Introduction: Understanding the Family Lives of Older Adults

Family gerontologists focus on understanding the social ties of older adults, particularly their family relationships. In contrast to the common belief that older people are isolated from family members and friends, family gerontologists have shown that older persons have rich and varied social lives. Maturity in adulthood is often described as determined by one's capacity for love and for work. Middle- and later-life adults exhibit tremendous capacity for both. Family gerontologists have illustrated how work—both paid and unpaid—remains pivotal for shaping aging adults' identities and ties with others. Older persons' participation in social relations and their engagement in productive work create a context that enhances their visions of themselves and their world. In this reader, we explore ways in which older persons construct a sense of identity, build positive family relationships, and pursue purposeful work—just as younger people do.

Any discussion about families in later life must include an explanation of what we mean by *family.* As we explore the everyday family lives of aging people, we demonstrate that narrow definitions of family do not capture the diverse ways that people relate as family members. Traditionally, families have been conceived of as persons related by blood or marriage living in the same household. As you will see in Part I, our definition is more broadly conceptualized. We highlight the interdependence of older people. By *interdependence,* we mean the way their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are intricately connected with those of others. We accept as family those persons who are bound by ties of marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves a family.

Although we pay particular attention to family relationships, we do so with sensitivity to the broader contexts within which older people live. Family gerontology is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses anthropology, demography, family studies, history, psychology, sociology, and other areas. Each of these disciplines provides an important lens through which to view the broader context of aging people and their family ties. For example, an older woman's retirement experience is shaped not only by her individual talents (an emphasis in psychology) but also by the quality of her marital relationship (family

studies), her participation in unpaid family work (sociology), job market constraints and opportunities (history and economics), and cultural beliefs about the proper work for women (anthropology). The content of our reader reflects this interdisciplinary nature of family gerontology. We integrate information from many perspectives, including the personal experiences of writers and poets, to provide a broad view of individuals and families in middle and later life.

Our worldview, as well, is interdisciplinary or eclectic. The life course perspective described by Vern Bengtson and Katherine Allen (1993) provides a framework that best conveys our theoretical approach or worldview. The life course perspective is a way "to examine the unfolding history of intimate connections in families and the social context of such long-term relationships in terms of social structure and historical location" (p. 469). The perspective also provides a way to understand changes or transitions that middle- and later-life families experience and the meanings that older people give to these transitions.

In our introduction, we explore issues from a life course perspective. For example, we discuss some of the demographic characteristics of today's aging population and how historical changes in technology and health sciences have altered the experiences of middle- and later-life families. We also discuss the importance of social processes that create different experiences for families, depending on their location in the social hierarchy. Finally, we discuss developmental change as it pertains to issues of identity, family ties, and work.

Who Are Today's Older Adults?

Today's older people constitute the largest group of aging adults ever to live in the United States. In 1997, persons 65 years or older numbered 34.1 million and represented 12.7% of the U.S. population (AARP, 1998). One reason for the size of this group is that today more than three fourths of all persons live until their 65th birthday. This unprecedented change in the average length of life is a recent phenomenon. In fact, two thirds of the total increase in human longevity took place during the 1900s (Skolnick, 1991). The older population will continue to grow significantly in the future as well. By 2030, there will be about 70 million older adults, representing 20% of the U.S. population (AARP, 1998).

As more people are living increasingly longer lives, family gerontologists have sought to discover how these changes influence middle- and later-life families. For example, elder care previously was not a major, long-term task for most families because fewer persons lived to be old (Coontz, 1992). Today, caregiving for dependent older people is a substantial challenge for many families. Family members provide 80% of the in-home care to older people with chronic illness even when formal services are used (U.S. Senate Special Committee on

Aging, 1992). Family gerontologists are interested in assisting caregiving families and informing health care providers and policymakers.

Older persons not only constitute a larger group than in the past but also are more diverse in race and ethnicity. In 1997, people of color represented 15.3% of older Americans (AARP, 1998). Today's aging population is varied and complex, and it will become increasingly so in the future. Ethnic and racial minorities are projected to represent 25% of older adults in 2030, an increase of nearly two thirds from 1997 (AARP, 1998). People of color are becoming more predominant in the United States and also are becoming more diverse. For example, the term *Hispanic* encompasses Americans of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central and South American, and Cuban descent, among others. Similarly, Asian Americans officially are composed of at least 11 nations of origin including China, India, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The category of American Indian represents many tribes with distinctive languages, spiritual belief systems, and histories. As much variability exists, then, within any racial-ethnic group as between people of color and the dominant White culture.

Older persons have also become progressively wealthier compared with their counterparts in the early 1900s. Living standards in general have risen since World War II, and the rise has been sharpest for older adults (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). This increase in the standard of living, however, is an average that masks tremendous variability in economic well-being. For example, people of color are disproportionately poor relative to Whites. About 3.4 million elderly persons were below the poverty level in 1997. Of this group, approximately 9% were White, 24% were Hispanics, and 26% were African American (AARP, 1998). These numbers are striking because Whites constitute a majority of the older population. They are the least likely group, however, to be poor.

How Has Family Life for Older People Changed During the 20th Century?

Today's older people have experienced many of the social and technological changes that took place in the 1900s. These changes brought about transformations in the terrain of family life. For example, technological advances in reproductive health gave women now in their 60s more control over the number and spacing of their children. Because of this greater control, many parents decided to have fewer children and to space them at closer intervals. This childbearing pattern has resulted in fewer years spent raising children than were spent even 50 years ago.

Technological advances in other areas of medical and public health served to increase longevity for most Americans. This longevity has

changed experiences of family life as well. Around the turn of the 20th century, for example, most women lived an average of 10 to 15 years after their last child matured to adulthood. Today, women can expect to live an additional 40 years after their children gain independence. Older married couples often live more than a third of a century with no children in their household (Coontz, 1992). Instead of raising children, as was common in the past, middle- and later-life couples are tending to relationships with their adult children and, perhaps, cultivating new relationships with their grandchildren. Historically, people simply did not live long enough to become active grandparents. In 1900, only one in four grandchildren had four living grandparents at birth. Today, most adults live long enough to know most of their grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986).

Because people are living longer, marriages that endure are lasting for increasingly longer periods. In 1900, one or both partners in a marriage were likely to have died before their children reached adulthood. Today, it is common for couples to remain married for 50 years (Riley, 1983). More diversity exists in the ways that couples arrange their relationships, too. Today, some older people choose to live together without a marriage certificate, something they rarely did in the past. Divorce rates are much higher today as well, so it is not unusual for older adults to have divorced and remarried sometime in their lives. Finally, because younger people are even more likely to divorce, older people today are interacting with new and complex stepfamily systems.

Although it is important to acknowledge the changes that have taken place during the lifetimes of today's older adults, it is equally important to recognize that much about aging and family life has remained the same. Americans continue to value marriages and families and consistently provide family members with emotional and practical support (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Women remain primary caregivers for dependent family members, including those who are aging. Finally, women and men have always shared the pursuit of financial resources for their families, although the nature of this pursuit continues to vary, depending on circumstances such as race and social class. For example, working-class women have always combined the unpaid work of child care and housework with low-wage jobs to help support their families. In recent years, middle-class women have followed this same pattern, pursuing employment when their children are young in addition to after their children leave home.

Finally, the changes that occurred during the 20th century have not had a unified impact on today's older people. Within this group exists significant variation in life experiences from one cohort to the next. The term *cohort* is used by social scientists to describe a group of people born within a narrow band of years who share certain social and historical experiences. People in a particular cohort not only have lived through a specific historical event but have done so at the same time in their lives.

Glen Elder's (1974) research on the Great Depression provides an interesting account of how cohort membership and larger social forces influenced the lives of today's older adults. Elder found that those people who were teenagers when the Great Depression began showed fewer ill effects than those who were in early elementary school. The younger cohort spent a longer period under economic hardship, which altered the trajectory of their lives. For example, many of these children received few resources for education and vocational training—a disadvantage that limited their prosperity in later life. Those who were teenagers when the Great Depression hit, however, seemed to benefit from the experience. The teenage cohort played a large role in helping their families survive, and this early experience encouraged a belief in hard work. This belief, combined with legislation that financed the college educations of those who served in World War II, allowed many persons in the teenage cohort to increase their wealth later in life. Elder's study shows that different cohorts experience sociohistorical events in different ways and that these differences produce varied experiences in later years.

How Does the Social Context Shape Family Life?

Although older people and their families have many shared experiences by virtue of being alive at similar times in history, their experiences vary with their social position. Although we, as individuals, experience our lives as unique, shaped by the particular people and circumstances we meet during our lifetimes, we also are part of a larger social pattern that reflects social hierarchies. Hierarchies based on race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability create systems of disadvantage and of privilege. These systems are embedded in the fabric of our social lives and are not easily changed. For example, social class is not an identity held by an individual but a series of relations that pervade our entire society and shape our social institutions and relationships with others (Andersen & Collins, 1995). For substantive change to occur, all levels of social life must be affected, from individual experiences to economic structures—a daunting challenge indeed. In the United States, Whites are privileged relative to people of color, wealthy people are privileged relative to less wealthy people, and men are privileged relative to women.

At times, people are consciously aware of our system of inequity; sometimes they are not. Peggy McIntosh (1998) writes of her awakening recognition of White privilege after noticing that men acknowledged women's disadvantages but denied men's advantages. She writes, "As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage"

(p. 76). She describes many ways that she receives unearned advantages over people of color, a few of which follow:

> I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable. I can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of my race. (p. 79)

Those who are advantaged receive disproportionate access to resources, opportunities, and rewards. Experiences of privilege and disadvantage have a cumulative effect that results in diverse and unequal life circumstances in old age. For example, older people of color are disproportionately likely to experience poverty, have less access to health care, and receive poorer treatment for health problems—circumstances with which proportionately fewer older Whites contend.

The way that social hierarchies play out in the lives of all people, including those who are aging, is complicated because an individual can occupy a position of disadvantage and advantage simultaneously. For example, a White wealthy woman has lower social value relative to her wealthy husband but is privileged by virtue of her access to financial resources. Should she become divorced, however, her vulnerability becomes more apparent. In turn, the partners in an African American working-class couple share the experiences of living in a racist, classist society but differ in the value of their gender. For example, African American women, relative to African American men, receive lower pay and are more responsible for providing the unpaid labor of child care and housework.

These couples illustrate how one family can be set apart from another family on the basis of social position. The White wealthy couple has advantages over the African American working-class couple that result from and contribute to unfair life circumstances, particularly in old age. For example, older people of color have far less accumulated wealth than do Whites, including such resources as savings or property. It is important to recognize, however, that many White persons live in poverty as well. More White persons are in poverty than the combined numbers of African Americans, Asians, Native Indians, and Hispanics in poverty. In 1992, 19,012,000 persons of color, compared with 24,523,000 White persons, lived in poverty (Andersen & Collins, 1995). This class system interacts with racism, however, leading to greater rates of poverty for ethnic and racial minorities.

The couples described above also show that individuals *within* families can be positioned differently in the social hierarchy—a process that creates inequality. Gender, like race and class, is an experience that is influenced more from social practices than from biological differences

between women and men. Relations between women and men are structured at every level of social life—individual, relational, familial, legal, and economic—to create complex systems of inequality that favor men (Ferree, 1991).

Barrie Thorne (1992) explains how inequality among family members creates a "tangle of love and domination" in families (p. 20). For example, older married couples can draw happiness from memories of their long lives together. These loving memories, however, may be mixed with a history of the husband's being advantaged by the lesser amount of unpaid labor he does, the greater level of leisure activities he pursues, and the greater frequency that decisions were made to privilege his paid work. Of course, this within-family inequality varies, depending on the racial and class position of each partner. Still, a general pattern of unfairness, favoring men, pervades U.S. heterosexual partnerships.

How Are Identity, Connections With Others, and Pursuit of Work Central in the Lives of Older People?

Three developmental themes are addressed throughout our reader: identity, relationships, and work. These three themes provide the foundation from which people build the entirety of their lives. Steven Marks (1986) describes marriage as a process in which partners attempt to combine their values concerning identity, relationships, and work to create a shared vision of what is important. For example, some couples choose to emphasize their relationship, while others place greater emphasis on their separate work lives. As long as the partners agree, the relationship remains satisfying. Here in this section, we provide a general introduction to the themes and how they pertain to middle- and later-life families.

Identity

For many, turning 40 is an important social marker signaling the beginning of middle age. Around this age, people may begin to realize that their time to live is limited relative to the time they had when they were younger (Neugarten, 1972). With this subtle change in perspective, many persons reassess their lives to determine their future course. Some think this process is problematic, and popular media seem to portray middle-aged people as in crisis. The overwhelming majority of persons do not experience a painful crisis, however, but adjust to midlife changes through a gradual, long-term process. Most midlife people operate from a position of psychological strength, and this pattern continues into old age.

A challenge of identity in middle age and later life is to continue to experience mastery and productivity through work that enhances one's own well-being and that of others. Individuals also must continue to address their needs for agency and for communion with others (Bakan, 1966; McAdams, Ruetzel, & Foley, 1986). In middle and later life, then, individuals must combine a strong sense of self with a sense of commitment to others. In other words, psychosocial growth continues throughout adulthood into old age. In this volume, we emphasize the developmental and social nature of identity in middle and later life, particularly as it is shaped by family relationships.

Social Relationships

Individuals travel through life in the company of others, in what Kahn and Antonucci (1980) call a "social convoy." With increasing life spans, these journeys are lasting longer. For example, parent-adult child relationships used to last for 20 or 30 years. Today, these relationships exist for 50 years or more. To extend the convoy metaphor further, families, compared with families in the early 1900s, are traveling together in increasingly diverse groupings via a variety of family forms. As noted earlier, divorce and remarriage patterns have resulted in more complex family structures. Also, the ability to choose whether to have children, when to have them, and how many to have has given couples enormous flexibility in the types of families they will or will not have. These family arrangements affect one's social environment in middle and later life. For example, couples are more likely now than in the past to remain childless or to have one or two children, reducing the number of adult children with whom they will relate.

Although more diversity exists in family arrangements, family solidarity—affection, assistance and support, and time spent together—remains strong (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). We focus on two broad types of family relationships: cross-generation (vertical) and same-generation (horizontal) ties. We examine parent-child and grandparent-grandchild ties through middle and later life. We also explore marriage, including divorce, remarriage, and widowhood. We address lifelong singlehood, cohabiting relationships, and long-term lesbian and gay relationships as well. Finally, we discuss the importance of sibling relationships during the course of adulthood.

Through our study of family relations in later life, we discredit the idea that the American family is in decline. Instead, we show that families continue to maintain strong ties while creating new family structures that are adaptive to present-day social changes. For example, when adult children divorce, they rely on parents for emotional and financial support. An understanding of intergenerational relations

illustrates that although one family tie ends, another tie may be strengthened.

Work

As we stated earlier, we define work broadly to include all activities that are useful, both to ourselves and to others. A majority of persons in today's labor force are either underpaid or unpaid, a condition that has dire financial consequences for these workers in later life. Being a woman or a person of color makes it much more likely that work will be unpaid or underpaid.

Older people, as well, are likely to be participants in the unpaid labor force. For example, people aged 65 and older are just as likely as younger people are to participate in volunteer organizations, provide informal help to family and friends, and maintain and clean their homes (Herzog, Kahn, Morgan, Jackson, & Antonucci, 1989). We highlight the ways that our economic structure, with its demarcation between valued, paid work and less valued, unpaid work, creates a system of over-privilege for some and underprivilege for others.

We are also concerned with the connection between work and family life and explore how experiences in one domain influence experiences in the other. For example, studies have shown that stressful experiences at work can result in more negative family interactions later in the day. In later life, retirement provides the context for important work-family negotiations. As you will see in Part IV, however, most couples navigate the retirement transition with little change in their marital relationship.

Conclusion

The life course perspective highlights how older people and their families change or develop through time. We conceptualize development as a lifelong process of change in how individuals relate to themselves and others and how they pursue purposeful activity. We focus not only on change but also on stability. These periods of change and stability are roughly associated with age, although we do not argue for a universal trajectory of age-related stages and transitions. Instead, we acknowledge that within a particular sociohistorical context, most adults encounter similar age-related challenges. We have organized our chapters according to broad age categories common in family gerontology. The first three sections address midlife (roughly from 35 to 65 years of age). The last two sections address old age, from young-old through oldest old (roughly from age 55 through the end of life). We also recognize differences in the timing of these experiences. For example, first-time

grandparenthood can occur early in middle age or in old age, although the median age for becoming a grandparent is in the mid to late 40s.

Within these age categories, we focus on important developmental transitions, such as a teenager's leaving home or the end of a close relationship because of a death. Transitions are important periods of change for individuals and their families that can result in both positive and negative outcomes. These outcomes depend on the skills and resources available to those experiencing the transitions and the circumstances surrounding them. Researchers have shown, for example, that unexpected transitions are more difficult to negotiate than ones that are planned. Imagine how the experience of retirement would be different for someone retiring according to a self-determined, 10-year plan compared with someone who is forced to retire by an employer. Both of these transitions, however, require skill and resources to navigate through them successfully.

The life course perspective also draws attention to how social hierarchies create different experiences both *within* families and *between* families. Our emphasis is on how social constructs or classifications shape individual development and family life. We explore how older persons' lives and relationships are influenced by inequities that generate different views and experiences of social reality. We provide an opportunity for you to listen to diverse voices as older adults talk about their family experiences. Older people may be constrained by social circumstances, but they also have agency or are purposeful in creating meaningful lives despite the challenges they encounter. Examples of both agency and constraint in the lives of older people are provided throughout our reader.

In Part I, we explore how middle-aged parents negotiate ties with their children as these children move into adulthood. We also lay the foundation for understanding relationships between parents and their adult children through the life course. In Part II, we continue our discussion of parent-child relationships, including the process of coping with the death of a child. We also discuss grandparenting and issues surrounding caregiving. In Part III, we focus on the intimate relationships of middle-aged and older adults and the importance of sibling relationships through the life course. We also cover the diversity of kin ties, including grandparenthood, and the importance of kinkeeping. Finally, we talk about how the death of a parent affects one's life and marital relationships. In Part IV, our main focus is on work commitments and coping with relationship loss. We also address the experiences of providing care for spouses and dependent adult children. Finally, in Part V, we describe how oldest old adults focus their energies and attentions on their most significant social ties. In addition, we address challenges that older people may face, such as elder abuse and neglect, and explore how the quality of later life is influenced by health and economic circumstances.

First, however, we begin our reader with a poem by Lois Tschetter Hjelmstad that depicts a multigenerational family coming together to share a meal in later life. Family meals and holidays provide important opportunities for building and maintaining connections, as this poem illustrates. The poem is particularly significant because it acknowledges the many years of happiness and heartbreak experienced by this extended family.