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## The Ecology of Families: A Systems-Developmental Perspective

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# Living Arrangements Over the Life Course

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## *Families in the 21st Century*

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*Living arrangements are influenced by social and demographic trends. Changes in social norms related to marriage, childbearing, educational attainment, and women's employment have reshaped families, making residential family membership much less continuous over the life course. The increasing complexity of family living arrangements makes a life course perspective essential for understanding families. The special issue titled "Living Arrangements Over the Life Course: Families in the 21st Century" addresses several key themes that will characterize families in the 21st century, including gender and the family, union formation and dissolution, living arrangements, and family migration.*

**Keywords:** *cohabitation; divorce; family migration; gender; immigrant families; living arrangements; marriage; union formation*

The fall in household size has had an important effect on the family as a social unit beyond the fertility and "empty nest" effects. . . . Family membership is becoming much less continuous over the life cycle, affecting the relationships between the generations (which are now much less visible to each other) and life cycle patterns of interaction generally.

—Kobrin, 1976, p. 137

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The later portion of the 20th century was marked by a number of significant changes in the family. Family researchers documented the consequences of increases in longevity, declines in fertility, increases in cohabitation and marital instability, and changing ages at marriage on the family life cycle (see Glick, 1977, 1988). Implicit in the concept of the family life cycle is that the core functions of the family are to produce and raise children. Yet the timing and meaning of these events have changed for recent cohorts. Family roles and expectations have changed over time. Families have fewer children. Some families have children earlier, some later. Not all families have children. Not all children are raised in nuclear families.

Family scholars increasingly differentiate between events that occur in one's life and the timing of those events over the life course. For example, marital status transitions have become more common throughout the adult life course. Although widowhood has been postponed, the growth of divorce and remarriage has meant that marital status transitions are less concentrated at the beginning and end of adulthood. Changes in marriage and family formation represent a shift in key transitions that can have lasting effects on the trajectories of one's life course.

Furthermore, children often leave the parental home long before they marry. Increased longevity also means that adults are more likely to have surviving parents who may become dependent and need assistance. These changes represent shifts in intergenerational relations. How these intergenerational transitions will affect an individual depends on the characteristics of that individual as well as his or her relationships with other family members, particularly those who reside nearby.

At any given point in time, individuals' family roles are shaped by their ages and the social and cultural factors that have shaped their lives. By examining living arrangements over the life course, we are able to better understand ongoing family transitions and their consequences for individual lives. This special issue focuses on several key themes that will shape families in the 21st century: gender, union formation and dissolution, living arrangements, and family migration.

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## **GENDER AND FAMILY**

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We now know that the period in the mid-20th century, when the ideal was the breadwinner-homemaker specialization in the home, was the exception to family patterns, not the rule. Increased labor force participation among women, high rates of divorce, child rearing outside of marriage, and an overall decline in marriage and remarriage challenged the dominant paradigm of the nuclear family. Researchers have often focused on the consequences of these changes for women and children, but later in the life course, as family relationships based on marriage and parenthood grow in importance, the consequences of divorce may accumulate for men (Goldscheider, 1990).

Increasingly, not just women, but also men are single parents, both full- and part-time. Single-parent fathers have recently been one of the fastest growing family types. Single fathers are likely to differ from single mothers in the types and amount of resources they provide to their children. In this issue, Ziol-Guest asks whether single fathers invest differently in their children than do other parental types. She finds that the purchasing decisions of single fathers are distinct from those of both married couples and single mothers. Single fathers spend more on food outside the home, alcohol, and tobacco and less on education.

The impacts of fathers' interaction (or lack of interaction) with their children following union dissolution has been an ongoing issue in the literature on child welfare and development. Swiss and Le Bourdais examine the amount of contact between fathers and their children following a union dissolution using data from the Canadian General Social Survey. Their article suggests that father-child relationships are shaped by more than just sociodemographic and attitudinal factors; the dimensions of contact include the costs of maintaining contact, the father's current family situation, and custody arrangements.

A substantial literature documents the intergenerational consequences of divorce (e.g., see Amato & Cheadle, 2005). If divorce puts men at risk of diminished social support later in life, are there early life course trajectories, such as having grown up in a single-parent family, that may make them more likely to create single parent families? In this issue, Goldscheider, Hofferth, Spearin, and Curtin use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine the extent to which childhood family structure influences young men's likelihood of becoming absent fathers instead of resident fathers. Focusing on the key correlates of parental and partner statuses among young men, they examine three contexts that shape young men's family formation: their own family structures, childhood financial well-being, and the time period in which they grew up. Their results are consistent with prior research demonstrating the importance of economic and educational disadvantage. They also document an apparent weakening of the influence of family structure on men's early parental roles.

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## UNION FORMATION AND DISSOLUTION

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Social and economic changes may have contributed to a mismatch between men's and women's preferences and family expectations. Despite the reality that most couples will consist of two earners, a man may prefer the provider role, and a woman may prefer a partner who can provide for her. Similarly, individuals may prefer partners with no prior marital history. Potential partners who are divorced or have children from prior relationships may be less attractive. As marriage markets become increasingly populated with individuals who have been married or have children, it is unclear the extent to which partner expectations have changed with the times. Goldscheider,

Kaufman, and Sassler examine the relationship between attitudes toward partner characteristics and potential union formation. They describe gender differences in partner preferences on several dimensions: Women are significantly more likely to report a willingness to marry someone with children, someone who has been previously married, or someone of a higher status; men are more likely to be willing to marry someone with a lower status.

Other research looks beyond normative commitment-making trajectories. Cohabiting couples may transition into long-term committed relationships outside of marriage. Studying the relationships of long-term gay and lesbian couples, Reczek, Elliot, and Umberson examine how these couples conceptualize commitment formation outside the traditional marriage ceremony. Their findings of the processes by which individuals construct commitments outside of marriage have the potential to contribute to our understanding of alternative forms of union-making among all adults.

Two articles examine the consequences of parental divorce on the union formation patterns of children. Gähler, Hong, and Bernhardt examine the impact of parental divorce on union disruption among young adults in Sweden. Consistent with prior research, they find that young adults with divorced parents are more likely to experience union disruption themselves. However, this effect becomes insignificant once the possible mechanisms associated with divorce are controlled. They discuss these findings in the context of changing perceptions of divorce: One explanation for the weakening of the effect of parental divorce may be that social norms have adjusted to family realities.

Although research has established that parental divorce may be associated with relationship instability among young adults, little work has examined in detail the impact of parents' subsequent unions. Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, Sassler, Cunningham, and Lichter examine the relationship between parental marital transitions and the union formation patterns of their adult children. Contrasting the effects of specific parental union transitions with those of parents in a stable marriage, they find that parental transitions may indeed influence the union formation patterns of their young adult children. Their article contributes to our knowledge of the relationship between childhood living arrangements and union formation in young adulthood.

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## LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

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Studying contemporary living arrangements can help us better understand ongoing social changes that may be affecting the family. By understanding who lives with whom and the determinants of those patterns, we can better anticipate potential service needs over the life course. Family size is often an important determinant of living arrangements and can reflect the level of social support available to an individual. Individuals who are childless may have fewer familial

supports to draw on as they age, but net of marital status, childlessness per se does not appear to have any significant negative consequences on their psychological state, as reported by Bures, Koropecky-Cox, and Loree in this issue. Their findings suggest that social networks outside the home as well as coresidential family may play a significant role in well-being.

Patterns of institutionalization may also affect family patterns and living arrangements. A history of incarceration may affect family relationships and contribute to a smaller social support network. London and Parker examine the relationship between duration of incarceration and age at first incarceration on living arrangements. They find that having been previously incarcerated reduces the likelihood that individuals will be married and increases the likelihood of living alone. To the extent that living alone may be associated with lower levels of social integration, these living arrangements may increase the risks that previously incarcerated individuals face for recidivism and/or continued disadvantage.

Placing the family in historical context can help us to understand the changes that have occurred over time. Van Gaalen and van Poppel describe changes in the living arrangements of children in the Netherlands during the period from 1850 to 1985. They find that historically substantial portions of children did not spend significant amounts of time in two-parent households. Despite increases in divorce, children in the 20th century were more likely to have lived with two parents than those in the previous century.

Living arrangements also reflect cultural differences in familial roles and accommodations that families may make to care for their members. In sub-Saharan Africa, both mothers and grandmothers are considered parental figures. Parker and Short find that grandparent-headed households are linked to positive schooling outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, grandmothers are associated with increased school enrollment for children, particularly those not living with their mothers. Given the increased absence of mothers due to migration or early death, their findings illustrate the need to consider the complexity of the family context as well as household structure.

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## FAMILY MIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION

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Independence between generations means that the family context often extends beyond a single residence. Family researchers and policy makers are giving increasing attention to the consequences of both migration and immigration for families. Although many studies focus on who lives with whom, researchers acknowledge that the location and proximity of other family members are important considerations as well. Family research needs to explicitly consider the spatial dimensions of families and the consequences of distance between family members. This includes addressing the impact of family context on residential patterns and mobility decisions, patterns of family migration, and the proximity of family members.

Mobility behavior is shaped by the types of family and life course transitions that occur. The family context of mobility across the life course is important for understanding both living arrangements and support networks. Different stages of the family life course are associated with different types of mobility: Local mobility is associated with family transitions; long distance mobility is associated with work and retirement transitions. Bures examines the relationship between the age of the youngest child at home and parental residential change in later midlife. Her findings are consistent with a life course view of family migration behavior that suggests children leaving home may be associated with increased long distance mobility of adults in later midlife. Understanding the relationship between mobility and family change in later midlife will contribute to a better understanding of where aging individuals will reside and with whom they will reside as they age.

International migration affects the lives of family members who migrate as well as those who remain behind and has important consequences for family formation, kinship ties, living arrangements, and children's outcomes. Family scholars need to explicitly address the theoretical and conceptual issues raised by immigration for families, including current patterns of migrant selectivity, appropriate comparison groups for particular immigrant groups, and the long-term impact of immigration on families and family patterns. Clark, Glick, and Bures present a selective review of the literature on immigrant families in the United States as well as suggestions for future research in this increasingly important area of family research and policy.

## CONCLUSION

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The motivation for this special issue originated with the 2006 conference "Gender and Family: Agendas for the 21st Century," in honor of Professor Frances Goldscheider's career at Brown University. My goal was to bring together a collection of scholarly articles that reflected the breadth of Fran's scholarship and her impact on family demography while at the same time shedding light on current research issues. These articles pose important questions and extend our understanding of current patterns of living arrangements and family processes. Although a substantial body of literature documents current family patterns, one must recognize the ongoing changes that families experience as a consequence of social and demographic change. Given the importance of families for both emotional and instrumental support, we need a more detailed understanding of how living arrangements affect both the current and cumulative lives of individuals and their families.

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