AGING AND GENERATIONAL RELATIONS: A Historical and Life Course Perspective

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Abstract

This review explores historical changes in generational relations in American society as they affect adaptation to the later years of life. Following a life course perspective, the review examines changes in the timing of life transitions, in family relations, and in generational and kin assistance and their impact on support in old age. In doing so, it demonstrates the significance of a historical and life course approach to the understanding of generational relations over time. Dispelling prevailing myths about coresidence and generational assistance in the past, the review discusses the circumstances under which nuclear household arrangements were modified and explores patterns of assistance inside and outside the household. It links demographic changes in the timing of life course transitions with patterns of supports to aging parents in the context of changing reciprocities among kin. By comparing two cohorts of adult children in an American community in terms of their supports to aging parents, as well as their attitudes toward generational assistance, the review identifies historical changes in the relations between generations in the larger context of family relations and kin assistance.

INTRODUCTION

The study of generational relations in the later years of life in American society has been oriented to the present and clouded by myths about the past. An

understanding of this subject in contemporary society depends on a knowledge of the larger processes of social change that have affected the timing of life course transitions, family patterns, and reciprocal relations among kin (Bengtson et al 1985, Shanas 1986, Bengston & Treas 1985, Shanas & Sussman 1981). As this chapter suggests, both a historical perspective and a life course paradigm are important for the exploration of these processes.

A historical perspective, in addition to providing a context of change over time, illuminates the ways in which historical events and circumstances have affected the life experience of different age groups (Hareven 1977a, Elder 1978). At the same time, the life course paradigm helps focus attention on the interaction of demographic, social-structural, and cultural factors in shaping family patterns and generational relations. It illuminates the impact of historical events on the lives of various cohorts, and their consequences for old age (Elder 1974, Elder 1993, Riley et al 1978, Hareven 1991a).

A life course perspective thus provides a necessary dimension and an integrating framework for the study of intergenerational relations because it is both developmental and historical. It provides an understanding of the ways in which earlier life experiences of older adults, as shaped by historical events and by their respective cultural heritage, have affected their values governing family relations, their expectations of kin support, and the nature of their interaction with welfare agencies and institutions.

Generational relations in old age can be best understood in the context of the entire life course and of the historical changes affecting people at various points over their lives. They are molded by individual and familial experiences and by the specific historical circumstances that have impinged on people's lives. Rather than viewing older people as a homogeneous group, a life course perspective considers them as age cohorts moving through historical time, each cohort with its distinct life experiences shaped by the circumstances encountered earlier in life (Hareven 1978b, Elder 1978).

The adaptation of individuals and their families to the social and economic conditions they face in the later years of life is contingent on the pathways by which they reach old age. Relations of mutual support are formed over life and are revised in response to historical circumstances such as migration, wars, depressions, and the decline or collapse of local economies that people may have encountered at various points in their lives. Hence, patterns of support and expectations for receiving and providing assistance in old age are part of a continuing process of interaction among parents, children, other kin, and unrelated individuals. They are shaped by cultural traditions and the strategies that people follow over their lives, as they move through historical time (Hareven 1981, Elder 1982, Hogan et al 1993).

Following a historical and life course perspective, this chapter examines changes in demographic behavior, in family and household organization, in

the timing of life course transitions and in kin assistance in American society, as they have affected generational supports in the later years of life.

THE LIFE COURSE PARADIGM

The life course approach is developmental and historical by its very nature. Its essence is the synchronization of "individual time," "family time," and "historical time." Underlying the life course paradigm are three major dimensions. (i) the timing of life transitions in the context of historical change, (ii) the synchronization of individual life transitions with collective familial ones and their impact on generational relations, and (iii) the impact of earlier life events, as shaped by historical circumstances previously encountered, on subsequent events.

The timing of life transitions involves the balancing of individuals' entry into and exit from different roles—education, family, work, and community—over their life course. It addresses the key question: How did individuals time and sequence these transitions in changing historical contexts? In all these areas, the pace and definition of "timing" hinge upon the social and cultural contexts in which transitions occurred, and the cultural construction of the life course in different time periods and in different societies (Neugarten & Datan 1973, Clark & Anderson 1976).

The second dimension of the life course approach involves the synchronization of individual life transitions with collective family transitions, such as leaving home, getting married, and entering the labor force. Individuals engage in a variety of familial configurations that change over the life course and that vary in different historical contexts. Although age is an important determinant of the timing of transitions, it is not the only significant variable. Changes in family status and in accompanying roles are often as important as age, if not more so (Hareven 1991a, Hareven & Masaoka 1988, Riley & Riley 1993).

The synchronization of individual transitions with familial ones is a crucial aspect of the life course and impinges directly on generational relations, especially when individual goals are in conflict with the needs and dictates of the family as a collective unit. In the nineteenth century, for example, the timing of young adults' life transitions often clashed with the demands and needs of aging parents. Parents discouraged the youngest daughter from leaving home and marrying so that she could continue to support them at home in their old age. Daughters succumbed to these dictates, despite their preference to leave home and start a life of their own (Hareven 1982, Hareven & Adams 1994). Similarly, the timing of later life transitions affected more than one generation. For example, the death of "old, old" parents enabled caretaking children who were themselves old to begin providing for their own old age, as well as for their adult children or grandchildren (Hogan et al 1994).

Historical forces thus play a crucial role in this complex, cumulative pattern of individual and familial life trajectories. They have a direct impact on the life course of individuals and families at the time when they encounter them, and continue to have an indirect impact over the entire life course. This means that the social experiences of each cohort are shaped not only by the historical events and conditions its members encounter at a certain point in life, but also by the cumulative impact of the historical processes that influenced their earlier life transitions (Hareven & Masaoka 1988).

The impact of historical events on the life course may continue over several generations. One generation transmits to the next the ripple effects of the historical circumstances that affected its life history. Elder & Hareven (1992) found that in the same age cohorts in two different communities, delays or irregularities in the parents' timing of their work and family transitions as a result of the Great Depression affected the subsequent timing of the children's life transitions. The children thus experienced the impact of historical events on two levels: directly, through their encounter with these events in their early adulthood, and indirectly, in the transmission of these events across the generations. A life course perspective provides a framework for understanding variability in the patterns of support in the later years of life, as well as differences in the expectations of the recipients and the caregivers who are influenced by their respective social and cultural milieux (Fry & Keith 1982, Kohli 1986, Kiefer 1974, Jackson et al 1990).

Generational assistance is shaped by values and experiences that evolve or are modified over the entire life course. In the United States, ethnic values rooted in various premigration cultures call for a more exclusive dependence on filial and kin assistance than the more contemporary attitudes, which advocate reliance on supports available from government programs and community agencies. Such differences in values are expressed in the caregiving practices and attitudes of successive cohorts. The earlier life course experiences of each cohort, as shaped by historical events, also have an impact on the availability of resources for their members and on their modes of assistance and coping abilities in the later years of life (Elder 1974, Hareven & Adams 1994, Elder et al 1992, Sokolovsky 1990).

Specifically, recent research on the life course has made an important contribution to the understanding of generational relations and social change by refining the distinction between "generation" and "cohort," two concepts that have frequently overlapped in the gerontological literature (Bengtson et al 1985, Hill 1970). "Generation" designates a kin relationship and a genealogical lineage (for example, parents and children or grandparents and grandchildren) and may encompass an age span as wide as 30 years or more. A "cohort" consists of a more specific age group that has shared a common historical experience. Most importantly, a cohort is defined by its interaction with the

historical events that affect the subsequent life course development of that group (Ryder 1965, Riley 1978, Riley et al 1972). Over the past decade and a half, several scholars have warned against "confounding the genealogical and cohort meanings of 'generation.'" Building on the major problems that Elder (1978) and Vinovskis (1988) identified, Kertzer has pointed out that when a population is divided on genealogical principles into various generations, there is substantial overlapping in age among the generations. It would thus be "impossible to properly characterize the generations in terms of their common characteristics vis a vis other generations" (Kertzer 1983:130).

A generation might consist of several cohorts, each of whom has encountered different historical experiences that have affected its life course. For example, in Hareven & Adams's (1994) comparison of patterns of assistance of two cohorts of adult children to aging parents in a New England community, members of the same generation belonged to different cohorts: In families with large numbers of children, siblings in the same family were members of two cohorts, who differed in the historical experiences they had encountered and in their attitudes toward generational supports. If one intends to examine change over time in generational relations, then it is necessary to compare cohorts, not generations.

MYTHS ABOUT THE PAST

Historical research has dispelled the myths about the existence of an ideal three-generational family in the American past, according to which elderly parents coresided with their adult children and were supported by the younger generations after they reached dependent old age. This research has also challenged the prevailing sociological theory that industrialization destroyed the great extended households of the past and led to the emergence of a nuclear family system and to the isolation of the elderly. In reality, in the American colonies and in pre-industrial Europe, coresidence of three generations in the same household was not the modal familial arrangement. Given the high mortality rate, most grandparents could not have expected to overlap their grandchildren's lives for a significant time period (Greven 1970, Demos 1970, Laslett & Wall 1971). The great extended families that have become part of the folklore of modern society rarely existed in the past (Laslett 1977, Goode 1963, Hareven 1971).

As in the present, early American households were nuclear in their structure. The older generation resided in households separate from those of their married adult children but were located nearby, often on the same land. Opportunities for contact and cooperation among the generations abounded in what was characterized as a "modified extended family system" (Greven 1970). These voluntary, reciprocal relations were different, however, from an institutional-

ized stem family system, which characterized the coresidence of generations in Central Europe (Plakans 1987).

Nor was there a "golden age" in the family relations of older people in the American or European past. Even in the colonial period, elderly people were insecure in their familial supports, though they were revered and accorded higher social status than they are today (Fischer 1977). Aging parents had to enter into contracts with their inheriting sons in order to secure supports in old age in exchange for land. The emphasis in such contractual arrangements on specific details suggests the potential tensions and insecurities that parents anticipated concerning their care after they became too frail to support themselves (Demos 1978, Smith 1973).

Similarly, in urban-industrial society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, older people were not guaranteed supports from their children. In American society, familial support and care for older people, as well as more general patterns of kin assistance, historically have been voluntary and based on reciprocal relations over the life course (Adams 1968, Sussman 1959). In the absence of social security and institutions of social welfare, in the past norms dictated that kin engage in intensive reciprocal assistance. Adult children were expected to be the main caregivers for their aging parents (Demos 1970, Hareven 1982). Still, these patterns of care were voluntary rather than established by law. They depended, therefore, on carefully calculated strategies and on negotiated arrangements over the life course (Hareven 1982).

CORESIDENCE

The fact that aging parents and adult children rarely coresided in multigenerational households does not mean that the generations lived in isolation from each other. Even in urban society, throughout the nineteenth century, solitary residence—a practice that has become increasingly prevalent among older people today—was most uncommon for all age groups (Kobrin 1976). Autonomy in old age, however, partly expressed in the opportunity for older people to head their own households, hinged on some form of support from an adult child living at home or on the presence of unrelated individuals in the household (Hareven 1981). The ideal was the generations' residence on the same land in rural areas, or in the same building or same neighborhood in urban areas. "Intimacy from a distance," the preferred mode of generational interaction in contemporary American society, has been persistent since the early settlement and reaches back into the European past (Demos 1970, Laslett & Wall 1971).

Despite this overall commitment to residence in nuclear households, common to members of various ethnic groups and native-born Americans alike, nuclear households expanded to include other kin in times of need, during

periods of accelerated migration or housing shortages. The most notable extension of the household occurred when elderly parents and especially widowed mothers were unable to maintain themselves in separate residences. In such cases, aging parents had an adult child return to live with them, or they moved into a child's household (Smith 1979, 1981, Ruggles 1987, Hareven 1991b). Since household space was an important economic resource to be shared and exchanged over the life course, the configurations of household members changed over the life course in relation to the family's economic needs or in response to external opportunities (Hareven 1990). Older people whose children had left home shared household space with boarders and lodgers in exchange for services or rent, or with their own children who returned with their spouses to the parental home because of housing shortages or their aged parents' frailty (Chudacoff & Hareven 1979).

In the later years of life, boarding and lodging served the function of the "social equalization of the family," a strategy by which young men or women who left their parents' home communities moved into the households of people whose own children had left home. Trading household space with boarders and lodgers thus made it easier for families to adhere to their traditional values without slipping below the margin of poverty. Elderly couples who had no children or whose children had moved far away took in boarders and lodgers in exchange for money or assistance (Modell & Hareven 1973).

Boarding provided an important means of mutual exchanges between the generations even if they were not related. About one third of the men and women in their twenties and thirties living in late nineteenth-century American urban communities boarded with other families. For young men and women in the transition between leaving their parents' homes and establishing their own households, boarding with older people offered affordable housing in surrogate familial settings. For older people, particularly for widows, it provided the extra income needed to maintain their own residence and helped avert loneliness after their own children had left home. In some cases the function was reversed, and older people who could not live alone, but who had no children or relatives, moved as boarders into other people's households.

Despite preferences for unrelated individuals, households expanded to include kin, though usually for limited periods during times of need or at specific points in the life course. The unwritten rules about separate residence of the generations in American society were modified when aging parents became chronically ill or demented and, therefore, unable to live independently. Under such circumstances, frail elderly parents usually coresided with a child, or with other kin if no children were available (Hareven & Adams 1994). Only about 12% to 18% of all urban households in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contained relatives other than members of the nuclear family (Hareven 1977a). In urban communities, which attracted large numbers of migrants

from the countryside or immigrants from abroad, coresidence with extended kin increased greatly over the nineteenth century (Hareven 1971, Hareven 1982). The proportion of households taking in kin increased to 25% over the early twentieth century, but declined to 7% by 1950 (Ruggles 1987). As noted above, the presence of relatives other than members of the nuclear family in the household, though, was most common in the later years of life.

Aging parents and widowed mothers strove to maintain their autonomy by retaining the headship of their own households, rather than moving in with their children, relatives, or indeed strangers. The powerful commitment to the continued autonomy of the household was clearly in conflict with the needs of people as they were aging. In the absence of adequate public and institutional supports, older people striving to maintain independent households were caught in the double bind of living separately from their children, yet having to rely on their children's assistance in order to do so (Chudacoff & Hareven 1979). Holding on to the space and headship of their household in exchange for future assistance in old age was an important survival strategy for older people in urban society, one reminiscent of the contracts between inheriting sons and rural older people in preindustrial Europe and colonial New England, as discussed above. To continue living separately in their own household, parents ensured that at least one adult child remain at home. In the absence of a child, frail elderly people, especially widows, had to move in with relatives or strangers (Chudacoff & Hareven 1978, Hareven & Uhlenberg 1994, Smith 1979, Hareven 1981).

An examination of patterns of generational coresidence raises several questions related to household headship and to the nature of the supports inside the household: When a household record in a census listed a parent as being the head of the household and an adult child as residing in the household, who in reality headed the household, and how did the resources and assistance flow? It is difficult to answer these questions from cross-sectional data, nor can this type of data provide an explanation as to what the dynamics were in these household arrangements. Did the son succeed to household headship after his father retired or became too old or frail to support himself, or did the parents move into the son's household? Under what circumstances did the older generation coreside with adult children or other kin; and under what circumstances did they reside separately and engage in various types of assistance outside the household? It would be impossible to answer these questions from cross-sectional data. They need to be addressed, however, when analyzing longitudinal and retrospective data.

Rates of coresidence recorded in cross-sectional data might reflect a life course pattern in which elderly parents who did not coreside with their children at the time a census or survey was taken might do so later when they became more dependent. Cross-sectional data can obscure considerable variation in

patterns of coresidence over the life course: In the National Survey of Families and Households, for example, only 7% of Americans aged 55 and older with a surviving parent had the parent living with them at the time the survey was taken. The retrospective questions revealed, however, that one quarter of the persons surveyed in their late fifties had had an aging parent living with them at some point in their lives. Hogan, Eggebeen, and Snaith (1994), explain this discrepancy by the short time period that a sick parent actually resides with a child. The parent stays usually less than a year, because after the parent's health deteriorates, he or she either enters a nursing home or dies.

HISTORICAL CHANGES IN THE TIMING OF LIFE TRANSITIONS

Demographic changes in American society since the late nineteenth century have significantly affected age configurations within the family and the timing of life course transitions, and they have had a major impact on the overlap of generations into old age (Uhlenberg 1974, Hareven 1976, Riley 1984). As Uhlenberg has pointed out, the decline in mortality since the late nineteenth century has resulted in greater uniformity in the life course of American families and has dramatically increased the opportunities for intact survival of the family unit over the lifetime of its members. An increasing portion of the population has lived out its life in family units. Except when disrupted by divorce, married couples have been able to live together for longer time periods, children have been growing up with their parents as well as with their siblings alive, grandparents have overlapped with their grandchildren into the latter's adulthood, and great grandparenthood has emerged as a new stage of adult life (Uhlenberg 1974, 1978). Longevity and the increasing survival to adulthood have maximized the opportunity for generational overlap and the incidence of available pools of kin, despite the decline in fertility (Townsend 1968, Cherlin & Furstenberg 1990).

Under the impact of demographic, economic, and cultural change, the timing of the major transitions to adulthood—particularly leaving home, entry into and exit from the labor force, marriage, parenthood, the "empty nest," and widowhood—has undergone significant changes over the past century. Underlying these changes has been an increase in age uniformity in the timing of life transitions. Over the twentieth century, transitions to adulthood have become more uniform, more orderly in sequence, and more rapidly timed. This timing has become more regulated according to specific age norms, rather than in relation to the needs of the family. Individual life transitions have become less closely synchronized with collective familial ones, thus causing a further separation between the generations (Modell et al 1976).

By contrast, in the nineteenth century the transitions to adulthood were more

gradual and less rigidly timed. The time range necessary for a cohort to accomplish these transitions (leaving school, starting work, getting married and establishing a separate household) was wider, and the sequence in which transitions followed one another was not rigidly established. The nineteenth-century pattern of transitions allowed for a wider age spread within the family and for greater opportunity for interaction among parents and adult children. Later age at marriage, higher fertility, and shorter life expectancy rendered family configurations different from those in contemporary society (Uhlenberg 1978). The increasing rapidity in the timing of the transitions to adulthood, the separation of an individual's family of origin from their family of procreation, and the introduction of publicly regulated transitions such as mandatory retirement, have converged to isolate and segregate age groups and generations in the larger society (Hogan 1989, Modell et al 1976, Hogan et al 1993).

Because early and later life transitions are interrelated, these changes have affected the status of older people in the family and their sources of support, generating new kinds of stresses on familial needs and obligations. In the nineteenth century the timing of later life transitions to the empty nest, to widowhood, and out of the headship of one's own household, followed no ordered sequence and extended over a relatively longer time period. Older women did experience more marked transitions than men because losing a spouse in old age was more characteristic of the experience of women than of men; however, the continuing presence of at least one adult child in the household meant that widowhood did not necessarily represent a dramatic transition into the empty nest (Chudacoff & Hareven 1979, Smith 1979).

The most pronounced discontinuity in the adult life course during the twentieth century, especially since World War II, has been the empty nest stage. A modal pattern of the middle and later years of life, the empty nest emerged as a result of the decline in mortality, and the combination of earlier marriage and the bearing of fewer children overall, with closer spacing of children and the more uniform pattern of children leaving home earlier in their parents' lives. This meant that a couple experienced a more extended period of life without children, beginning in their middle years. A separation between the generations thus occurred when parents were still in middle age (Glick 1977).

By contrast, in the nineteenth century, the residence of children in the parental household extended over a longer time period, sometimes over the parents' entire life. Most importantly, the nest was rarely empty, because usually one adult child was expected to remain at home while the parents were aging (Smith 1981). Demographic factors account only in part for the empty nest. Children did not remain in their aging parents' household simply because they were too young to move out. Even when sons and daughters were in their late teens and early twenties, at least one child stayed in the parental home to care for aging parents if no other assistance was available (Chudacoff &

Hareven 1979, Hareven 1982). Leaving home did not so uniformly precede marriage, and the launching of children did not necessarily leave the nest empty. As mentioned above, occasionally a married child returned to the parental home, or the parents took in boarders or lodgers.

The timing of life transitions in the nineteenth century was erratic because it followed family needs and obligations rather than specific age norms. Familial obligations, dictated by economic insecurity and by cultural norms of kin assistance, took precedence over strict age norms (Modell et al 1976). Over the twentieth century, on the other hand, age norms have emerged as more important determinants of timing than familial obligations. As Modell et al (:30) concluded: " 'Timely' action to 19th century families consisted of helpful response in times of trouble; in the 20th century, timeliness connotes adherence to a socially-sanctioned schedule." As greater differentiation in stages of life began to develop following the turn of the century, and as social and economic functions became more closely related to age, a segregation between age groups emerged, and with it, an increasing separation among the generations. This separation occurred first in the middle class and was only later extended to the working class. The pattern still varies considerably among ethnic groups and among black families in contemporary society (Markides et al 1981, Markides & Krause 1985, Jackson, Jayakody & Antonucci 1994, Taylor et al 1993).

Age uniformity in the family and age segregation among generations, however, may be modified as a result of remarriage following divorce. As Furstenberg pointed out, remarriage recreates a kinship configuration that resembles those resulting through remarriage following the premature death of a partner in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. In contemporary society, remarriage following divorce may have a similar effect of incorporating new spouses and step siblings into a "blended family," who differ considerably in their ages. As age again becomes heterogeneous within the family, Furstenberg concludes, generational boundaries become less distinct in the everyday life of the family, and consequently, "the salience of generational boundaries in the larger society may decline as well" (Furstenberg 1981:136).

Since the 1980s, more erratic and flexible patterns in the timing of life course transitions have emerged again. This pattern departs from the earlier age-related rigidities in timing to reflect changes in family arrangements and new policies governing the work life. The movement of young adult children in and out of the parental home has become more erratic. Young adults stay on, or return to the parental home after having left previously (Goldscheider & DaVanzo 1985, Goldschieder & Goldscheider 1986). This contemporary pattern, however, differs from that of the past in a fundamental way: In the late nineteenth century children continued to stay in the parental home or moved back and forth in order to meet the needs of their family of orientation by

taking care of aging parents or, in some cases, of younger siblings. In contemporary society, young adult children reside with their parents in order to meet their own needs, because of their inability to develop an independent work career or to find affordable housing. Another contemporary variant of the filling of the nest is the return of divorced or unmarried daughters with their own young children to the parental household (McLanahan 1988). In this instance as well, the main purpose generally has not been for the daughter to assist her aging mother but rather to receive help in housing and child care.

In contemporary American society one is accustomed to thinking of most transitions to family roles and work careers as individual moves. This may differ among certain ethnic and cultural groups, where strong patterns of kin assistance are still extant. In the past, on the other hand, the timing of individual transitions had to be synchronized with familial ones. The family was the most critical agent in initiating and managing the timing of life transitions. Control over the timing of individual members' transitions was a crucial factor in the family's efforts to manage its resources, especially to balance different members' contributions to the family economy. The absence of a narrow, age-related timing of transitions to adult life allowed for a more intensive interaction among different age groups within family and community, thus providing a greater sense of continuity and interdependence among people and among generations at various points in the life course.

In a historical context, early life transitions were bound up with later ones in a continuum of familial needs and obligations. Hence the life transitions of the younger generation were intertwined with those of the older generation. Specifically, the timing of children's leaving home, getting married, and setting up a separate household was contingent on the timing of parents' transitions into retirement, inheritance, or widowhood (Greven 1970, Hareven 1982). This interdependence dictated parental control over the timing of adult children's life transitions. The strategies that parents and children followed in determining exchanges and supports in relation to the timing of life transitions represent, therefore, important theoretical and empirical issues that require further exploration.

INTERDEPENDENCE AMONG KIN

Contrary to prevailing myths and sociological theories, urbanization and industrialization did not break down traditional ties and reciprocal relations among kin (Anderson 1971, Hareven 1978c, Sussman 1959). Whether they resided separately or in the same household, for members of the nuclear family interdependence with extended kin was at the base of survival. Kin served as the most essential resource for economic assistance and security and shouldered the major burden of welfare functions for individual family members.

Historical scholarship has documented the survival of kinship ties and viable functions of kin following the process of industrialization in the nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century and the early part of this century, kin fulfilled a central role in facilitating migration, in locating jobs and housing, and in providing assistance during critical life situations. Kin assistance was pervasive in urban neighborhoods and extended back to the communities of origin of immigrants and migrants through various exchanges. Immigrants in the United States often sent back remittances for their aging parents and other relatives in their home communities, while relatives remaining behind took care of aging parents and family farms (Anderson 1971, Hareven 1982).

Under the historical conditions in which familial assistance was the almost exclusive source of security, the multiplicity of obligations that individuals incurred over life toward their kin was more complex than in contemporary society. In addition to the ties they retained with their family of origin, individuals carried numerous obligations toward their family of procreation and toward their spouses' family of origin. Such obligations cast men and women into various overlapping and, at times, conflicting roles over the course of their lives. The absence of institutional supports in the form of welfare agencies, unemployment compensation, and social security added to the pressures imposed on the kin group. In the regime of economic insecurity characteristic of the nineteenth century and the first part of this century, kin assistance was the only constant source of support. Family coping, by necessity, dictated that individual choices be subordinated to collective familial considerations and needs. Supports from kin were crucial during critical life situations such as unemployment, illness or death, as well as for normative life transitions (Anderson 1971, Hareven 1982).

This strong interdependence among kin meant that individual choices had to be subordinated to collective family needs. Individuals' sense of obligation to their kin was dictated by their family culture. It expressed a commitment to the survival, well-being, and self-reliance of the family, which took priority over individual needs and preferences. Autonomy of the family, essential for self-respect and good standing in the neighborhood and community, was one of the most deeply ingrained values (Hareven 1982).

Mutual assistance among kin, although involving extensive exchanges, was not strictly calculative. Rather, it expressed an overall principle of reciprocity over the life course and across generations. Individuals who subordinated their own careers and needs to those of the family as a collective unit did so out of a sense of responsibility, affection, and familial obligation, rather than with the expectation of immediate gain. Such sacrifices were not made without protest, however, and at times involved competition and conflict among siblings as to who should carry the main responsibility of support for aging parents. Close contact and mutual exchanges among parents, their adult chil-

dren and other kin persisted throughout the nineteenth century and survived into the twentieth century in various forms in the lives of working-class and ethnic families. Parents expected their grown children to support them in their old age in exchange for supports they had rendered their children earlier in life. Societal values rooted in ethnic cultures provided ideological reinforcements for these reciprocal obligations (Hareven 1982, Eggebeen & Hogan 1990).

Changes in the configurations of kin resulting from the increase in divorce rates and remarriage during the past three decades may have important implications for the available kinship pools in the later years of life, as well as for generational boundaries within a kinship group. As Furstenberg (1981) stresses, divorce has not necessarily led to the depletion of existing kinship ties. Especially where the older generation is involved with child-rearing, ties with grandparents survive divorce. When divorce is followed by remarriage, the kinship pool expands through the addition of new relatives, without relinquishing the existing ones. This "remarriage chain" as Furstenberg refers to it, links family and present conjugal partners and their relatives, primarily through the child. Since the older generation is likely to invest in child-rearing, Furstenberg concludes that children reared within these complex configurations will maintain stronger obligations toward future supports for the older generation (1981:137).

Building on Furstenberg's identification of complex kinship networks in contemporary society, Riley & Riley further expand the definition to include non-kin, who were members of the network as a result of cohabitation and other associations with members of the nuclear family: "Indeed, the emerging boundaries of the kin network may be more closely influenced by gender, or even by race and ethnicity, than by age or generation. Instead, the boundaries of the kin network have been widened to encompass many diverse relationships, including several degrees of stepkin and in-laws, single parent families, adopted and other "relatives" chosen from outside the family, and many others...." Riley & Riley characterize these complex kinship and fictitious kinship relations as "a latent web of continually shifting linkages that provide the potential for activating and intensifying close kin relationships as they are needed" (Riley & Riley 1994, p. 6).

This phenomenon is not entirely new. In the nineteenth century and in the first part of this century, various ethnic groups and working class families were enmeshed in similar networks consisting of fictitious kin as well as kin. Some of these networks stretched across wide geographic regions, linking migrants or immigrants in the communities of settlement with their kin in the communities of origin into one social system. Some of these ties were latent or activated in accordance with various needs (Hareven 1982). The significance of these new networks is that they transcend the boundaries of age and gen-

erations, which may enhance their flexibility and efficacy. When comparing the contemporary networks to the historic ones, however, one needs to assess their long-term effectiveness. The historic networks were also flexible and fluid, but the expectations for supports were clearly defined by long-standing norms of reciprocity. For the contemporary networks one would need extensive research to identify the rules and principles by which they operate and to follow them longitudinally in order to determine their durability.

GENERATIONAL SUPPORTS OVER THE LIFE COURSE

Despite the strong tradition of kin assistance, spouses and children have been the main caregivers for aging parents. Both historical and contemporary studies of supports for older people have identified adult children, most commonly daughters, as the main caregivers, where spouses were not available. Even in time periods and among ethnic groups where individuals were deeply embedded in reciprocal relations with extended kin, the main responsibility of caregiving, particularly for frail, elderly parents, was that of children. Kin provided sociability and occasional help, but the day-to-day involvement with caregiving fell upon the children. Regardless of how many children a couple had, one child usually emerged in the role of caregiver (Smith 1979, Chudacoff & Hareven 1979).

Assistance among the generations stretched across the life course and tended to be mutual, informal, and recurrent under normal circumstances, as well as during critical life situations. Adult children's involvement with the care of their aging parents was closely related to their earlier life course experiences, to their respective ethnic and cultural traditions, and to the historical context affecting their lives. Routine assistance from children to aging parents prepared the children to cope with parents' later life crises, especially widowhood and dependence in old age.

When both parents survived into old age and were able to cope on their own, the children were more likely to try to maintain them in the parental home. Children made an effort to have their parents reside nearby, preferably in the same building or the same block, but not in the same household if it could be avoided. In cases of illness or need, children visited their parents on a daily basis, arranged for medical treatment, provided bodily care, prepared meals, and ran errands. After the death of one parent, children temporarily took in the surviving parent. In some cases, several siblings contributed jointly by hiring a nurse to take daily care of a frail parent who was still living at home (Hareven & Adams 1994, published). Children, most commonly daughters, took a parent into their own household under circumstances of extreme duress, such as when parents were too frail to live alone or when they needed extensive help with their daily activities and regular care. There was no pre-

scribed rule as to which child would become a "parent keeper." If the child was not already residing with the parent, the selection of a child for that role was governed by a particular child's ability and willingness to take the parent in, by the consent or support of the parent keeper's spouse, and by the readiness of the parent to accept the plan (Hareven & Adams 1994).

Life course antecedents were crucial determinants of whether an individual was cast in the role of "parent keeper." Some children took on this responsibility because of a sudden family crisis, but most evolved into this role over their life course. Most commonly, the parent keeper was the child who continued to reside with a parent after the other siblings had left home. Even when both parents were alive, as noted above, the youngest daughter was expected to remain at home and postpone or give up marriage in order to ensure support for the parents in their old age. This pattern was pervasive among various ethnic groups until World War II (Hareven 1982). Caretaking daughters gave up marriage altogether or sometimes waited for decades until their parents died before they could marry. They fulfilled their role at a high price to themselves and to their spouses and other family members. As various gerontological studies have emphasized, caregiving disrupted a daughter's work career, led to crowding in her household, caused tension and strain in her marriage, and made her vulnerable in preparing for her own and her spouse's retirement and old age (Hareven & Adams 1994, Brody 1990, Cantor 1983).

More recent studies have questioned what may be an excessive emphasis on "women in the middle" as the main caregivers for aging parents. Several of these studies have explored the respective roles of females and males as caregivers and have concluded that while men performed managerial and maintenance tasks, as well as providing financial and social supports, the women predominantly performed the daily hands-on caregiving (Dwyer & Coward 1991, Kaye & Applegate 1990, Dwyer & Seccombe 1991, Hareven 1993). Historically, it was the women who maintained the life-long role of "kin keepers." Although needs and responsibilities changed, the kin keepers' centrality to the kin networks as helpers, arbiters and pacifiers continued and became even more pivotal with age. It was the kin keeper who became the primary caregiver and who marshalled other relatives and negotiated their subsidiary roles in the effort to provide care for frail elderly parents (Hareven 1982).

COHORT LOCATION IN HISTORICAL TIME

Historical changes in generational supports and in attitudes toward receiving and providing such supports are best reconstructed through a comparison of cohorts who encountered different historical circumstances. In their study of two cohorts of the adult children of immigrants to the industrial community

of Manchester, New Hampshire, Hareven & Adams found significant differences in the attitudes and practices of the two cohorts in relation to their earlier historical experiences. An earlier cohort (born 1910–1919), who came of age during the Great Depression, and a more recent cohort (born 1920–1929), who came of age during World War II, were both the children of a historic cohort who had migrated to Manchester to work in the textile industry. Members of the earlier cohort, toughened by the Depression, were primarily concerned with keeping the entire family afloat economically: They pooled resources, doubled up on housing, and supported their aging parents and other needy relatives. They held to the traditional ideologies of relying on kin rather than on public agencies (Hareven 1982).

By contrast, members of the more recent cohorts took advantage of the economic recovery brought about by World War II and were eager to develop middle class life styles. They devoted themselves to improving their own lives and their children's future, and they were more prepared to accept government help or nursing homes for their parents. They were more likely to live separately and thus drew firmer boundaries between younger and older generations. Neither the earlier nor the later children's cohort, however, was free of the complexities involved in handling the problems of generational assistance.

While the earlier children's cohort had a more clearly defined commitment to collective family values and kin assistance, its members, who had actually gone through the experience of caring for elderly parents in their own home or had sacrificed their own marriage for parental care, did not do so without ambivalence, doubt, bitterness, or the threat of a lonely old age for themselves. Their posture had often been one of resignation to familial norms and acceptance of "fate" rather than free choice. Members of the later cohort, on the other hand, who followed a more individualistic course, were not free of guilt over the way in which the support of their aging parents had been worked out.

Both cohorts were, to some degree, transitional between a milieu of deep involvement in generational assistance, reinforced by strong familial and ethnic values, and the individualistic values and lifestyles that emerged in the post–World War II period. In this historical process, the earlier cohort's lives conformed more closely to the script of their traditional familial and ethnic cultures, while the later cohort, as it Americanized, was being pulled in the direction of individualistic middle-class values. The transition was by no means completed. Members of the later cohort had not entirely freed themselves of their traditional upbringing. Both cohorts still expressed their parents' values, but the later cohort felt less able or inclined to implement them (Hareven & Adams 1994).

This comparison of the cohorts reveals differences in the practice of caretaking and in the attitudes toward the responsibilities of caring for aging parents. Both cohorts were transitional in the sense that they were still strongly

bound by their parents' values and expectations that children should serve as the major caretakers. Both cohorts attempted to fulfill this script at a high price to their own relationship to their spouses, to their ability to help their grown children, and to their preparation for their own "old age." The earlier of the two children's cohorts was more inclined to live by their parents' cultural script, despite the fact that its members were more vulnerable as their own "old age" approached. The later of the children's cohorts was more ambivalent and more conflicted about a commitment to care for a frail or chronically ill parent. They were especially hesitant about taking such a parent into their own home.

The parent cohort had been the major supporters of their aging parents. They viewed kin as their exclusive source of assistance over the life course. For that very reason, they also expected their main support in old age to come from their children. They tried to remain self-sufficient as long as possible, however. Paradoxically, they viewed all supports from their children as part of the family's self-reliance and ranked assistance from their adult children as their highest priority, followed by assistance from extended and more distant kin. Given their commitment to self-reliance within the family, they viewed public welfare as a last resort.

While the parents expected their children to assist them in old age, the children did not expect (want) to have to rely on their own children for economic support. They prepared for their later years through pension plans, savings and home ownership, and expected to rely on social security, and, if needed, on assistance from the welfare state. In cases of illness or disability, they hoped to be in a nursing home. The most they expected from their children was emotional support and sociability. This attitude was also a result of these cohorts' becoming accustomed to assistance from public agencies and to interacting with bureaucratic institutions over the life course (Hareven & Adams 1994).

The difference between the two children's cohorts and the parents thus reflects the historical process of an increasing individualization in family relationships, and a reliance on public agencies and bureaucratic institutions to shoulder the responsibilities for the care of dependent elderly. The historical process is well known, but the detailed analysis of the interviews of the cohorts' members provides first-hand testimony about how this change was perceived and experienced by the women and men who were caught up in it. The process is one of increasing separation between the family of origin and the family of procreation over the past century, combined with a privatization of family life and the erosion of mutual assistance among kin.

These historical changes have tended to escalate insecurity and isolation as people age, most markedly in areas of need that are not met by public welfare programs. Although some of the intensive historical patterns of kin interaction

have survived among first-generation immigrant, black, and working-class families, a gradual weakening of mutual assistance among kin over time has occurred (Jackson et al 1988). Sokolovsky and others have warned against a romanticization of generational interdependence among more recent immigrant groups, such as hispanics or Koreans and among blacks (Sokolovsky 1990, Mutran 1986, Burton & deVries 1992, Taylor & Chatters 1991, Dowd & Bengtson 1978, Burton & Dilworth-Anderson 1991).

How consistent and continuous the support from nonresident children or other kin to aging relatives has been in the United States is still widely open to future research. The studies in gerontology or sociology insisting on the persistence of kin supports for older people in contemporary society have not documented the intensity, quality, and consistency of these supports in meeting the needs of older people, especially of the frail and chronically ill elderly. Most of these studies have used visiting patterns and telephone communication as evidence, rather than regular caregiving and coresidence (Litwak 1965, Shanas 1979).

Recent studies have provided more systematic evidence of various supports from adult children to aging parents, especially for the "old, old" in contemporary society. Some of these supports involve coresidence; in other cases, the caretaking child provides assistance in the parent's household (Brody et al 1983, Brody 1990, Dwyer & Coward 1991). The contact that older people have with kin, as Shanas (1979) and others have found, might represent a form of behavior characteristic of specific cohorts rather than a persistent pattern. The cohorts who are currently aged, especially the "old, old," have carried over their historical attitudes and traditions advocating an almost exclusive reliance on kin. Historical precedents also reveal the high price that kin had to pay in order to assist each other without the appropriate public supports (Hareven 1978b, 1982).

Except for members of certain ethnic groups, future cohorts, as they reach old age, might not have the same strong sense of familial interdependence characteristic of earlier cohorts, nor might they have sufficiently large pools of kin on whom to rely. Rossi & Rossi (1990) have discovered that in the population sample they studied in Boston, the younger respondents expressed a stronger sense of normative obligations to kin than did the older ones. On this basis the authors concluded that obligations to kin have not been declining over historical time. This assertion would need to be tested, however, by comparing the attitudes of the group studied in Boston with their age counterparts in the late nineteenth century.

The major changes that have confounded the problems of older people in contemporary society were rooted not so much in changes in family structure or residential arrangements of the generations, as has generally been argued, but rather in the transformation and redefinition of family functions and of

values governing family relations and generational assistance. Over the nineteenth century, the family surrendered many of the functions previously concentrated within it to other social institutions. A retreat from public life and a growing commitment to the privacy of the family in the middle-class have led to the drawing of sharper boundaries between family and community and have intensified the segregation of age groups within and outside the family (Demos 1970, Rothman 1971).

The transfer of social-welfare functions from the family to public institutions over the past century and a half has not been fully consummated, however. The family has ceased to be the only available source of support for its dependent members, and the community has ceased to rely on the family as the major agency of welfare and social control. Who actually provides supports for the elderly and what form those supports take have been subject to ambiguities. On the one hand, family members assume that the public sector carries the major responsibilities of care for the aged; on the other hand, the public sector assumes that the family is responsible for the major supports. This confusion in the assignment of responsibilities often means that old people are caught between the family and the public sector without receiving proper supports from either.

The expectation that family and kin carry the major responsibilities for the care of aged relatives still prevails, without the provision of the necessary supports that would enable kin to discharge such responsibilities (Litwak 1985). The decline in instrumental relations among kin and their replacement by an individualistic orientation toward family relations, with sentimentality and intimacy as the major cohesive forces, has led to the weakening of the role of kin assistance in middle-class families in particular, and to an increasing isolation of the elderly in American society (Hareven 1977b).

CONCLUSION

In addition to its obvious role of providing an understanding of change over time, a historical perspective serves two additional functions: It enables us to compare contemporary phenomena with similar ones in the past, in order to assess how new or different from their predecessors they really are; and, secondly, it offers models of coping from the past that may be modified and utilized in the present.

In this article, a historical and life course perspective has helped identify the complexity of social change itself. Even though it is possible to trace some general trends—such as the emergence of age segregation, separation among the generations and individualization—a warning against following a linear path of change is in order. Rather than being linear, the process of social change

has been uneven and multilayered. Historic forms of household extension and coresidence with relatives, which have disappeared over the twentieth century, have reappeared in different configurations. Complex kinship networks characteristic of earlier centuries, which resulted from remarriage following the death of a spouse, have reappeared in different forms in "blended families" following divorce. Recently the trend toward age uniformity and streamlined timing of life transitions has been modified or reversed by the return of an "erratic life course," which is similar to the nineteenth century one, but driven by different social forces.

When examining changes over time in the family, the life course, and generational relations in American society, one needs to pay attention to differences in class and ethnicity. The most important dimension still absent from studies of long-term changes in the family and generational relations involves systematic differences among social classes and ethnic groups. We need a more detailed understanding of the historical process by which patterns of family behavior that first emerged in the middle class were transferred to other classes, and by what process. When generalizing on long-term changes by comparing contemporary patterns to past ones, it is essential to specify what ethnic groups or social classes are being compared.

Any examination of changes in generational relations and in the family over time needs to take into consideration the diverse nature of "the family" itself, rendered fluid by shifts in internal age and gender configurations across regions and over time. Since the family is the arena in which generational relations are acted out, one needs to achieve a clearer definition of "family" and "kinship." It is important to understand the boundaries and the overlap between the two, especially as one examines the newer, complex kinship configurations that have emerged in contemporary society.

As mentioned above, the historical experience can provide important models for coping in the present. Even though longevity and its inherent social problems is a unique phenomenon of our times, the more general aspects of providing generational assistance and supports, and coping with dependence in old age, can be enhanced by drawing on models of familial adaptation in the past. In doing so, one must not lose sight of the dramatic social, economic, and institutional differences in the contemporary context. For example, it would be beneficial to adapt past models of generational and kin assistance and surrogate familial arrangements for the support of older people. When doing so, it would be counterproductive, however, to idealize these patterns from the past and to expect kin to "take care of their own."

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