CHAPTER 1

Older Persons in a Family Context

My family has always been an essential part of my life, but the older you get, the more you feel . . . how much you need each other. As long as you are together, it is like a tree growing. . . . The longer the tree is there, the stronger the branches become and the more you are knit into one. So, the more you are together, the more you realize how important it is to be together and stay together.

—66-year-old married father of two

All of us share the experience of being family members and, whatever the nature of that experience, it is likely to be profound. For some, family life may be the idyllic safe haven from a heartless world; for others, early family traumas may set the stage for a lifetime of surviving harsh circumstances at the hands of loved ones. For most of us, family life falls somewhere between these two extremes. Although our focus in this book is the family lives of older persons, we must bear in mind that they have a history that goes back to childhood. Family ties in old age are the culmination of a lifetime of decisions made, roads taken and not taken, and changing times and social worlds.

Because older persons' family ties involve individuals from several generations, we look beyond the particular experiences and situations of older persons, to consider also how the lives of younger persons affect family relationships in older age. As a convention, older persons are considered to be aged 60 to 65 years or older, reflecting common practices of entitlement, such as pension and security benefits. We need not be quite that precise here, recognizing that family relationships may follow different trajectories depending on such facts as age at first marriage or birth of first child and upon variable social circumstances. For convenience, we shall assume that we are generally speaking of people aged 60 or more when we talk about older persons, realizing that there are substantial variations within this age group.

Families and Family Ties

Who do you think of as your family? Who considers you part of their family? Are there any older persons in your family? If so, who is in their family? When we think of families, we tend to concentrate on the nuclear family, that is, parents and their children living together in one home. Depending on our stage of life, this may refer to the family of orientation, comprising parents and siblings, or the family of procreation, consisting of spouse and children. Over time, the nuclear family model has become less applicable as more families break the traditional pattern through cohabitation, divorce, single parenthood, opting not to have children, and remarriage, for example. This model also downplays the significance of the single (never married) and the childless in family networks and minimizes the family relationships of those past the child-rearing stage—the middle-aged and elderly. As well, emphasis on the nuclear unit implicitly treats other arrangements as problematic or undesirable. Yet diverse familial arrangements reflect fundamental forms of diversity in society. Moreover, the non-nuclear family households that are common in later life are usually the outcome of expected life course transitions by family members, such as young adult children leaving home.

Because the life experiences of any age group are so closely tied to family life, examining the family ties of older individuals can improve our general understanding of later life. In this book, the focus is on familial relationships in older age rather than later-life families. This emphasis avoids some of the pitfalls of attempts to define a later-life family. For example, childless couples are often excluded from definitions that focus on the age and stage of children to define the family of later life. Trying to alleviate this problem by selecting a chronological age as the time when such couples become later-life families still excludes the never married. Yet both those who are childless and those who are single are active participants in family life as children, nieces, nephews, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins. Our focus on family ties and aging emphasizes the fact that nearly all older persons remain family members and that the process of aging is associated with transitions in family relationships.

Definitions of family have both substantive and practical implications. At the substantive level is the need to recognize diversity by going beyond the nuclear family and beyond the household to include nonresident kin and those who are considered family by virtue of assumed obligations and the support that is extended and received (Scanzoni & Marsiglio, 1993). Practical implications may be most acutely felt when the state adopts definitions of family that either include or exclude particular individuals as family. Such applications can result in forcing someone to rely on an unreliable family member because he or she qualifies as the "closest" tie (legally or biologically) or having someone miss the opportunity for support from someone who acts as family but is not defined officially as family (e.g., a gay partner; Bould, 1993). Those with few "real" family members often consider their closest friends as family, a tie termed *fictive kin* by some (MacRae, 1992).

An essential fact about the family is that it does not take one fixed form (Cheal, 1993). Continuity is a central element of relationships in later life. Most relationships in older age are continuations of those begun earlier in life, and their nature is shaped by past patterns. Poor relationships will probably not become good ones simply because one reaches old age, and good ones are likely to remain that way. However, change also occurs. Some long-term relationships are lost, primarily through death, whereas others are gained, most notably through birth (grandchildren, great-grandchildren) and remarriage. Change in the nature of past relationships may also occur in response to other changes associated with aging. Widowhood may lead to a reorganization of family ties and more time spent with other family members. Retirement may alter the marital relationship, and health declines may lead to shifts in helping patterns and dependency. Change in the lives of other family members may also have profound effects. A child's divorce, for example, may alter dramatically the relationship between a grandmother and her grandchildren. Thus family life in older age is dynamic and involves both continuity and change.

The Place of Older People in Families of the Past and Present

Myths About the Past

Several myths about family life persist despite numerous studies over the years that do not support them (Haber, 2006; Hareven, 1991, 1996; Nett, 1993; Shanas, 1979). One predominant myth is that today's elderly are neglected or abandoned by their families, especially their children. The Golden Age myth assumes a better past for older people, based on assuming that three-generation households were typical in times gone by, that they signify better family relationships, and that the respect accorded older persons in the past can be equated with affection (Nydegger, 1983). What does historical research find? Earlier historical work showed that, contrary to popular belief, the typical 19th-century family household throughout the Western world, including the United States, Canada and Europe, was nuclear, with one generation of parents and their children (Darroch & Ornstein, 1984; Hareven, 1996; Nett, 1993). Much higher mortality rates and lower life expectancy across the life course made multiple generations living together a rarity. As young countries founded in their current form by immigrants, both the United States and Canada were even less likely to have multiple generations nearby. Thus only recently have multigenerational households in large numbers become a possibility.

More recent historical analysis shows the risk of over generalizing about the past as well as the present, a common outcome when the male middle-class experience is taken to represent all old people (Haber, 2006). Gender, class and fluctuating economic conditions are all tied to variations in living arrangements over time, including the prospect of co-residence. In days past, old men could remain head of the household until they died; old women often could not (Haber, 2006). Old women had a harder time than old men in maintaining their property and independent living if their spouses died. Thus the pattern of nuclear households was more common among old men than old women, as many old women had to find creative alternatives following the death of their husbands, including living with adult kin or moving into the city where they could run boarding homes.

Many have argued that a major reason for the shift toward living alone in old age has been the improved financial situation of older persons. However, research using U.S. census data indicates that, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, co-residence was more likely among those with higher incomes, leading to the conclusion that "rising incomes cannot explain the decline of co-residence" (Ruggles, 1996:255). This association is consistent with two patterns of earlier times: older parents' power through land and property ownership and the common placement of impoverished older persons into poor houses, the only institutional alternative available to those families who could not afford to support an older parent. Again, further historical work shows varied experiences among old people in response to improved economic conditions. As income rose in the early 1900s, the middle-class pattern of having old family members live with their adult children shifted to independent living but only among those whose new wealth moved them out of the middle class (Haber, 2006). For those who moved from the working to middle class, a shift to co-residence with older family members was a marker of improved socioeconomic status. Thus improved economic conditions interacted with both class and gender to create different outcomes among old family members.

As well, then as now, co-residence of older parents and their children typically followed a lengthy period of independent living in nuclear households by both generations, rather than the continuation of three-generation households as a dominant family form (Hareven, 1996). When they did occur, three-generation households were a function either of inheritance laws and older parents' power through control over land or parents' dependence on their children after loss of a spouse. For example, in 1871, three-generation Canadian households were usually formed by a widowed parent moving in with a child and his or her family. When a child lived with older parents, it was more often sons than daughters who did so, "as one would expect in a society where control of property was largely vested in the male line" (Darroch & Ornstein, 1984:164). In New England, among parents whose children were born from 1920 to 1929, the typical pattern was close proximity to at least one child, with co-residence an outcome of a parent's widowhood and only after repeated attempts to assist the widowed parent's independent living (Hareven & Adams, 1996). The youngest daughter was most likely to care for an older parent.

Did taking an older parent into the home signal closer ties between an older parent and his or her (but usually her) children? No. At the turn of the century, publicly funded assistance for older people was either nonexistent or extremely limited, making three-generation households in many ways a forced choice for those elderly who could no longer function alone. Although living with children in old age might have been more probable, it did not necessarily reflect a happier or more desirable situation. Indeed, "All the children . . . who had taken care of aging parents in their own homes expressed a strong desire never to have to depend on their own children in their own old age. They considered living with their children the greatest obstacle to maintaining their independence" (Hareven & Adams, 1996:283). Current co-residence of parents and their adult children is discussed in Chapter 8.

Rising incomes over time have had the greatest impact on the poor elderly who now qualify for state-funded pensions and support. In both Norway and Sweden, as examples, declines in informal care and increases in formal support are due largely to the availability of state-supported alternatives, not the demise of the family (Daatland, 1990; Tedebrand, 1996). Similarly, solitary living among older persons is related to income; higher incomes among today's older persons account for more of them living alone, and among older persons, greater income increases the chances of solitary living (Kinsella, 1995; Wolf, 1990). Even widowed homemakers enjoy greater financial security than past generations, largely due to receiving publicly funded support (Gratton & Haber, 1993; Kinsella, 1995).

Although the elderly in times gone by appear to have received greater respect from younger family members and the community at large, such respect was based on economic power rather than either age itself or being more loved than the elderly of today (Nydegger, 1983). Indeed, when accumulated power among the elderly does occur, the result is typically intergenerational conflict and competition, not improved familial relations. The debate over intergenerational equity (see Chapter 14) in which the old are portrayed as getting too much from the government at the expense of the young is a current example of the price the old pay when they improve their economic situation. Attempts to find evidence of a "Golden Isle," a place in the world where the old are revered, also lead to the general conclusion that age alone is rarely a basis for preferred status in any culture (Nydegger, 1983).

Realities of the Present

Of course, discounting the assumptions that comprise the myth of a Golden Age does not establish that families of today provide better relationships or support for older adults. Nonetheless, the family has clearly not deserted its older members and continues to provide extensive support (Brubaker, 1990; Finch & Mason, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Wellman, 1990, 1992). The network of contact and exchange among nuclear households has resulted in the characterization of today's family as *modified extended* (Shanas, 1979). Family ties beyond the nuclear family household operate on a principle of revocable detachment wherein "dormant emotional ties can be mobilized when they are needed or desired" (George, 1980:79). Thus although the extended family does not typically live together, multiple generations are available to one another when needed, as Photo 1.1 reflects. The history of immigration and greater life expectancy means that there are now more families than ever with multiple generations in the United States and Canada.

Photo 1.1 Increased longevity means that more of today's older people are living to see their great-grandchildren.

Living longer also means lengthening the amount of time spent in particular familial relationships for today's old. Marriage and other intimate ties, relationships between parents and their children, between grandparents and grandchildren, and between siblings may all last longer. Parents can expect to know their children into their middle age, and increasing numbers of grandparents are living to see their grandchildren reach adulthood and become parents. When combined with less restrictive definitions of what constitutes family membership, living longer makes family relations more complex and could actually widen the net of family carers, despite times of lower fertility. These trends can only continue, however, if similar timing of key life transitions, such as age at marriage or birth of first child, continues over time. Last, speedier methods of communication (telephone, e-mail, instant messaging) and travel (car, air) enhance the opportunity for contact among family members. Overall, the near-universal provision of family care and support for older members in different cultures and historical periods indicates greater continuity than change in the responsibility family members assume for their elders.

The potential for conflict in families may be greater today, not because there is less love shared or because older family members are neglected, but rather because the demands and expectations on families "as a source of personal identity and satisfaction in life" (Laslett, 1978:478) are greater. These demands on family life often exceed the family's ability to meet them, creating a potential source of guilt and conflict. Contrary to popular belief, then, the importance of family has in some ways heightened, not diminished, but this creates additional strains within families. Regarding marriage, for example, Gillis (1996:151) argues that the increased expectations of marriage in which "the perfect couple now must be everything to one another—good providers, super sexual partners, best friends, stimulating companions" combine with longer life expectancies to make sustaining romance over the course of a marriage very difficult.

Conflict can be expected in other family ties, too. For example, the fact that parents and children share adulthood may increase the likelihood of counter opinions as older children behave more like peers than like children. At the same time, the greater likelihood of sharing more of life's transitions may enhance empathy between the generations. These possibilities underline the importance of exploring the *qualitative* aspects of older people's familial relationships and the need to consider the negative aspects of family life that may occur because of structural strains in the kinship system and in society. The coexistence of both positive and negative sentiments and the competing demands of familial relationships may be the basis for ambivalent inter- and intra-generational ties (Connidis & McMullin, 2002b; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; see Chapter 7).

Assessing Family Ties

Despite the fairly long-standing rejection of a Golden Age for families, the current hold of the family values debate illustrates just how attractive a myth this is. One can only speak meaningfully of the family's decline by assuming that there were better times. There is no question that both the ideals of family life and family life itself have *changed* over time (Gillis, 1996; Snell, 1996), but the monolithic treatment of "the family" as an institution in decline makes several questionable assumptions. First is the assumption that change signals decline. After dispelling the myth of idyllic family relations in the past, Snell (1996:4) concludes that "for both women and men in the past, old age was often a difficult time" but, he emphasizes, "this is not to argue that the nature of aging and of being old has not changed." Change is often discomfiting, leading us to favor old ways of doing things. This tendency raises the challenge to first identify the real ways in which family life has changed and then examine the consequences of any observed changes for *various family members.* As Atchley and Lawton (1997:187) observe about age-related deficits, "negative changes do not necessarily have negative consequences." More generally, changes in family life may reflect the resilience of this social institution rather than its decline (Amato, 2005).

The tendency to focus on the negative consequences of change is part of a larger phenomenon of looking at family life in relative terms. For example, when proposing that individuals should be considered active agents in their own destiny, Scanzoni and Marsiglio (1993:109) promote the view of family members as "persons struggling to create *better* lives for themselves and their families (italics added)." Although the general argument is sound, why better lives? Better than what? This orientation fits a dominant economic view of progress that rests on ongoing economic growth, but in terms of intergenerational comparisons, one should consider variations in the relative starting point of a previous generation's experience. One can understand the hope of parents during the Depression that their children's future would be brighter. But what of the generation that followed the post-World-War II economic boom of the 1950s? Is outstripping the prosperity of that generation necessary to establish that the subsequent generation has also had a good life? Most of us are not necessarily striving to shape our lives, including our ties with family members, in such relative terms. Instead, we might more accurately be said to be striving to create lives that we consider desirable, acceptable, satisfactory, good or fulfilling. Moving away from implicit relative treatments of family life can help us avoid some of the ideological pitfalls of many writings on family ties, including those on older persons.

A second problematic assumption embedded in much research on the family is that all members of a family share uniform experiences of family membership. Thus the impact of change is assessed in relation to "the family" rather than from the point of view of different family members. For example, rising divorce rates are often equated with familial decline. But does divorce have the same impact on all family members (husbands, wives, children, parents, grandparents, grandchildren)? The apparent success of marriage in earlier days, measured in terms of duration, often came at the expense of both the happiness and welfare of particular family members. Women were often financially dependent on their spouses and could not leave their marriages, either legally or practically, even in the face of harsh circumstances, such as being the victims of abusive partners. Did children in such marriages necessarily benefit from the lasting union of their parents? Another example is the questionable assumption that family members of a given generation have uniform experiences of social mobility. There may be considerable variation within a family regarding their socioeconomic circumstances relative to other members of the same generation and to the previous generation (see Chapter 12). Once again, comparisons across time require us to consider the impact of both continuity and change from the vantage point of different family members.

Views of the place of older persons in families have followed ironic twists and turns that correspond to general concerns regarding family life in North America. During the 1970s and early 1980s, serious attention was paid to the predominantly negative view of old age, including the portrayal of older family members as drains on family resources. Embedded in this concern was an empathetic stance toward meeting the needs of older persons, both within families and through social policy. This negative stereotype gave way to an equally inaccurate positive stereotype that focused on the virtues of old age, placing heavy emphasis on independence and the possibility of remaining youthful. Despite the good intentions of assuming that a more positive view would be the basis for greater inclusion of the older population, we find ourselves in a new century dealing with debates on intergenerational equity. In these debates, we see a return to a negative view of older persons as a serious drain on resources (see e.g., Guillemette, 2003; Jackson & Howe, 2003), "greedy geezers" who take far more than their share of the public purse at the expense of younger generations, particularly children (see Chapter 14). But this view can only be sustained by ignoring family dynamics and the significant contributions made by older persons to the younger generations of their families over a lifetime (Estes et al., 2003; Gee, 2000; Stone, 1998). At the same time, postmodern views of old age as a time of endless possibilities (Estes et al., 2003; Katz, 2005) reignite the positive stereotype of old age and minimize the inequality that results from current social arrangements. We have in a sense come full circle, with a competing focus on the positive and negative views of old age. Looking at aging in the context of family ties helps redress major inaccuracies in the broader public debate concerning an aging population, the place of older persons in social life, and related social policy.

Underlying Assumptions

This book does not aim to provide exhaustive coverage of theoretical developments about the family or about aging. I do make several underlying assumptions, however, and I favor some theoretical concepts and perspectives that frame my approach to family ties in later life. In this section, I will specify some starting assumptions, and then discuss my preferred theoretical approach. Concepts and theoretical frameworks that focus on specific elements of family life (e.g., caregiving) are addressed in the relevant subsequent chapters.

First, understanding the family ties of older persons requires examining relationships as entities in their own right. Family ties are not captured fully in an institutional arrangement referred to as *the family* or in statistical entities referred to as *households.* Most older persons do not live with most of their family members. The relationships that constitute family life have at least two points of view that may not be in complete accord. Thus one must strive for balance in understanding relationships between an older person and other family members by considering multiple vantage points. No party in a relationship only gives or only receives, although the contributions of the two at a given point in time may be imbalanced. Thus the issue of support is considered from the perspective of the givers and of the receivers, emphasizing the fact that older persons serve as both, operating within a system of family relationships (see Chapter 8). The broader context of a family network or system in which relationships are embedded is influenced in turn by a society's structural arrangements. Our society's tendency to organize family life on the basis of gender, for example, provides a fundamental parameter for family ties. Such parameters can be one basis for conflicting interests among family members and must be negotiated by the players involved.

Second, family membership should be defined broadly and not restricted to a traditional notion of what constitutes family. Although writing about a broad range of relationships is often made difficult by limited information on particular familial arrangements, it must nevertheless remain the goal. One can distinguish between formal and social families (Scanzoni & Marsiglio, 1993) to capture the difference between a narrow and broad view of family membership. Formal families are defined by such criteria as having a blood (biological parents and children) or legal (marriage, adoption) tie. This excludes many who develop social families that either cannot be formalized (e.g., marital unions between same-sex partners in most of the U.S.) or are not considered "real" family (e.g., friends who act as family in the eyes of the involved parties).

Defining families broadly also means a more inclusive treatment of family membership. In a typical family textbook, family life follows a trajectory starting with childhood, moving into early and middle adulthood, and, in some books, ending with old age. Along the way, certain groups tend to be dropped from the discussion. For instance, once the topic of marriage comes up, those who never marry tend to disappear, and once the subject of family formation arises, the childless are no longer part of the discussion. Yet those who remain single or do not have children, by choice or circumstance, remain family members. They may have active ties with parents, siblings, aunts or uncles, nieces or nephews, grandparents and so on. Looking at families broadly and in terms of relationships rather than as fixed groups enhances the likelihood of inclusiveness in the examination of family life. How we define families is critical to developing good theories about family relationships and their connection to social processes (Cheal, 2005).

Third, the patterns and arrangements of social life, what is commonly termed *social structure,* both encourage and constrain individual action, but they do not completely determine what individuals do. The fact that individuals in very similar circumstances can and do act in very different ways attests to the importance of individual agency, the ability to act on one's own behalf. At the same time, our position within the social structure will influence how much this is possible. A key challenge to appreciating how family relationships actually work is to understand their connection to the bigger social picture. Although none of us mindlessly follows a prescribed set of norms, none of us completely creates family life just as we would choose to have it. Instead, we work within the pressures exerted by social structure to negotiate as best we can what we consider to be a desirable family life. Key bases of social organization include gender, class, race and ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation (Arber et al., 2003; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Ginn & Arber, 1995; McMullin, 2004). Our negotiations of family life are influenced by our place in current structural arrangements, and the families of which we are a part will reflect the diversity that these structural arrangements create (Calasanti, 1996; Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993). To the extent that these change, we can expect that the nature of negotiating family ties will also change.

Fourth, the negotiation of family relationships takes place in the context of social structural arrangements that are imbued with cultural views of an ideal family and an ideal old age. Thus the meanings of family and of old age at both the cultural and individual levels are important facets of understanding how ties are both negotiated and evaluated by family members and by others of various ages (see Marshall et al., 1993). The ideals of family life (Gillis, 1996) and of a successful old age (Katz, 2005) may not be realized in practice, but they are typically the benchmark by which family life and aging are judged. Cultural ideals about family life and about aging change with time and intersect with each other. Shifts in the social desirability of old age as a time of relative dependency and disengagement or as a time of efforts to stay active and productive coincide with changing views about the place of older persons in families and of responsibilities toward older persons by younger family members and by society.

With these as my starting assumptions, there are a number of theoretical concepts and perspectives that are especially well suited to studying family ties and aging.

Theoretical Orientation

One of my favorite definitions of theoretical frameworks describes them as "ways of naming, ways of conceptually ordering our senses of the world. They are tools with which we decide what it is that we experience, why something is the way it is, and how it is that we might act or react to it" (Pfohl, 1985:9). In very few words, theory is aligned with the what, why, and how of social life and with ways of understanding and of acting on that understanding. Theory and practice are brought together rather than isolated as separate enterprises. In this section I outline my general theoretical orientation to family ties and aging. Other concepts and theoretical approaches that deal with specific aspects of aging and of family life can be incorporated within this perspective but reviewing all of them here is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Family life and aging enjoy long-standing public and policy interest. Although this has aided research in these areas, it has perhaps hindered theoretical development, as funding agencies have sought information (data) to meet immediate needs for building knowledge and developing policy. Discussions of theory suggest that the area of family has enjoyed more theoretical development than the area of aging (Cohler & Altergott, 1995). Nonetheless, researchers in both areas lament the data-rich and theory-poor character of their respective bodies of work (Bengtson et al., 2005; Estes et al., 2003; George, 1995; Katz, 2005), although such critiques may have a longer history in family studies (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 2005). Some claim convincingly that this critique no longer applies to theoretical development in aging (Bass, 2007), but a challenge to link theoretical thinking to research remains.

An interest in older persons and their family relationships brings into question traditional approaches to family life. Aging research has generated data that fill important gaps in the family literature, particularly concerning family ties that fall outside the nuclear household (Cohler & Altergott, 1995). In turn, family research that includes older persons works against the marginalization that occurs when the old are isolated for separate study. As well, researchers in the aging field can bring fresh insight to theoretical thinking about the family and vice versa. Thus there are benefits to bringing the two areas together and building on their respective strengths.

Being an outsider to a field frees the observer from the weight of history within a particular specialty; in a sense, one can think theoretically, unfettered by disciplinary or established approaches to the subject (Katz, 2005; Mann et al., 1997). In a more extreme version of this argument, Betty Friedan (2000 quoted in Ray, 2006:32), an influential feminist from the early 1960s, claimed that activists and serious journalists "have made as much or more of a contribution to social theory in America as formal academic social scientists. They aren't hampered by the old assumptions built into the jargon. They can cut to the cutting edge." Whoever the theorist—academic, activist, or journalist—research that is conducted on issues specific to either families, aging or their juxtaposition can inform broader theories of social life by addressing family and aging *processes* that can be applied to other social contexts (Turner, 2005).

There is some debate about whether theoretical approaches in family sociology have become more diverse and critical (Cheal, 1991) or whether they continue to be grounded in the functionalist perspective and its focus on stability and the maintenance of the status quo (Mann et al., 1997). Reflecting the influence of functionalist thought in North American sociology, approaches to both family and aging have their equivalents, and in both fields, functionalist approaches have been criticized severely. Of key concern is bias in favor of middle-class life, the importance of maintaining the status quo while ignoring the conflicting interests of different groups within society, the view of the individual as someone who follows norms rather than being an active agent in setting his or her course, and the failure to link societal or macro-level phenomena and individual or micro-level experience. Researchers of aging and of family have moved toward a more critical and interpretive approach to studying how social life works. This trend mitigates specifying or assuming a monolithic ideal family and encourages observing the lived reality of family life. Combining the two areas of family and aging by examining the family ties of older persons also moves us in this direction. But even though particular theories may have lost favor, their ideas often live on in social practice and policy. Thus we must be critical observers of the ideas that are embedded not only in theories but also in social institutional arrangements.

Much of the work in aging and in family research occurs outside the boundaries of particular disciplines—for example, in multidisciplinary units that focus on family studies, aging studies, gerontology and human development. There is some debate about whether this has helped or hurt theoretical development. Absence of a disciplinary home has often meant some lag time between the arrival of new discipline-based theories or perspectives and their application to either aging or family studies. At the same time, freedom from the constraints of discipline-based orthodoxies allows those working in aging, family and their intersection to selectively scavenge useful ideas from a variety of disciplines, regardless of whether they are currently in vogue within those disciplines (Katz, 2005). As well, researchers in aging and in family typically share a desire to consider how their findings and theories apply to policy concerns. Both theory and policy are interpretive enterprises (Estes et al., 2003) that require addressing the why and how of the findings generated by research (Bengtson et al., 2005). Specifying a theoretical perspective provides a crucial context for interpreting the observations that writers make about their fields, including mine about family ties and aging.

Theoretical development is an ongoing quest (Allen, 2005b), particularly in social scientific approaches to family and aging where we are attempting to observe and understand an evolving world of which we are a part. Our places in the structured social relations of age, gender, class, race and ethnicity create unique perspectives on social life and relationships and limit our ability to be value free in our research and in the theories that we create. If we begin with this awareness, we are more likely to be critical about who is and is not included in our theoretical thinking. As Pfohl (1994) argues,

> By directing attention to some things but not others, all theories politically empower (if only temporarily) certain viewpoints over others. . . . [W]e must be vigilant about the ways in which our own social positions both shape and are shaped by what we study. This demands a willingness to continually revise our theoretical viewpoints in accordance with what we learn and unlearn. (p. 9)

A profound example of the degree to which we rely upon conceptual frameworks for interpreting what we see—often unaware that we are doing so—is provided by Oliver Sacks's (1993) account of a man named Virgil, who, having lost his sight in early childhood, regained it 45 years later following surgery. We tend to think of sight as a sense that simply works on its own. Yet Virgil's experience, popularized in the movie, *At First Sight,* serves as a metaphor for the need to incorporate what we learn and unlearn into new viewpoints. When the bandages were removed from Virgil's eyes, he could not make sense of what he was seeing; the shapes and colors were meaningless and chaotic because he had not learned how to see them. Virgil was overwhelmed by the challenge of seeing, in much the same way that we struggle when our ideas or theories about social life are threatened by new ways of seeing (regarding family theories, see Bengtson et al., 2005).

The challenge to appreciate the influence of our own experience while trying to move beyond it draws me to ways of looking at family ties and aging that represent various groups in society, include the full range of family relationships that we negotiate over a lifetime, and relate our individual lives to the institutional settings in which macro-level forces play out in our lives. A framework that can meet these objectives of theoretical thinking requires three interconnected components: a life course perspective, a recursive and interactive multilevel framework, and a critical approach that includes a feminist perspective. Sociological ambivalence is a useful concept for bringing these orientations together in the study of family ties and aging (see Chapter 7). As a sociologist, I view the social arrangements that we take for granted as the way the world is—and sometimes turn into assumptions about the way the world should be—as social constructions; as our creations, we can also change them (Moen & Coltrane, 2005).

A Life Course Perspective

An older person's familial relationships are in substantial measure an outcome of decisions, actions and circumstances in younger years so that later-life relationships represent both continuity and change. Consequently, when striving to understand such issues as reciprocity in family relationships, one should take a long-term view of the exchanges that have occurred rather than focusing on one point in time (usually the present). The life course perspective links the experiences of later life to earlier life stages and of old family members to younger ones. Personal history or biography—a focus of life course research—puts current circumstances into context and improves our understanding of them. For example, research that examines marital history as opposed to current marital status deepens our appreciation for the link between relationships and loneliness (see Chapter 3).

The life course perspective enjoys unusual popularity in the social sciences in a variety of areas, including aging, family and health. Its evolution makes it critical to consider when particular critiques of the approach were launched because iterations of the approach over time have addressed some of them. A significant body of European work on the life course (Heinz, 2001; Marshall & Mueller, 2003) complements the orientation that dominates work in the United States and Canada. This review will focus on the central ideas of the life course perspective.

According to the life course perspective, aging is a biological, psychological and social process, starting at birth and ending at death. During this lifelong process, individuals make decisions and choices about the paths that they will take and are, therefore, active participants in building their biographies, reflecting the assumption of human agency (Elder & Johnson, 2003; Heinz, 2001). Individual experience is shaped by the historical context of variable social, political and economic conditions, creating unique influences for different age groups, an ever-changing milieu in which individual life courses are navigated within the constraints and opportunities of available options. This connection of individual agency with the larger social world is referred to as an *agency within structure* model (Settersten, 2003) and provides an important link between macro and micro levels of analysis in connecting larger social, political and economic forces (macro) and individual experience (micro) over time. A third meso level of analysis captures the social institutions or social spaces in which we live our lives, including the institutionalized arrangements of family lives. It is here that we experience directly the larger social forces of the macro level.

The four T's of the life course perspective are *trajectories, transitions, turning points* and *timing* (Elder & Johnson, 2003). Trajectories can be described as "long-term patterns of stability and change" (George, 2003:672) and refer to the long view of the life course and the sequences of various statuses that are occupied along the way. This includes statuses related to family relationships—for example, child, sibling, partner, aunt, parent and grandparent. There are multiple trajectories or pathways (Settersten, 2003), reflecting the various social domains or institutions (the meso level) in which we are engaged, including education, family and work. At any one time, we therefore occupy multiple statuses (child, parent, sibling, worker), creating a status configuration (Heinz, 2001). The life course can thus be described as a series of status configurations (Heinz, 2001), a succinct definition that captures movement across time in the multiple continuing and changing statuses that we occupy.

Transitions are the points along the life course trajectory when particular changes in situation occur (Elder & Johnson, 2003), for example, children leaving home, becoming a grandparent, and losing or gaining a partner. Transitions in combination with periods of relative stability are the building blocks of the life course trajectory. Turning points are dramatic transitions that mark "a substantial change in direction" (Elder & Johnson, 2003:55), a somewhat vague distinction that may explain the usual focus on transitions. Although the transition of becoming a grandparent or losing a partner would not seem to involve agency on behalf of the new grandparent or recently bereaved spouse, the negotiation of such transitions does involve agency as individuals figure out how to handle their new situations. Thus exercising agency applies to transitions across the life course trajectory, in terms both of paths taken or not taken and of how a particular chosen or imposed transition is negotiated.

In earlier formulations of the life course perspective, change typically emanated from the larger social world, leading to an implicit treatment of individuals as primarily reactive. For example, Elder's (1991) concepts of control cycles and situational imperatives propose a process in which social change prompts individual responses to regain control of a new situation, which can be seen as an adaptation response. The greater emphasis placed on human agency as a fundamental feature of social actors in subsequent work opened the door to considering the combined actions of individuals as a source of social change.

Time is another central concept of the life course perspective. One component of time, historical time, creates varying contexts in which different cohorts negotiate their life courses. Time also applies to expectations about when certain events or transitions should occur (timing) that serve as benchmarks for assessing transitions as on or off time and to the multiple time tables of different life course trajectories (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). For example, there is an age range during which transitions such as leaving home or committing to a partner or having a child or grandchild are expected. Those who follow such pathways at either younger or older ages are off time in relation to those social expectations. However, such expectations may change over time so that now, the typical age of making any of these transitions is older than it was for today's old people. In addition to the timing of transitions, there are cultural ideas about the appropriate sequencing of transitions (the order in which they should occur) and their expected duration (e.g., how long one should spend in school; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). To avoid an unduly normative undertone, these expectations are best thought of as shifting social and cultural constructions that are subject to change rather than as fixed imperatives that must be met in order for society to function (Hatch, 2000), an important distinction in the context of such debates as those over so-called family values.

Two other concepts add vitality to the life course perspective: the principles of life stage and linked lives. According to the life stage principle (Elder & Johnson, 2003; Marshall & Mueller, 2003), the impact of life transitions and events on personal biography is mediated by their timing and sequencing; both the age at which a transition or event is experienced and the place that the transition takes in the order of life course events alter its impact. For example, a shared historical time, such as the Depression or the Viet Nam War, varied in its effects on personal biographies for those who were young adults who had not yet had children when compared with somewhat older adults who were already parents. Consider this observation in relation to the current engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The concept of linked lives emphasizes the interdependence of our lives with others and the reciprocal influences of connected lives (Elder, 1991; Elder & Johnson, 2003; Heinz, 2001), a significant asset when applying the life course perspective to family ties and aging. When the concept of linked lives is combined with our simultaneous engagement in multiple trajectories, the connection between our ties to family and our involvement in other spheres of social life, such as paid work, is highlighted. When considered in a multilevel model, there is also the potential for connecting our interpersonal experiences in families with larger macro-level processes. For example, the social capital of who you know, another form of linked lives, varies according to structured social relations so that some have more powerful connections than others.

In sum, the life course perspective has several strengths as an approach to studying family ties and aging. First, multiple levels of analysis are possible, encouraging the deliberate consideration of how individual experience (micro) is related to the arrangements of various social institutions, including family (meso), that are shaped by the larger social, economic and political forces of a particular historical time (macro). Studying the connections of family ties to aging is advanced by a life course approach because it highlights interdependence among "a changing society, dynamic family systems with complex webs of relationships, and individual life paths" (Hagestad, 2003:135). To the extent that traversing the life course is also placed in the context of age relations, there is a direct connection made between the experiences of individuals in families and their age status. Second, the life course perspective encompasses various facets of social life so that considering simultaneous involvement in family relationships and other social domains, such as work and retirement, is possible. Such links are important considerations when developing social policy. However, as a number of critics have noted, there are limits in the extent to which the life course approach has capitalized on these assets.

The life course perspective's widespread appeal underscores its potential weakness: limited theoretical development regarding how social life works. For example, through which mechanisms are constraints and opportunities produced and for whom? How are they negotiated in everyday life? An impressive number of concepts are explicated, but their connection and the assumptions made about each of them are not always clear. Does the emphasis on a normative life course captured in the concept of being on and off time reflect a functionalist or normative bias? These unanswered questions have led many to conclude that the life course perspective is not an integrated theory per se. Following Merton (1968), Elder himself describes the life course perspective as a theoretical orientation that establishes "a common framework to guide descriptive and explanatory research" (Elder & Johnson, 2003:54). This is not necessarily a problem because life course principles are useful as research guides, as context for interpreting findings, and as components of other theories (George, 2003). Thus, as Settersten (2006:15) suggests, the principles and concepts of the life course perspective are "probably most effectively used in conjunction with other social and behavioral paradigms." This makes it necessary to specify theoretical leanings beyond a preference for taking a life course approach to family ties and aging.

The life course perspective has theoretical roots in early work by Leonard Cain, a sociologist who drew attention to the significance of age status as a significant dimension of power relations (Cain, 2003; Marshall & Mueller, 2003). Cain avoided a static view of the life course by emphasizing process and argued against a deterministic view of identities as wholly shaped by institutional arrangements. I highlight these two points because they continue to haunt formulations of the life course perspective. In the first case, although the life course approach promotes studying historical context and the link between individual lives and the larger political, economic and social environment, it has often faltered in specifying the connection of the structured social relations of age, gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation to social institutions and to the everyday lives of individuals as they construct their life course. Consequently, the life course perspective has been faulted for focusing too much on the micro level of analysis in studies that concern the actions of individuals and the immediate factors that influence them (Estes et al., 2003; Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001; Marshall & Mueller, 2003).

Ironically, the critique that the life course perspective focuses too heavily on the micro level of analysis is in part due to the current emphasis on human agency (Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001). The irony rests in the fact that assuming human agency on behalf of social actors is key to avoiding an overly deterministic view of individual lives as ruled by social forces and policies. The assumption that all social actors exercise some degree of human agency—the capacity to act on their own behalf—is central to viewing the life course as an individual as well as social project; as individuals, we are active agents in constructing our biographies and family lives. Indeed, the key potential for dynamism in the life course perspective comes from the interplay of human agency on behalf of social actors, our interdependency with others (the concept of linked lives), and the constraints and opportunities created by structured social relations and key economic, political and social forces of a particular time.

A Critical Perspective

There is work on the life course, particularly by European scholars (Marshall & Mueller, 2003) that does consider the significance of the state and other macro-level factors for the construction of individual biographies. For example, Heinz (2001) discusses the need to include the experience of women in life course studies and emphasizes the gendered nature of linked lives that implicates men and women differently in the social domains of family and work. Such questioning of traditional approaches to the life course improves the model, enhancing its potential to link individual experience, institutionalized family relationships, and structured social relations, including those of age. In my view, this is central to formulating better theory and understanding and to developing social policies that combine individual and social responsibility for meeting the needs of various groups in society, including old persons. Such connections between theory and practice and between individual experience and social structure are central to a critical perspective. A critical perspective makes explicit some of the links that are hinted at in the life course approach and draws on the strengths of the modernist focus on social structure and of the postmodernist emphasis on narrative, personal meaning, individual choice and subjectivity (Baars et al., 2006).

A critical perspective combines the view that our social worlds are socially constructed with a reflexive perspective that values the subjective experience of individuals. A critical approach to aging makes explicit the influence of structural inequalities on everyday life *and* the unique interests of old people, including sources of meaning and fulfilment in later life (Estes et al., 2003). Thus at the same time that social arrangements related to age are seen to put old people at a relative disadvantage, older persons are also viewed as active agents in defining and creating their lives. However, because age relations intersect with other structured social relations, such as gender and class, there is substantial variation among old persons, including in their family situations.

The resurging interest in reflexivity is an important element of a critical approach because it is how human agency mediates the impact of social forces (Archer, 2007). Archer defines reflexivity "as a personal property of human subjects, which is prior to, relatively autonomous from and possesses causal efficacy in relation to structural or cultural properties" (15). We are not simply reactive; we take into account what is happening around us, and the actions that we take affect the social and cultural worlds in which we live. Archer argues that our conversations with ourselves "are the way in which we deliberate about ourselves in relation to the social situations that we confront . . . because that is the only way we can know or decide anything" (15). Through these internal conversations, we reflect on the social world and draw conclusions about how we will act in a particular situation. In the case of family life, this might concern a new situation, such as a parent's marriage, or it could involve an ongoing relationship.

A critical perspective connects structured social relations and macro-level forces, such as globalization, with individual action by viewing the institutional situations that we face as socially constructed and by viewing the action that we take as an outcome of a reflexive response to those situations. Our actions, in turn, may fit nicely with established ways of doing things and thereby help to reproduce them, or they may diverge from traditional practice. If enough individuals act in unexpected ways, they can produce change in institutional arrangements and in structured social relations (Katz, 2005). Rather than pitting agency against social structure, a critical perspective merges macro-level forces with social institutions at the meso level and interaction at the micro level in a reciprocal and recursive model (Estes et al., 2003). The interests of the individual are not necessarily represented by the status quo. A final ingredient of a critical perspective is to relate theoretical thinking to praxis in an effort not only to study the lives of older persons and their family relationships but also to facilitate their ability to make desired choices. One goal of this book is to consider whose interests and beliefs are best served by current family and age relations and to ask, how might current arrangements be changed to enhance the lives of older persons and their families?

Links to Other Perspectives

There are clear links between feminist theorizing and praxis and central rubrics of the critical perspective (Estes et al., 2003). "The personal is political" slogan coined by Friedan (1963) in an earlier wave of the feminist movement highlights the connection of everyday life to social structure and processes and of individual to social identities, underscoring the potential for change through individual action (Ray, 2006). The aim to be inclusive emphasizes the costs of marginalization, an experience of both old people and of particular familylike relationships. Variable interests of women and men based on age, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality exemplify the cross-cutting of various social relations and have been a challenge to both feminist theory and the feminist movement. Feminists were among the first to critically assess family life and the structured gender relations that permeate its institutionalized underpinnings. This critical gaze pulls back the façade of socially constructed family life to reveal some of its failings.

In the modernist tradition, feminist gerontology reveals the political and economic arrangements that fail to reward the reproductive labor that has dominated the lives of many older women and left substantial numbers of them with limited resources in old age (Powell, 2006). In the postmodernist tradition, feminist work on the body respects the physical significance of aging and its social and subjective consequences (Powell, 2006). These realities have consequences for negotiating family relationships in later life and are central to issues of intergenerational dependence and support. More recent feminist work on aging goes beyond a focus on women to explore gender relations (Allen & Walker, forthcoming; Arber et al., 2003; Connidis & Walker, forthcoming; Krekula, 2007), an important advance in understanding the multiple vantage points that characterize relationships, including those among family members.

A focus on gender relations extends discussions of inequality by considering the relative advantages and disadvantages of different groups of women and men in various social contexts, including family life. Work on masculinity now includes old men (e.g., Calasanti, 2003) and feminist gerontology's potential to include the experience of both old men and women as central to understanding gender relations is evident in recent writing on various topics including health, family relations, and sexuality and aging (Calasanti, 2004; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; 2006). A multilevel life course perspective in which socially constructed relations of gender and age are seen to be embedded in social institutions and social interaction treats both gender and age as dimensions of power and provides the additional context of time (Hatch, 2000).

Although often aligned with macro-level theorizing, a critical perspective takes seriously individual-level concerns, including the meaning assigned to aging, personal identities, and their connection to family relations. A critical perspective has a point of view that is compatible with a range of theories that assume an ideology and power relations that favor some over others (e.g., political economy, conflict theory), in which individuals are social actors who negotiate the social world in their relationships with others (e.g., symbolic interactionism), and in which there is concern for emancipating the relatively powerless (e.g., feminist theory).

As we will see, involvement in family relationships is a core source of one's sense of self and place in the world. Age relations and normative views about family structure and about who carries which responsibilities create both opportunities and constraints for different types of family involvement. The emphasis on reflexively interpreting and negotiating social life, including ties to family and to transitions across the life course, is an essential ingredient of a critical perspective. Above all, the critical perspective challenges us to look below the surface, to question the taken for granted, and to ask which and whose ideas and beliefs are being met and to what purpose? These are especially important questions to ask about the fundamental processes of aging and age relations and about the social institution most central to our personal lives—family. In the chapters that follow, consider how these general assumptions and ideas apply to particular family relationships and to the more specific theoretical frameworks that have been designed to understand them.

Dimensions of Family Ties and Plan of the Book

Four dimensions of familial relationships in older age are discussed when we examine intimate ties, intergenerational relationships, and sibling ties in this book. First, the availability of kin is addressed in the next chapter through the presentation of data on the marital status and the number of children, grandchildren and siblings of older persons. Second, the extent of contact and interaction with particular available kin is discussed in the relevant chapter. Third, the quality of specific familial relationships in later life is explored. Fourth, the ties between older family members and various kin are examined as potential avenues for providing, receiving and exchanging support. In the final chapter, I discuss research and policy issues and use elder mistreatment as a case study to demonstrate the link between the questions that we ask, the ways that we answer them, and the implications for social policy.

The focus of this book is the United States and Canada. Although the culture, the structure, and the dynamics of family life of the two countries differ in important ways, in some areas, such as the relationships between adult children and their older parents, similar patterns are evident. Although the emphasis here is on research conducted in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Canada, work from other countries is also included, providing some comparative context.

The emerging theoretical perspectives on aging and of family ties outlined in this chapter correspond with changes in research approaches. A primary shift is away from methodological turf wars and toward the greater use and acceptance of various research methods designed to study the processes and dynamics of relationships. Different research methodologies provide different views of the world and can be used to complement one another (Acock et al., 2005). Census data provide important baseline information regarding the parameters of family ties in later life. New statistical approaches allow for quantitative analysis that can explore relationships over time. More quantitative work is now related to theoretical frameworks, adding purpose to data collection that goes beyond gathering more facts. And a range of qualitative work is now enhancing our appreciation for multiple voices in families, for the influence of power on the internal dynamics of family life, and for the processes that link family life to the larger social world. The greater emphasis on reflexivity in theoretical thinking is now evident in research practices, including the use of reflexive personal narrative in which researchers analyze their own life stories to provide important insights about families (e.g., Allen, 2007a). The range of research methods used to study family ties and aging is represented in the work that is incorporated into this book.

As well, I refer to published and unpublished work from my own research throughout the book. This includes an early community study that involved interviews with a stratified random sample of 400 residents aged 65 and over (see Connidis, 1989a; Connidis & Davies, 1990). A second more qualitative study involves a convenience sample of 60 sibling dyads or 120 respondents ranging in age from 25 to 89 (see Connidis, 1992). In a third study, 678 persons aged 55 and over were part of a multistage quota sample and were interviewed in their homes (see Connidis & McMullin, 1993).

A fourth project is an intensive qualitative study of 10 three-generation families in which a total of 86 individuals ranging in age from 23 to 90 years participated through self-administered questionnaires and then follow-up personal interviews (see Connidis, 2003a, 2007). A fifth project mimics the fourth one but with the critical difference that at least one adult family member self-identified as gay or lesbian and that person was the initial contact. This study of three-generation families includes 49 individuals from 10 families, including 14 gay or lesbian adults, and respondents ranged in age from 22 to 88 years (see Connidis, 2005). From time to time, personal observations from subjects in these studies make the somewhat lifeless findings of research take on human dimensions. As you read each chapter, I encourage you to consider how your experiences and those of persons to whom you are close compare with the general conclusions drawn from research.

Thinking Ahead

There is now a fairly long-standing North American tradition of addressing the needs of families and of older persons through government policy. As researchers and experts in the area of family ties and aging, there is a responsibility to consider the implications of what we know for social policy. The final chapter of the book focuses on policy implications. As you read each chapter, consider the extent to which intervention by the state can improve conditions for older persons and their families. To aid in this consideration, be aware of the biases that are embedded in our current social arrangements and in your own way of thinking about individual versus social responsibility. To what extent do you think individuals and their immediate families should assume responsibility for their own welfare? And to what extent do you believe there is a social responsibility to ensure a reasonable quality of life for all citizens, including the old? This distinction between individual and social responsibility was made by C. Wright Mills (1959) some time ago, when he distinguished between approaching problems from a private troubles versus public issues perspective.

When we take a private troubles approach, we assume that individuals and those close to them should take care of themselves; when we take a public issues approach, we assume that there is some social responsibility for both creating and solving the challenges that citizens face. As we shall see, for many of the issues concerning family ties and aging, there are elements of both individual and social responsibility. The challenge is to find a balance between the two that recognizes the power of and limits to both individual and social action in creating a social world that benefits all citizens.