generational status, in fact, is a very poor index of historical location. Individuals who occupy a common generational position in the descent hierarchy are most unlikely to share anything resembling a common historical location. Births to members of a particular cohort are distributed across successive cohorts. In periods of rapid change, biographical variations within a generation (among siblings) may exceed any inter-generational difference. The most persuasive case for identifying age cohorts in generational analysis comes from multi-generation studies (see Vinovskis's critique, forthcoming, of Greven's *Four Generations*, 1970). For example, the grandparents in Bengtson's three-generation study (Bengtson and Lovejoy, 1973) vary in birth year by as much as 20 years, a time span which is too broad for a precise analysis of historical change in life patterns. Hill (1970) refers to the grandparents, parents, and children in his study as "generational cohorts," even though members of each generation were born within a broad sweep of American history (the age range in the parent generation is 30 years).

The middle generation in Hill's study offers striking documentation of the inadequacy of generations as units in the analysis of social change and life patterns. The parental couples actually represent two historically meaningful cohorts, defined by marriage in the 1920s and 1930s. Consistent with our knowledge of the Depression era, the pre-Depression couples ended up with a larger number of children and a more diverse set of career timetables (childbearing, childrearing, consumption, worklife, etc.) when compared with the younger couples. Even though the two cohorts were described as sufficiently different in life patterns "to constitute

samples of different universes," they were treated throughout the analysis as one social unit (a decision which may have been based on considerations of sample size). The heterogeneity of this generation is likely to have obscured significant insights regarding intergenerational continuity and change.

Three points from this discussion deserve emphasis and apply more generally to the literature on social change in the life course: (1) the analytic importance of the conceptual distinctions between generation and cohort—analysts who refer to a generation as a cohort frequently have carried out their research as if the former unit possessed the attributes of the latter—i.e., shared historical location;⁷ (2) the strategic advantages of employing both perspectives (generation and cohort) to studies of historical change in life patterns—by specifying two birth cohorts within the grandparent generation of Bengtson's study, and thus through descending generations, we identify "true" generational cohorts that are well-suited for research on historical change in the life course; and (3) the need to invest greater effort in studies of the process by which particular forms of social change have an effect on life patterns. In comparisons of successive cohorts, we assume that the same historical event has differential consequences for persons and family units who vary in career stage.

Career stage represents a basic construct in life course analysis and in conven-

⁷The practice of equating generation and cohort with regard to historical location owes much to Mannheim's classic essay "The Problem of Generations" (1952; orig. 1928). Invariably we find this tendency in writings which use Mannheim's essay as a point of departure (see, for example, Spitzer, 1973). Since cohort refers explicitly to historical location, it should be preferred over the generational concept when this meaning is intended. Though generation has precise meaning within the domain of kinship and family, it has been associated with a wide variety of meanings, such as cultural or political era.



tional models of the family cycle, but it is used in very different ways. Stage analysis in family cycle studies has generally neglected the historical context and social course of family units. Since models of the family cycle are currently the most popular approach in studies of families over the life span, it is important to identify what they do and do not represent in family patterns and to place them in relation to basic analytic features of the life course framework.

II. The Family Cycle and Life Course

Three models of family change, as a developmental cycle, are suggested by theory and research. One depicts the cycle as an ordered set of stages which are indexed primarily by variations in family composition and size. Refined by a Chicago research group in the early 1950s and by the subsequent work of Reuben Hill (1964) and his associates, this model has been widely adopted in family studies, often without recognition of its limitations, such as the neglect of family variations associated with the differential timing, spacing, and duration of events.⁸ These variations

distinguish a second model exemplified by Paul Glick's cohort studies (Glick and Parke, 1965; Carter and Glick, 1970; Glick, 1977). Although Glick's first paper on the family cycle utilized both composition and timing variables in a "presentation of the ages at which American married couples usually reach the several stages of the family cycle," (1947:165) very few studies have followed this lead. A perspective which joins these two orientations represents a third concept of the family cycle, one which more accurately represents the course of family life and structure.

Although the family cycle has been used most frequently in reference to patterned change in family composition and size, such change has been measured by typologies that only provide a series of stage or cross-sectional depictions of family structure. In what follows, I shall first explore some conceptual and empirical implications of stage typologies of compositional change, and then review issues and research on the dynamic interdependence of change in the composition and economy of family units. This review suggests the analytic advantage of a multi-dimensional concept of family stage which is informed by the differential timing and sequencing of events. As a global concept, the family cycle makes a valuable contribution to an understanding of the life course of family units when it is applied in studies to the inter-generational aspects of change in the composition and economy of families.

A. Compositional Change and Family Patterns

Major points of compositional change over the life span include marriage, birth of the first and last child, age-graded status transitions in the lives of dependent offspring (entrance into grade school, etc.), departure of the eldest and youngest child from the parental home, withdrawal of one

⁸The history of the family composition model can be traced from Rowntree's five alternating periods of comparative want and sufficiency in the life course of the common laborer of York, England (1901:136-37), to Loomis's atheoretical study of the family cycle in the 1930s (1936), Glick's initial analysis of the family cycle through the use of Census materials on family composition and size (1947), and the Chicago research team consisting of Evelyn Duvall (1977), Reuben Hill, Bernice Neugarten and others. Subsequent refinements and theoretical contributions have been made by Reuben Hill (1964, 1970) and his students, especially Rodgers (1962, 1973). In 1957, a paper by Lansing and Kish gave a substantial boost to the family stage approach by claiming that it accounted for more of the variance in family behavior than age of household head. Unfortunately, their typology of family stages is based partly on age data—young married with children, older married with children, etc. As such, a comparison of family stage and age is equivalent in outcome to that of an index with one of its components.



or both parents from the labor force, and marital dissolution through the death of one spouse. The expansion phase, which ends with birth of the last child, is thus followed by a period of stability up to the departure of the last child and the subsequent phase of contraction. Anthropological essays by Fortes (1970), Goody (1958), and others have defined expansion and contraction as two of the three major phases in the developmental cycle of domestic groups, the other phase being that of replacement by families of the parents' offspring.

This change in family size, with its consequences for social interaction, consumption, and material resources, is generally acknowledged as one criterion for identifying stages of family structure and development (Hill, 1964). A second criterion is based on change in the age composition of the family, or, more specifically, on shifts across major age categories by the eldest or youngest child, or by both. Major status changes on the part of the eldest and youngest child add a forbidding degree of complexity to typologies of family stages, as Rodgers (1962, 1973) has shown in his model of 24 stages, and yet some information must be drawn from the careers of these children in order to identify such fundamental stages as childbearing and the "empty nest." The birthdates and status change of eldest and youngest child define the childbearing and childrearing phases, the stage in which the young establish their own domicile, and the postparental phase. The father's retirement or withdrawal from the labor force represents a third criterion which differentiates the post-parental stage from that of old age.

Reuben Hill (1964:192) has proposed a nine-stage model of the family cycle which is based on information regarding change in family size, major change in the status of the eldest and youngest child, and the father's occupation: "I. Establishment

(newly married, childless); II. New Parents (infant-3 years); III. Preschool Family (child 3-6 and possibly younger siblings); IV. School Age Family (oldest child 6-12 years, possibly younger siblings); V. Family with Adolescent (oldest 13-19 years, possibly younger siblings); VI. Family with Young Adult (oldest 20 until first child leaves home); VII. Family as Launching Center (from departure of first to last child); VIII. Postparental Family, the Middle Years (after children have left home until father retires); IX. Aging Family (after retirement of father)." Each change in stage indicates a change in family structure. Such change may occur through the development of role sequences; the aging of children entails change in the parents' role expectations, and thus establishes role sequences. Each stage, therefore, represents a distinct role complex and the sequential pattern of stages describes the family career.

A number of observations are suggested by this typology and relate to our discussion of the life course approach. First, it is clear that the stage model does not use all information provided by the criterion indicators (see Hill's discussion, 1964). For example, the stages become less and less precise in representing change in size as children are added to the family unit; in this regard, the stages leave something to be desired for analytical work on the large family systems of late nineteenth-century America. With the exception of retirement, the stages do not utilize information on the economic careers and worklife of husband and wife. Also, the status of the youngest child is used only in the specification of one stage, that of the launching phase. While a full information model (based on all criteria) would be needlessly complex for most problems, the typology is costly in loss of precision and information. The meaning of stage differences in family patterns is likely to remain elusive when the categories include wide internal

variations and are defined by a different mix of indicators.

Even more important, the model and most other stage formulations do not incorporate information on the differential timing of events. Just as age of family head provides only a rough index of family structure, the latter is by no means an accurate predictor of the head's age or career stage, especially in the middle years of the life span. The family head may have married a much younger woman in which case he would have a younger family than most men his age. During the middle years of the life span, the cumulative impact of differences in the timing of events yields a broad age range by family stage or pattern—differences in marital age, in years between marriage and first birth, in child-bearing span, etc. (Glick and Parke, 1965; Glick, 1977). It would be strange indeed if the correlates of a particular stage did not reflect temporal variations in the life course of families. These variations are a primary feature of Hill's three generation study (1970), as we have noted in our review of the life course approach. More recently, he has argued that "family development and the issues of categorizing such development into phases are primarily concerned with the pervasive issue of *time*" (1973:3). However, family time is neglected by compositional typologies of the family cycle; they are not designed to chart the life course of individuals or the various career lines of a family unit. Family stages acquire meaning within the context of family history, and temporal constructs are needed to represent a family's life course.

The delineation of compositional stages brings us to questions on the research problem. What is the theoretical relevance of compositional change to the problem at hand? What change, if any, is relevant to an understanding of marital satisfaction, power relations, and the division of labor over the life course? Among some 13 cross-

sectional and longitudinal studies that have investigated marital interaction by family stage (Rollins and Cannon, 1974), we find little, if any, discussion of the theoretical basis for this line of inquiry. Rollins and Reldman (1970:21) merely note that the family cycle has been used "to compare structures and functions of marital interaction in different stages of development." Do these stages of development refer to the conjugal pair, to parent-child relations, or to the total complex of family relationships? If the family cycle "has failed to become an important variable," as Rollins and Cannon conclude (1974:80), one reason may be found in the unspecified meaning of its operations. We must ask what family cycle typologies measure, and our answer should be more precise than merely a reference to structural change.

The most common stage models of the family cycle are all best described as delineating *stages of parenthood*—before children, the active phase of parenting, the departure of children, and the "empty nest." Moreover, these stages follow a preferred script of a marriage which bears children and survives to old age; deviant patterns are excluded—childless marriages, children before marriage, the widowed and divorced with or without children, serial marriages, or an extended phase of living together which is eventually formalized by marriage.⁹ There is no limit to the models that could be developed for life patterns that deviate from the preferred or conventional type.

With their focus on parenthood, typologies of the family cycle do not provide an analytic framework for re-

⁹Turner (1969:81) notes that the conventional script of marriage applies to approximately two-thirds of the adult population in Great Britain. The remainder of the population is divided among those who never marry (8.9%), marry but become divorced or separated (12-18%), and marry but do not bear children (9-10%).



search on the synchronization of family or individual activities—of parental responsibilities and civic obligations, for example; for assessments of the relation between family and individual activities, as expressed in family control and support exchange (Hareven, 1975); or for studies of interdependencies between interior and exterior aspects of the family unit—between marital companionship and sexuality, on the one hand, and socioeconomic conditions, on the other. If we add a temporal perspective to these problem areas, the common theme is that of interlocking or contingent careers. For example, the arrangement of marriage, births, and work suggests five main career types for married women with children: the *stable homemaking* pattern with no work history; the *conventional* pattern of marriage, homemaking with no return to work after marriage or children; *double-track*—brief interruptions to have children; *unstable*—alternations between full-time homemaking and employment; and *delayed employment*—first employment following marriage and homemaking (Elder, 1974:234).¹⁰ Stage analysis might supplement these temporal patterns by identifying the status and family structure of women at points in time. However, the meaning of one's status at a point in time depends on the course through which it was attained.

Some evidence on this point is provided by the life histories of women in the 1925-29 cohort (Elder and Rockwell, 1976) which show a consistent relationship between

marital timing and worklife. The economic pressure of early marriage and parenthood is most common among women who followed a double-track career, whereas the material advantage of late marriage and a relatively small family is characteristic of women who did not work at all or who remained employed only up to marriage and first birth. It is noteworthy that this life course variation does not appear in static analyses which ignore the temporal relation of women's work to other events. A study (Sweet, 1973:103) based on the 1960 U.S. Census found no relationship between marital timing and women's *work status* at a point in time.

Studies organized around a stage typology of the family cycle frequently display an "interior" bias in which the stages become *the* source of variation in family patterns. An example is found in studies of stage variations in marital interaction which do not analyze the socioeconomic careers of husband and wife and their relation to family stage or marital satisfaction (Rollins and Feldman, 1970; Rollins and Cannon, 1974). Rollins and Cannon refer to role strain in the middle stages as one possible explanation for the U-shaped, curvilinear relationship between marital sentiment and the family cycle, but they do not test this hypothesis with data on interdependent career lines. Moreover, the role strain hypothesis is derived from a multi-dimensional model of the family life course, not from the family cycle model on which the study is based.

A contrasting deficiency, the neglect of life stage and timing phenomena, is characteristic of studies on class and socialization. None of the studies in Bronfenbrenner's review (1958) of class and childrearing since the Depression era examined this relationship by stage in the family cycle or considered the implications of wide variations in age at marriage and births. This practice, which has changed little up to the present (cf. Erlanger,

¹⁰A number of other career typologies have been proposed in the literature (see Lopata, 1971; Sweet, 1973). Bernard (1971:181) has identified eight career patterns in the life course of professional women on the basis of four major contingencies and their order—marriage, childbearing, professional preparation, and the assumption or resumption of professional practice. The eight patterns represent variation of three general types—early interrupted, late interrupted, and uninterrupted. Length of the break should be added to this model.



1974), has a number of important consequences. In a cross-sectional sample of children, parents occupy a wide range of stages, from childbearing to the launching phase; family variations across these stages implies substantial differences in the socialization of children who are comparable in age. Equally significant are differences in socio-economic position between the early and middle stages, and their relation to economic pressures and adaptations.¹¹

B. Change in Family Composition and Economy

The economic implications of change in the age composition and size of the family are expressed in the ratio of supply and demand, in the level of earnings and number of earners, and in the number of dependents, young and old. The lifetime course of the family economy is thus intimately linked to change in the age of the household head, to change in the number and age of children, and to loss of productive family members through death, disability, divorce, and the formation of new family units.

Initial impressions of the interlocking histories of family composition and

economy emerged from a series of socio-economic studies in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹² Using budget data and demographic information, they charted variations in living standard by number of earners and young children, and thus, in implication, by family stage: 1) the relative prosperity of the young married years before children; 2) the often extreme economic pressure associated with the expansion phase of childbearing, a period of imbalance between supply and demand in which the husband occupies an early stage in his economic career and the earnings potential of the wife is curtailed by child-care norms and duties; 3) an improvement in economic well-being as children and perhaps the wife enter the labor force; and 4) a decline in family income resulting from the departure of older children and the loss of their earnings. In the uncontrolled economy of late nineteenth-century England, Rowntree's study of York laborers (1901:136-37) produced a graphic portrait of this covariation between living standard and family composition.

Since the 1930s and major welfare legislation, studies of American families have continued to document the profound economic effects of change in family composition and size over the life course. Using annual data on income dynamics from a panel study of some 5,000 American families, Lane and Morgan (1975:50) conclude that "most changes in family economic status result from changes in family composition." Significant economic declines over the six year period were found to be related to loss of earnings from offspring, to divorce in

¹¹The intercorrelational pattern of status dimensions (such as the head's education, occupational status, and income) varies by career stage, owing to differences in worklife progression and economic rewards across occupational categories. Skilled workers, for example, reach their economic peak at an earlier stage than do professionals; thus occupational status differences of income are much less pronounced among young workers than among men in middle age. This life pattern has not been given appropriate recognition in studies of socio-economic status, specifically with respect to the analysis of status interrelations by age or career stage (see Kahl and Davis, 1955, and their observation that "income stands in sulking isolation" relative to head's education and occupation). More recently, Jackman and Jackman (1973) examined the relation between dimensions of objective and subjective social status in a cross-sectional sample, but did not carry out the analysis within age strata. analysis within age strata.

¹²In addition to S. Rowntree's study (1901), Rubinow (1916) makes reference to a large number of early socio-economic studies that show the link between family composition and economy. Family budget research dating back to LePlay's work is reviewed by Carle Zimmerman (1936).



which the wife and mother became the household head, and to the withdrawal of husbands and wives from the labor force.¹³ Among intact families, economic change stemmed primarily from change in the number of earners (e.g., re-employment of the wife), rather than from change in the earnings of the family head. A similar pattern is reported by Modell (forthcoming; Modell & Hareven, 1973) from research on the household budgets of working class families in late nineteenth-century Massachusetts. Family expenses varied more by family stage than by the earnings of the father.

Lack of synchronization between family income and material needs over the life course has centered attention on family management strategies and priorities (Hill, 1970; Modell, forthcoming), on ways of adapting to the disparity between income and demand. These strategies fall into three general categories: 1) control or reduction of consumption, imposing family constraints on living standards, deferral of material aspirations; 2) re-allocation of time and energy resources providing services with family labor, changing work patterns, etc.; and 3) improvement of the synchronization of income and outgo—savings, loans, etc. (Gove, et. al., 1973). Prior to the birth of children, the anticipation of future needs and economic

pressures may take the form of decisions regarding the wife's employment, the saving of discretionary income, and the reduction of expenses by living with relatives. Highly paid shiftwork, overtime, and moonlighting have been identified as adaptations to the economic squeeze associated with the childbearing phase, particularly in large families (Wilensky, 1963; Young & Wilmott, 1973: Chapter 7). Reentry of the wife into the labor market after childbearing may be motivated by the accumulation of debts, and by the anticipated costs of children's education and of financial security in old age.

From the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, urban American families in the "launching" and "post-parental" phases frequently took in boarders, primarily in response to economic considerations. As Modell and Hareven (1973:475) point out, boarding "was a social equalization of the family which operated *directly* by the exchange of a young adult person and a portion of his young-adult income from his family of orientation to what might be called his family of reorientation—reorientation to the city, to a job, to a new neighborhood, to independence." By supplementing income with payments for room and board, older single women and widows were better able to maintain an independent household.

From a review of studies on family stress by stage, Aldous and Hill (1969; see also Schorr, 1966) have identified childbearing and the subsequent phase of school-age children as a period of maximum stress, owing to insufficient material resources relative to family need. Dissatisfaction with material well-being tends to reach a peak in the school-age years, followed by emotional stress in marriage during the span of years when the children are leaving home. Since the evidence on these stress points comes primarily from cross-sectional studies, little is known about the long-term effect of early material depriva-

¹³Within a longitudinal sample, family income is both a potential source and outcome of marital dissolution. The lower the income, the greater the likelihood of a marital break, which in turn lowers family income. This causal sequence is obscured in cross-sectional data; a negative correlation between family income and female-headed households reflects to some degree the negative effects of both variables. Does a low income have a stronger effect on marital instability than the latter has in lowering the family income? An answer to this question (which could be provided by the Michigan panel study of family income dynamics (Lane and Morgan, 1975) is obviously much more than an academic matter in view of the policy thrust on economics in family stability and the sharply increasing divorce rate.

tion and related adaptations on the course of marriage.

The value of such longitudinal analysis would depend on whether it explored the consequences of event timetables for the economic and emotional implications of each family stage. Timing differentials on marriage and childbearing are sufficient to produce wide variations in economic well-being within each stage. For example, the socio-economic context of childbearing differs markedly between women who wed at a relatively early and late age, even assuming that they married men of similar occupational status. Husbands of late marriers would be more likely to be firmly established in worklife and economic assets than men who married much younger women; differences in age at marriage may exceed eight or ten years, a time span which could make a substantial economic difference during the early phase of a man's worklife. The late marriers would also have more work experience through which to accumulate economic assets before the arrival of children. An economic squeeze should thus be most acute in the childbearing stage of women who married and gave birth to their children at a relatively early age.

Empirical documentation of this economic burden is provided by a survey of women from the Detroit area (Freedman and Coombs, 1966; see also Oppenheimer, 1974); the economic liability of having a child either shortly before or after an early marriage persisted through the first nine years of marriage. Couples "who have their children very quickly after marriage find themselves under great economic pressure, particularly if they married at an early age. . . . They are less able than others to accumulate goods and assets regarded as desirable by young couples in our society" (648). Judging from the results of another study (Cutright, 1973), the initial economic disadvantage of early family events appears to decline by middle

age in the lives of women, even though early marriage entails a high risk of failure.

The interlocking course of parenthood and economic behavior makes a strong case for family studies that include variables in both domains and investigate their joint or interacting effects. An explanation of change in family structure and consumption requires knowledge of both sets of variables and their relation, of family income and assets in relation to the time schedule of family events, age composition, and family size. Social composition and economic effects in family behavior are partly contingent on the timing of key family events and thus on the course of family history. Problems of synchronization and coordination in family management arise from the *relation* between the course of events in these domains. An economic squeeze may result from loss of job or a mid-life demotion, as well as from early marriage and births.

C. From Concept to Operation

With data requirements that clearly favor detailed longitudinal records, a life course framework may appear to offer little to the analyst with cross-sectional materials, as in the case of nineteenth-century Federal census manuscripts on households. Even when decennial records are linked, a ten-year gap between data points severely restricts the kind of questions that can be addressed. Knowledge of the occupation of a man in 1870 and in 1880 obviously leaves much of his work-life or career to one's imagination. Despite such constraints there is much to be gained by linking age to events or statuses within a cross-section of a cohort or sample. Given satisfactory age data, the analyst could compare family patterns by stage within subgroups defined by different time schedules; for example, by early, on time, and late marriage, which can be derived by linking marriage certificates to census



records. More complex timetables might be developed by linking ages at marriage, first birth, and last birth, or by combining marital age with variations in the child-bearing span. Though age of household head is sometimes employed as an alternative to stages of the family cycle, both head's age and family stages acquire greater utility when they are used in combination. By relating head's age to family stage, we achieve some knowledge of the differential timing of family events. The head's age should also be linked to his socio-economic position if we are concerned with the sequential interdependence of parenthood and economic events.

In lieu of age-at-event information, a rough estimation of the temporal structure of life events in cohorts can be achieved by comparing the distribution of persons who have made a transition (such as marriage) by age category in each cohort. An elaboration of this strategy has been employed most creatively by Modell et al. (1976) in a comparison of five transitions to adult status (exit from school, entry into the labor force, departure from the family of origin, marriage, establishment of a household) among Philadelphia whites (1880) and among an all U.S. Census sample in 1970. Six aspects of the transition to adulthood are indexed in the study, including prevalence (proportion of cohort which experiences a given transition in specific age categories), timing (typical points of transition), spread (span of time required for given proportion of cohort to pass through a transition), and age-congruity (degree of overlap between transitions). The authors note that the "ideal ending-point of this inquiry would be a distribution of *careers*, which might be categorized by starting age, sequence of transitions, and intervals among them. To know this distribution would permit us substantial insight into how these careers were constructed. But our data permit us only to compare cross-sections, in order to

draw implications for patterns of events within individual life courses."

III. Overview

This essay has outlined some distinctive features of a perspective on the family which represents its course of development in historical context, a perspective which is focused on the process of status change, and thus on the task of explicating such change. Differences in the timing, duration, and arrangement of events across career lines generate patterns of asynchrony, relative to action sequences and normative pressures, and problems of adaptation, as expressed in strategies of life course management. These strategies entail ways of coping with demand-supply imbalances within the course of family life (e.g., patterns of resource development—time, income, and energy allocation), and on the individual level with problems of role overload and loss.

In addition to the contingent careers of an individual, three general modes of temporal interdependence are important aspects of life course analysis: the intersection between life or family history and social history, between the life course of the family unit and that of individual members, and between the course of events in the family and other institutional sectors—the economy, polity. Formation of the marital relationship is viewed in terms of the "joining of life histories," each characterized by a distinctive pattern of kin relations and culture, material assets and socialization. The configuration formed by these patterns has consequences for intergenerational ties with parents and in-laws, and for the course of marriage generally—the sharing of interests and activities, mutuality in support and understanding, the division of labor and power. The family unit is portrayed as a set of contingent career lines which vary in synchronization and problems of resource management; its social stage at any point in time thus



acquires historical definition within the course of family events and activities.

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