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GENDER AND PARENTHOOD
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ACROSS DIFFERENT LIFE STAGES, families experience dynamic relational and organizational shifts driven by children’s developmental needs, demographic forces, historical trends, and economic circumstances. Parenting at each stage involves balancing the internal nurturing needs of the family and its members against external factors including resource attainment, education and employment demands, and the socio-political context. Here, the underlying assumption is made that both familial and contextual factors interact to impact child outcomes (Bronfenbrenner 1979). With respect to gender differences and similarities across the family life course, questions emerge regarding negotiating division of labor (domestic and paid), child rearing responsibilities, and the suitability of partners in providing certain types of care and resources at different points in development of the child and family. The family serves as “an organization and a setting for facilitating growth and development of its members” (Hill 1986:20) across different life stages, thereby necessitating exploration of structural and relational components that drive family development.

Families continually reorganize to meet individual member’s needs within the context of available resources and environment factors. Both internal (e.g., the age of children, the addition of a family member) and external factors (e.g., employment, historical events) drive renegotiation of roles and responsibilities and alter expectations regarding partner contributions. The current chapter examines the manner in which gender differences in parenting manifest across the life course. These gender differences interact with developmental and socio-cultural factors to impact roles, responsibilities, allocation of resources, and child outcomes. The development of families in modern, industrialized societies will be explored using economic (Hill 1986), demographic (Glick 1989), and stage perspectives (Duval and Hill 1948; McGoldrick and Carter 2003).
The economic conceptualization of family life course development posits that the periods prior to having children and after children have left home are times of “net accumulation” (Hill 1986). During these periods, males and females gather assets and have greater ability to save assets because their resource needs are fewer. In contrast, the period of child rearing (parenting) and the period after retirement are conceptualized as times of “deficit financing” (Hill 1986). During child rearing, accumulation of resources is accompanied by higher resource needs and greater depletion of resources that are allocated to the care of offspring. While parents continue to gather assets to support their offspring, they are simultaneously less able to store assets for future use. In retirement, while child rearing is typically completed and resources are no longer being allocated to offspring, asset accrual also slows or stops and adults deplete saved assets to meet their resource needs.

An economic analysis of the family life course provides a mechanism for examining asset contributions and resource needs during distinct periods of family development. From this perspective, the cost of parenting includes not only material support of offspring, unpaid domestic labor, and childcare but also confers risks including decreased earnings, decreased retirement income, and decreased access to health and social resources as time for workforce participation becomes restricted. Because of competing demands between domestic and employment roles and responsibilities, parenting may ultimately lessen the societal contribution of adults to the extent contributions are measured through workforce enterprise. For professionals, the timing of parenthood often coincides with generative and productive phases of employment thereby necessitating decisions about whether to delay having children in order to focus on careers. Moreover, having children significantly increases the domestic burden in households (McDonald 2006) with additional members creating more chores and siphoning time and resources that otherwise could be invested in accomplishing tasks. These domestic burdens have traditionally fallen to women and have become increasingly more difficult to negotiate as more women move into the workforce (Craig and Mullan 2010).

The economic perspective is based on the assumption that families can accrue assets at various points in the life course. For the more than 40 million Americans living in chronic poverty, asset accrual is not possible. In 2008, 8,147,000 families (10.3 percent) and 13,507,000 children (18.5 percent) were living in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2011). Families in poverty struggle to afford basic needs such as food and shelter.
(Wood, Valdez, Hayashi, and Shen 1990) and substantial evidence documents adverse effects of poverty on child outcomes including achievement (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 2000). Additionally, poverty compounds the costs of parenting by impacting parental well-being (Elder, Eccles, Ardelt, and Lord 1995) and decreasing parental involvement in children’s lives (Waanders, Mendez, and Downer 2007). As a result, families in poverty find themselves in positions of instability and need that may ultimately alter the life course trajectories of both the adult and child members of the family.

Finally, family structure significantly impacts the economic well-being of children and their parents. Numerous studies document economic risks associated with single-parent households and in particular, for those headed by females (Hilton, Wong, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 1992; Desrocher, and Devall 2001; Biblarz and Stacey 2010). In one study, children in households with cohabitating adults had lower rates of poverty, food insecurity, and housing insecurity than their counterparts living in single-parent households (Manning and Brown 2003). In comparison to single-parent households headed by males (13.8 percent), significantly more female-headed (28.7 percent) single-parent households where no spouse is present reported living in poverty in 2008 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2011).

DEMOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE ON FAMILIES

Demographic studies of family life course use national (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau) and international data sources to determine the frequency, timing, and duration of family characteristics and predict changes based on population trends and historical factors (Glick 1989). These research endeavors to detail how families have changed over time and in response to socio-cultural and political events, illuminating similarities and differences in family characteristics including age at marriage, age at birth of first child, family size, and duration of widowhood by sociodemographic factors like race, ethnicity, nationality, and age.

Recent socio-demographic trends confirm increases in childlessness, delayed fertility, delayed marriage, smaller families, and increased divorce (Schnittker 2007). Current divorce rates, estimated at 3.6 divorces per 1,000 marriages (U.S. Census Bureau 2005), combined with the fact that women are less likely to remarry post-divorce, have contributed to a significant increase in the number of single-parent families. Beyond examining
broad population trends, family demographers conduct in-depth analyses that illuminate shifts in family life course and necessitate redefining characterizations of family life. Bumpass and Raley (1995) distinguished between single-parent families and single-parent households on the basis of data suggesting that single-parents may reside in households with other family members (e.g., grandparents) or cohabitating partners. According to this line of research, single-parent status cannot be determined solely on the basis of marital status but rather, must be established by examining parent relationship status (i.e., does the parent have a partner who co-parents) and household composition.

Population shifts including delayed onset of marriage and increased life expectancies have dramatically altered the family life course. More than a century ago, at least one parent was likely to die before their last child was married, while in 1940 couples had a 50 percent chance of spending an average of 11 years in an “empty nest” (Glick 1988). Other demographic trends demonstrate generational effects, such as the growth in the number of married couples without children at home, which resulted from baby-boomers launching their children to independence (Day 1996). The demographic perspective identifies periods during the life cycle where gender differences in parenting differentially impact child and adult development, and during which additional social supports are necessary to promote optimal family outcomes.

STAGES OF FAMILY LIFE COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Finally, studies from social and biological sciences have extensively documented the stages of family development and posited models of family life course for varying species. Duval and Hill (1948) described the formation, expansion, contraction, and eventual dissolution of families. Stage changes are precipitated by changes in the roles, responsibilities, and positions of family members that occur when other family members are added (e.g., birth) or lost (e.g., leaving home, death). Shifts between family life course stages also coincide with significant role alterations for members based on age or developmental level. For example, when children start school caregiving demands decrease, often driving reorganization of family structure and of the roles and responsibilities of specific family members (e.g., a parent who was a primary caregiver of a young child may return to the workforce when that child enters school). The literature
applies the following criteria in determining specific family life course stages: change in family size (e.g., birth of a child), developmental age of oldest child (e.g., beginning to attend school), and work status of primary earners (e.g., retirement).

In light of the dynamic nature of families and the myriad factors impacting family life course development, life-cycle norms can be utilized to characterize family patterns across cultures, classes, socio-cultural circumstances, and global realities. McGoldrick and Carter (2003) identified life cycle changes denoted by fundamental reorganization of the family system. Their model of family life course stages does not inherently link stages to specific ages, nor does it assume traditional family structures (e.g., married, heterosexual couples). Instead, McGoldrick and Carter posit that a uniform, sequential path across the family life course stages does not adequately characterize the significant variability in family life course development.

The process by which families transition between stages requires consideration. According to Rapoport (1963), stressors and precipitating events lead to stage disruptions and changes in roles and responsibilities for family members. Events such as the youngest child leaving home to attend college or live on his/her own may trigger a reorganization of the family, require changes in roles and responsibilities of the remaining family members, and ultimately lead to a stage transition. Similarly, family systems theorists have documented that points of transition across the family life course are often the most stressful and can lead to manifestation of psychopathology (Carter and McGoldrick 1988). Therefore, as families move from one stage to another, both the transition itself and navigating the challenges of the next stage require significant adjustment. To remain stable and organized within a given stage, family members must achieve consensus about numerous issues including division of labor, allocation of resources, ability of members to perform required tasks, and the urgent needs of members (Hill 1986).

The remainder of this chapter describes family life course stages, highlighting gender differences in parenting when relevant. Within each stage, particular attention is paid to interactions among the specific needs of children, parents, and the family unit in shaping the division of labor, negotiation of roles and responsibilities, and parenting practices. An extensive literature documents that effective parenting practices include providing high levels of support and monitoring and using less harsh discipline techniques across diverse socio-demographic contexts and family structures (Amato and Fowler 2002; Browne et al. 2010; Randolph and Radey 2011).
The chapter considers similarities and differences in gendered parenting behaviors across the life span and within varying family constellations.

**THE YOUNG COUPLE**

From a historical and evolutionary perspective, parenting behaviors are sex-dimorphic and as such, gender differences in parenting are to be expected. Evolutionary biology studies find that selectivity in choosing a mate is adaptive for females, while males are at an advantage if they seek as many mates as possible, unless their paternal contribution significantly enhances the survival of their offspring (Lancaster 1976; Rossi 1983; Bjorklund and King, chapter 3, this volume). Beyond gendered biological imperatives in coupling, historical factors over the last 50 years have dramatically altered coupling, marriage, and parenthood. First, advances in medicine have led to increased human longevity, enabling women and men to delay parenting and still have ample time to raise children into adulthood (Rossi 1983; Glick 1989). Medical advances have also improved contraceptive options at a time when sexual relations outside of marriage and use of contraception are accepted social norms in broad segments of the population. Second, since World War II, American women have been prominent in the workforce. Notably, it is easier for women to obtain higher levels of education and establish themselves more securely in the workforce when they do not have children (Schnittker 2007). In certain socio-demographic subgroups, greater educational attainment actually contributes to the decisions of single mothers to remain unmarried or unpartnered as their criteria for suitable partners increase (Holland 2007). The confluence of increased longevity, availability of contraception, a tolerant socio-cultural context, and an open labor market has enabled women to delay child rearing, focus on educational attainment, postpone marriage and childbearing, and participate in the workforce.

The family life course itself has been truncated by longer life expectancy and a compressed period of child bearing and child rearing. Historically, when adult life spans were considerably shorter, parenting consumed a much greater proportion of the life span. Census projections suggest that the number of never-married adults in the Unites States is growing and will continue to do so, with the proportion of single younger adults increasing steadily (Day 1996). Forces including modern gender ideologies, increased presence of women in the workforce, greater educational attainment for women, improved contraception, and a longer latency to parenthood, have reconfigured the desired or ideal contemporary family life cycle in Western cultures.
TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

The transition to parenthood results in significant biological, physical, psychological, and emotional changes for males and females (Cowan and Cowan 2000; Gottman and Gottman 2007; McHale 2007; Pruett and Kline Pruett 2009). This transition is associated with decreased marital satisfaction, assumption of more traditional gender roles and responsibilities (even in egalitarian, dual-earner partnerships), and increased risk for perinatal mood disorders for mothers and depression for both partners (Cox, Paley, Payne, and Burchinal 1999; Cowan and Cowan 2003). Although the biological connection between mother and infant is stronger in the newborn period than the bond between father and newborn (e.g., Swain et al. 2008; Doucet 2009) fathers are essential caregivers during pregnancy and infancy (Yogman, Kindlon, and Earls 1995), providing support to mothers and caring for newborns and young infants.

Newborn behaviors and needs elicit parenting behaviors and function to keep intimate caregivers close. From feeding every few hours, to holding, cleaning, soothing, regulating, and maintaining physiologic (e.g., temperature) and motoric stability (e.g., staying in a tucked, comfortable position), adults must remain in close proximity to their newborn. In a study of mothers’ and fathers’ attachment status during pregnancy in relation to co-parenting after a baby’s birth, Talbot, Baker, and McHale (2009) found that parenting dyads where both partners reported secure attachment patterns in pregnancy exhibited the highest levels of co-parenting cohesion and that prenatal marital quality also predicted co-parenting cohesion. Such findings demonstrate powerful intergenerational transmission of parenting behaviors that actively contribute to the interpersonal experience of newborns and young children in the context of their families.

Social and cultural expectations significantly impact how males and females parent (McMahon 1995; Ruddick 1995; Fox and Worts 1999). While gender socialization produces automatic response patterns and habits (Doucet 2009) resulting from repeated enactment across the life cycle, gender differences in caregiving of newborns and infants are also influenced by proximity to and experience with newborns and infants. Increased certainty of paternity, shared parental resource attainment, and partnership with a female that encourages involvement with offspring all function to promote paternal involvement with offspring (Rossi 1983; Bjorklund and King, in press).

In early caregiving of human infants, patterns of initial maternal regulation followed by more egalitarian and communal caregiving emerge.
In general, co-parenting in two-parent families tends to occur after 18 months of age and follows a period of female primary caregiving. While fathers are as capable of being highly involved and sensitively attuned to their young infants (Parke and Tinsley 1984) mothers more frequently responded to, stimulated, expressed positive affection toward, and took basic care of their infants while fathers engaged in other activities over the course of the first nine months of life (Belsky, Gilstrap, and Rovine 1984). When subsequent children were born to these families, mothers were less involved with their second children but still took primary responsibility for the infants while fathers were taking care of the older children.

Findings from numerous studies of parenting behaviors suggest that mothers are the gatekeepers and primary caregivers of newborns and young infants, regulating the amount of caregiving provided by others, including fathers, until they deem it appropriate for others to participate in care or until they require assistance. Bell and colleagues (2007) found that families transitioned from undifferentiated units (e.g., mothers and fathers providing care) early in the newborn period to having highly differentiated gender stereotypical roles and responsibilities at six weeks of life and ultimately, shifted back to a more integrated and balanced family unit by sixteen weeks. Not surprisingly, integration and balance coincided with the end of parental leave periods, a time when the primary caregiver may be returning to work and caregiving responsibilities must be redistributed.

The conditions under which mothers turn over the care of infants to fathers and other intimate caregivers vary considerably depending on factors including child, maternal, and paternal characteristics, the environment in which the family lives, and resource availability (e.g., suitable caregivers). For example, a first-time mother in a stable, committed relationship with a supportive partner who is egalitarian, interested in caring for the baby, and available, may relinquish nighttime feedings of a newborn to her partner very early in the baby’s life. Another mother, whose family depends on her income to survive and is forced to return to work shortly after delivering her baby, may also relinquish nighttime feedings to her partner, but for different reasons than those of the first mother. In contrast, mothers of babies with special health care needs may take longer to share caregiving responsibilities due to concerns that others will not be able to adequately meet their babies’ complex needs.

Negotiating the return to work after having a baby requires reconciling ideological principles, expectations, and needs for employment and income. These work-family strategies (Singley and Hynes 2005) are impacted by
local, state, and national policies that may inadvertently reinforce traditional division of labor. Families must weigh the benefit of being the full-time primary caregivers of their young children with the costs of income loss, job loss, and financial strain. For many families, returning to work is not optional; it is a financial necessity. Cultural expectations about the definitions of motherhood, fatherhood, and role expectations also shape decision making around workforce re-entry. Because of gender inequities in the labor market, with women earning less and having fewer job opportunities than men, the cost of women staying at home to raise children is less than the cost of men doing so. Women may also be more likely to stay at home after giving birth because their jobs may not offer the flexibility that allows them to meet familial obligations while continuing to participate in the workforce (e.g., breastfeeding-friendly work environments).

Other gender differences in workforce participation emerge during the transition to parenthood. During early parenthood, mothers tend to take leave or reduce their workload and, on average, are slower than fathers to return to work during their child’s infancy even when they have a history of previous employment. In contrast, a father’s work involvement stays the same or increases during the transition to parenthood (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 2000). Some dual-earner families balance their work-family responsibilities through shift work and turn-taking. In these families, parents take turns being at work and being available for childcare. Negotiating schedules that allow for alternating work and parenting responsibilities between partners enables mothers and fathers to maintain their caregiving primacy and reduces the financial burden of paying for childcare. However, in such cases, a significant toll is exacted on the couple’s relationship and on the children’s experience of family because less time is available for joint family activities.

In interviews with couples about their employment decisions after the birth of their first child, Singley and Hynes (2005) found that during the period immediately following birth, the majority of women took six to eight weeks of leave using a combination of vacation time, sick leave, and disability. Fathers took one to two weeks off from work using vacation time and sick leave. After the initial transition, mothers made greater changes to their work schedules, moving to part-time schedules, transitioning out of the labor force, or making multiple arrangements. Additionally, couples reorganized their work lives to incorporate new family obligations through changing jobs, refusing extra work or travel, changing work schedules, or decreasing the total number of hours worked. Overall, work-family strategies were shaped by either strong parenting role ideologies or by practical
and financial considerations. Singley and Hynes concluded that “couples’ use of policies appeared to flow from interactional processes that defined women’s jobs and careers as more flexible and their role in family life as more primary” (2005:390).

FAMILIES WITH YOUNG AND SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

As families transition from infancy and early childhood, their world expands considerably. The expansion is driven, in part, by the presence of a young child who is striving for autonomy and independence while at the same time attempting to acquire the skills necessary for self-care and relationship formation and maintenance. Having established strong relationships with intimate caregivers, preschoolers are ready to make efforts at connecting to a wider range of relationship partners including peers and other adults (Mueller and Cohen 1986). While mothers continue to play a key role in the lives of preschoolers, serving as coordinators, mediators, and navigators of the broader social circles in which preschoolers find themselves, these expanding circles provide opportunities for other caregivers and relationship partners to take on a more prominent role.

Research suggests that fathers of young children feel more able to freely display physical affection (e.g., kisses, hugs, cuddling) than fathers of older children (Doucet 2009). During early childhood, both mothers and fathers have been found to frequently engage in a variety of parenting behaviors, including educational guidance, physical caretaking, emotional support, discipline-administrative, active-recreational (Kellerman and Katz 1978), and personal interaction (Moon and Hoffman 2008). However, mothers typically engage in physical care and emotional support more frequently than fathers, with fathers also reporting lower levels of personal interaction with their children (Moon and Hoffman 2008).

In a study of paternal engagement in early childhood, Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) found that it was not fathers’ inability or lack of knowledge that prevented them from actively caring for their young children, but rather paternal beliefs that mothers were better able to do the job. The more fathers left caregiving tasks to mothers, the less aware they were of what needed to be done and how to engage with their children. Consequently, fathers who were more distally involved had children who were less responsive to them.

Families in this stage continue to strive for balance between family life and the demands of work. Working parents of young children reported
feeling rushed, pressed for time, and more strained than parents who do not work (Craig and Mullan 2009). Given the traditional role of fathers as breadwinners, it is not surprising that men spend more time engaged in activities with children on weekends than they do on weekdays (Yeung, Sandberg, David-Kean, and Hofferth 2001). Schnittker (2007) reported that for women, working was associated with better overall health across the lifespan, although having a child under age six decreased the health benefits of being employed due to the stress of managing multiple demands. The negative impact of combining work and family diminished for mothers when their children were old enough to attend school. In contrast, fathers with young children reported better health outcomes when working full-time as compared to part-time. Fathers who work full-time are likely to have higher paying jobs with better benefits than those who are only able to secure part-time employment, suggesting that socio-economic differences may also underlie these health outcomes.

In an ethnographic study of Canadian fathers identified as primary caregivers of their young children (e.g., single fathers, stay-at-home fathers, parental leave, or shared caregiving) Doucet (2009) reported gender differences in paternal manifestation of parental responsibilities. Fathers in this study displayed emotional responsibility through daily interactions with children (e.g., activities, involvement in sports) and by actively promoting independence through expectations of self-sufficiency and teaching life skills. According to Lamb (2000), fathers’ nurturance traditionally manifests in play as a way of connecting to children. Research also suggests that in some nontraditional families where fathers are the primary caregivers of young children, both parents reported not fulfilling role expectations for which they were socialized (Radin 1982). In this study, mothers reported not spending enough time taking care of their children and fathers reported not meeting societal expectations of professional achievement and earning. According to Doucet (2009:113–114), “. . . There is a strong sense that women feel guilty about leaving their child to go back to work and men feel guilty about leaving their work to care for their child. Put differently, mothers feel pulled toward care and connection while fathers feel pulled toward paid work and autonomy.”

In childhood, parenting behaviors of mothers and fathers may differentially impact child behaviors and outcomes. Illustrating this, Puustinen and colleagues (2008) found that paternal emotional warmth impeded problem solving for boys, while for girls it was associated with improved problem solving strategies and greater self-confidence.
It is also important to note the bidirectional influence of children and parents on each other. Not only do parent practices affect child outcomes, but child characteristics (e.g., temperament, behavior) affect parent outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, mood). Coleman and Hildebrandt Karraker (2000) reported that mothers who perceived their school-age children as less emotional and more sociable and who had experience with children other than their own endorsed greater parenting self-efficacy than their counterparts who perceived their children as having more difficult temperaments and less sociable and with less experience caring for other children. In this study, higher maternal parenting self-efficacy was also associated with having an older child, higher maternal education, and greater family income. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of examining the transactional nature of parent-child relationships when considering the impact of parenting across the family life course.

FAMILIES WITH ADOLESCENTS

Adolescence is a time of upheaval and renegotiation of family structure for children and their parents. As young people mature, grow, and develop, their cognitive capacities expand tremendously enabling them to tackle more complex challenges and problems, engage in more sophisticated discourse, and entertain more nuanced perspectives on various social issues. Adolescents become increasingly autonomous, separating from parents and families to spend more time in other social realms including school, extracurricular activities, and peer relationships. These other environments and social realms can exert a powerful influence on an adolescent’s opinions, decision making, and behavior.

With the onset of adolescence, family boundaries become more permeable as adolescents bring new friends, activities, and ideas into the family and exert more control over their schedules and relationships. Even with greater permeability in family boundaries, parents remain gatekeepers, helping guide and shape the choices adolescents make about their peers, activities, and driving outcomes including educational attainment (Kan and Tsai 2004). Although teenagers are increasingly independent in their choices and behaviors, their parents maintain a supervisory role, ensuring that adolescents abide by both family and societal rules. An extensive literature documents the relationship between parenting styles and adolescent outcomes. Gordon Simons and Conger (2007) found that having at least one authoritative parent significantly reduced delinquency and depression and
increased the likelihood of greater commitment to school, while having two authoritative parents resulted in the best adolescent outcomes. Similarly, adolescents reported higher rates of delinquency and drug use when their parents engaged in less monitoring and supervision, they lived in homes with more conflict, reported less attachment to their parents, and their parents had more lax attitudes about offending (Fagan, Van Horn, Antaramian, and Hawkins 2011). Adolescence is a time when family rituals might change, with adolescents preferring to spend time with friends on weekend nights rather than spending time with their families. Adolescents are also increasingly capable of and interested in defining their relationships with family and nonfamily members and exert greater influence on what these relationships look like.

With respect to gender differences in parenting, research has shown that fathers may have more challenges relating to and remaining close with their daughters during adolescence as puberty and sexuality become more salient (McGoldrick and Carter 2003; McKinney and Renk 2008). On the whole, adolescents report decreased parental monitoring as they get older, with females reporting greater monitoring and closer attachment to their mothers and males reporting less family conflict and closer relationships with their fathers (Fagan, Van Horn, Antaramian, and Hawkins 2011). However, even in late adolescence, females and males report that their well-being is related to both mother’s and father’s parenting and expectations, the family environment in which they live, and conflict with both parents (McKinney and Renk, 2008). With these and other changes in the parent-child relationship during adolescence, there is an increased capacity for distancing and disconnection. However, it is important to note that on the whole, both male and female adolescents remain close to their parents and do not experience the severe conflict and rebellion described in developmental theories of adolescents (Tavris 1992).

In African-American families, the presence of mothers and fathers has been shown to differentially impact male and female adolescents. When both mothers and fathers are present in the home, adolescents of both sexes displayed similar psychological outcomes, whereas in father-absent homes, boys are at greater risk than girls for mental health and behavioral problems (Mandara and Murray 2000, 2006; Mandara, Murray, and Joyner 2005). Mandara, Varner, and Richman (2010) predicted that that differential socialization patterns would emerge for unmarried African-American mothers, who traditionally give girls responsibilities and have higher educational expectations of them than they do of boys—“raise” their daughters.
and “love” their sons. Their results confirmed this hypothesis, showing that girls reported the highest levels of household responsibilities, expectations, and rules and also the highest achievement. Firstborn boys reported similar socialization to the firstborn girls, with slightly fewer rules about their whereabouts. However, later-born boys reported greater conflict with their mothers, fewer responsibilities, more freedom, less ability to make decisions for themselves, less cognitive stimulation (e.g., going to a museum, playing an instrument), and lower achievement as compared to girls. Taken together, these results suggest that for African-American adolescents, gender and birth order contribute to socialization experiences when they are being raised by their mothers. In African-American communities where, on average, females outperform males in achievement and education, differential parental investment in children may maximize the success of girls, for whom mothers have higher expectations.

FAMILIES AT MIDLIFE

The pattern of active, daily parenting characteristic of infancy, early childhood, and adolescence typically changes during the midlife stage for adults. As life expectancies have increased, parents find themselves preparing and launching their young adult children 20 years before they are eligible for or interested in retirement, making this stage the longest in the family life course. In families where divorce, remarriage, and the birth of additional children occurs, parents may find themselves launching different sets of children at different times. Regardless of the timing, when children leave home, family roles and responsibilities are reconstituted.

The daily burdens and domestic demands in the family of origin decrease as young adults establish their own households. However, young adults may still be financially dependent on their parents and continue to require financial and emotional resources even if they do not live in the same household. Additionally, many families make significant contributions to the educational expenses of young adults. In times of economic stress and uncertainty, many families find themselves unable to launch young adults, as finding employment that affords economic self-sufficiency is difficult and setting up a separate household can be prohibitively expensive. For some families, it may be beneficial to have young adults remain in the household and contribute some of their earnings to keep families financially solvent. Even in cases where young adults leave home, changes in their own family life course (e.g., a divorce or break-up) may result in
returning to live with their parents. Finally, as young adults leave their families of origin and renegotiate relationships with their parents, opportunities emerge for the introduction of new members into the family system—the partners and, eventually, spouses of young adults.

Mothers, who have functioned as primary caregivers for many years, may look forward to cultivating other interests, focusing on work, and developing relationships with time afforded to them by decreased caregiving demands (DeVries, Kerrick, and Oetinger 2007). In contrast, fathers may find themselves yearning for closeness with children who are no longer within arm’s reach (McGoldrick and Carter 2003). Whereas mothers tend to remain closer with their children (especially their daughters) than fathers (Rossi and Rossi 1990), fathers in this stage of the family life cycle tend to invest more time in their work. Both husbands and wives hold the belief that women should maintain family relationships with children who no longer live at home.

THE FAMILY IN LATER LIFE

In the last stage of the family life course, the nest is empty, parents are aging, and retirement may be on the horizon. Parents may find themselves with fewer formal societal obligations and roles to fulfill. As the family decreases in size, parents may relocate the family home (Bures 2009), downsizing to a space that better fits their needs or relocating to be closer to their children and extended families. This stage has become increasingly important because with longer life expectancies, families are in a period of contraction for many more years than in the past. Today, empty-nest baby boomers are a rapidly growing demographic, representing more than seven million households (Day 1996). As these baby boomers continue to age, there will be a corresponding growth of people in this stage of the family life course.

More than 80 percent of adults over age 65 live within an hour of at least one of their children (Walsh 1999). Ongoing connection to children is facilitated through proximity, health and social needs, and with the arrival of grandchildren. Many grandparents continue to provide considerable assistance to their children by helping to care for the grandchildren. Contrary to the idea that family relationships become less frequent and intense during this phase in the family life course, relationships may become more intense and require more frequent contact depending on parental and familial needs. During this stage, roles may be reversed, with children taking care of the long-term health needs of their aging parents and becoming more
gender And P Arenting Across the fAmily life cycle

Intergenerational caregiving patterns emerge, which improve well-being and buffer depressive symptoms in elders (Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Tyler 2001). For instance, aging fathers who have a caring relationship with an adult child report fewer depressive symptoms.

Gender differences exist in the amount of time spent by adults caring for their parents. Women spend more hours providing care to parents and in-laws than do men, and aging mothers are more likely to be receiving help from their children than are fathers (Hammer and Neal 2008). Research on gender differences has shown that men are more likely to help their parents with instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs) such as grocery shopping, writing checks, and mowing lawns, than activities of daily living (ADLs) such as bathing, dressing, and feeding, which are usually done by females. Thus, while both males and females engage in elder care, females are more likely to engage in tasks that are physically draining and that interrupt their daily activities and routines when compared with males whose assistance and involvement is more periodic, circumscribed, and can be done more flexibly. Unlike child rearing, wherein the child’s physical and emotional dependency gradually diminishes as their competence and skill increases, parent-caring involves the caregiver meeting the sustained or increasing physical and emotional needs of the older person who is in decline (Singleton 2000).

A recent national telephone screening survey revealed that between nine and 13 percent of American households with adults over age 30 had dual-earner couples who were caretaking for both children and their parents (Neal and Hammer 2007). Especially for women sandwiched between their familial roles and responsibilities and the obligations of caretaking for their elderly parents, this increased pressure to provide for the needs of multiple generations of family members can cause increased role strain and stress, depleting them of the requisite energy to properly meet the needs of all those for whom they are responsible. Studies have shown that employed caregivers of elderly parents report more absenteeism, more distractions at work, more physical and mental health problems, and loss of career advancements. In one study, 22 percent of men and 35.6 percent of women reported depression scores above the clinical cutoff (Hammer and Neal 2007). Women in this study reported higher levels of work-family conflict than men while simultaneously reporting higher levels of positive spillover from family to work. They also reported more absenteeism due to child or parent care responsibilities than did their husbands.
In general, women in this stage of life are more likely to be cared for by their children, which may increase the likelihood that these grandmothers will play an important caregiving role in the lives of their grandchildren. Aging fathers may have fewer opportunities to contribute to their children’s families, particularly if they do not have a spouse to mediate the relationship. Nonetheless, even at this last phase of the family life course, contraction of the family back to the original couple does not preclude connection and involvement with the growing and evolving families created by their children.

**SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE**

In 2010, more than twelve million American households were headed by single mothers and more than three million by single fathers (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010). Thirty-one percent of all families can be classified as single-parent, with 85 percent of these households being headed by mothers (Cunningham and Knoester 2007), a trend that likely reflects the tendency for women to bear the brunt of child rearing responsibilities post-divorce. What these data do not adequately represent is the diversity in types of single-parent households. Some single-parent households result from divorces or dissolutions of partnerships. In these cases, children may be raised in two separate single-parent households, one headed by their mother and the other headed by their father. Other single-parent households are headed by women or men who have children without being in a committed relationship. Widowers comprise another group of single-parent households. Households headed by single grandparents raising their grandchildren represent yet another demographic.

In single-parent households, parents are limited in their ability to divide roles and responsibilities. The burden of parenting typically falls to one person who is responsible for the emotional, instrumental, and financial support of children. This reduction in available members to assume roles places additional burdens on the remaining family members, including children being raised in these households. Children in single-parent families may be expected to take on some of the domestic work (e.g., chores, caring for younger children) to decrease the burden on the only adult in the family.

While single mothers and fathers have to be “all-in-one” parents, some gender differences emerge when considering quality of life. For example, poverty rates are higher in families headed by single mothers than those...
headed by single fathers due to higher male earning capacity (Biblarz and Stacey 2010; Hilton, Desrocher, and Devall 2001). In times of national economic strain, the impact on single-parent households may be even more profound because only one adult is providing the sole financial support for the family.

Cunningham and Knoester (2007) found that single parents reported more symptoms of depression and alcohol abuse than married parents. Mothers in this study reported more traditional depressive symptoms while fathers were more likely to abuse alcohol. Depressive symptoms for parents were associated with experiencing economic strain and with the amount of time spent doing domestic work. More importantly, spending time with children was negatively associated with depression symptoms, suggesting that parents who spent more time with their children were less depressed. Contrasting single and married parenthood, the authors concluded that marriage confers a benefit of greater well-being and provides parents with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. Consistent with these findings, women reported greater life satisfaction around having children when they were in relationships (Kohler, Behrman, and Skytthe 2005). Indeed, the benefits of two-parent households appear to extend beyond support, division of labor, and ability to rely on a partner for assistance, reaching into the realm of adult psychological and emotional well-being.

While single fathers and mothers experience social isolation, decreased standard of living, and restricted workforce options because of child rearing responsibilities, some gender differences emerge (Rossi 1983; Biblarz and Stacey 2010). Rossi (1983) found that fathers received more help from the community and relatives than mothers but were less likely to ask for help if they were not receiving sufficient support. Single fathers made fewer social contacts than single mothers given that male social contacts are made primarily through work and their greater domestic burden limited the time available for socialization with colleagues. Single fathers also reported more worries about meeting the emotional needs of their children, especially daughters. In contrast, single mothers reported greater anxiety around maintaining standards of living and were more concerned about discipline and structure than were fathers.

The literature suggests that additional gender differences between single mothers and fathers exist. In one study, single mothers spent more time with their children, exhibited more skilled parenting, and displayed more affection and warmth than single fathers (Biblarz and Stacey 2010). Single mothers were more actively engaged in their child’s life, knowing the names of
friends, participating in school related activities, and attending to homework and academic responsibilities than were single fathers. Single mothers also had higher levels of parental control than single fathers, which might help explain increased levels of conflict with their children. In other research, maternal partnership transitions in the first five years of a child’s life have been associated with decreases in children’s verbal abilities and increased behavioral problems, especially for boys (Cooper 2011).

In families where single parents remarry, they may find themselves simultaneously working on their marital and parenting relationships. Childbearing may also accompany remarriage, thereby putting the family back to an earlier stage and expanding the time from having children to launching them. In some cases, families may end up launching two sets of children with several years separating the launchings. Without remarriage, the cycle for a single woman more closely parallels the trajectory of intact families, but is more difficult due to financial and domestic burdens and social isolation (Hill 1986).

Taken together, the literature on single parenting suggests that single-parent households face numerous challenges, not the least of which is the increased responsibility of caring for children alone and the greater likelihood that female-headed households will experience greater financial and economic strain. Undoubtedly, single parents experience more parenting stress than do couples. Research on child outcomes in single-parent families presents mixed results. Some studies demonstrate the negative effects of a father’s absence, others report worse outcomes for boys and girls in single-parent families, and yet others find no differences in child outcomes when comparing children being raised by single-parent versus coupled parents.

**NONTRADITIONAL FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS**

Today, many children are being raised by same-sex couples and by single females and males who choose to parent without being in partnered relationships. Lesbian and gay couples account for 1 percent of families (O’Connell 2008), though these figures likely underestimate the number of households with same-sex parents who are raising children. Some have arrived at parenthood through adoption, some through assistive reproductive technology (e.g., donor insemination), and some as stepparents. However, the vast majority of the literature on gender differences in parenting has been based on studies of married, heterosexual couples and studies
of single parents. These studies confound family structure (e.g., married/unmarried, two-parent household/single-parent household) with gender. A smaller literature exists with data on same-sex and different-sex parenting and on single-mother versus single-father families.

The literature on same-sex parenting reveals higher levels of co-parenting satisfaction for lesbian couples and more positive parenting practices including greater parental awareness and concern, better parent/child interaction, more time spent in play and shared interests, and greater warmth, affection, and attachment than for heterosexual couples (Biblarz and Stacey 2010). In both same-sex and heterosexual relationships, mothers engaged in more caregiving than their partners and spent more time caregiving than in paid work. The transition to parenthood exacted a similar toll on heterosexual and lesbian couples, with increased stress and decreased relationship satisfaction reported in both groups. Gay male parents exhibit parenting that is more similar to mothers than fathers in part because when gay men parent, they are actively choosing to be the primary caregivers. In fact, more gay fathers are stay-at-home dads than gay mothers. In considering child outcomes, the majority of studies find similarities in well-being of children raised by heterosexual or lesbian parents (Crowl, Ahn, and Baker 2008; Tasker 2010). Some benefits conferred to children being raised by lesbian parents included greater attachment security, fewer behavioral problems, greater perceptions that parents are available and dependable, and increased capacity for discussing emotional issues.

PARENTING AND WORK

Extensive research demonstrates a greater domestic and psychological burden associated with parenting (Bird 1997). While on the whole, women engage in more domestic duties than men, the largest gender gap is evidenced in married couples (South and Spitze 1994). In fact, being married creates an additional seven hours of work each week for women (Panel Study on Income Dynamics April 2008). When caring for children is added, the gender gap widens further. Research comparing household time spent in paid work, domestic work, and childcare for males and females with and without children in the United States, Australia, Italy, France, and Denmark, found that in all five countries, total time demands were higher for households with children than those without (Craig and Mullan 2010). In households with children, men did more paid work and women did more
domestic work and childcare than in households without children. Even when mothers worked outside the home, they spent significantly more time in childcare activities than fathers in all of the countries studied. On weekdays, mothers in the United States spent an average of 3.6 hours caring for children in contrast to fathers’ 1.3 hours. On weekends, mothers spent 4.2 hours each day caring for children while fathers spent 3.2 hours each day. This study clearly demonstrates that in industrialized societies around the world, parents spend more time doing paid and domestic work than nonparents. Moreover, the time demands are more pronounced for women than for men and as such, women’s daily lives are more significantly impacted when they have children than are the daily lives of men.

Achieving the elusive work-family balance may be less relevant for families in financial distress. Families that depend on two incomes or that rely exclusively on the income of a single parent have fewer degrees of freedom with respect to parenting responsibilities. In dual-earner families, both mothers and fathers reported less parenting distress with more egalitarian division of labor (Deater-Deckard and Scarr 1996). In a period of high unemployment and underemployment, caregiving responsibilities may default to the parent who is not currently in the labor force or who is working less. More and more fathers are finding themselves in positions of head of domestic household due to unemployment. As domestic heads of household, fathers assume the roles and responsibilities related to scheduling, child rearing, and maintaining a household while their partners are out in the workforce earning income that is used to support the family. In times of severe financial stress, the drive to ensure family survival by providing food, shelter, and clothing supersedes other important parental activities such as playing, encouraging achievement, supporting emotional needs, spending time together. Parents under such duress become preoccupied with worries, stress, and needing to work, and may be unavailable at a time when their children might require additional support and reassurance. At the very least, they have less emotional energy and less time available to foster healthy relationships with their children.

CONCLUSION: SUPPORTING PARENTING AND FAMILY SHIFTS ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Families are constantly evolving, dynamic systems. Economic, demographic, and stage models of family life course have been used to capture how families change over time. This chapter explored gender differences and partner
contributions in parenting across the family life course. Life stage theories are instructive in characterizing the stages through which families move as they form, expand, stabilize, and contract. Using these stages of family development also helps illuminate the periods during which gender differences in parenting are more or less salient and influential with respect to child and family outcomes. Importantly, even within a particular life course stage, families continually reorganize and renegotiate role, responsibilities, and expectations to meet the needs of different members. These within stage fluctuations are driven by internal factors and external factors.

The magnitude and influence of gender differences in parenting on child and family outcomes depends, in part, on the stage of the family life course. Throughout child rearing, mothers assume greater responsibility for scheduling, child rearing, and domestic work while fathers engage in more paid work. However, the literature as a whole suggests that both mothers and fathers assume critical parenting responsibilities throughout a child’s life and over the course of the family life cycle. Both fathers and mothers can and do assume similar parenting roles and responsibilities. When two parents are available, roles and responsibilities may be divided and be complementary. When one parent is available, he or she may provide what a child needs to grow and thrive, utilizing more androgynous parenting practices.

It is of the utmost importance that strategies and policies that promote optimal parenting across the family life course be implemented and sustained for both mothers and fathers. Fostering parenting confidence and competence through repeated experiences with children across the family life course is critical to both mothers’ and fathers’ skills and to developing positive and enduring relationships with their children. Repeated, daily interactions—micro-interactions—that occur routinely across different stages of a child and family’s development are woven into the fabric that becomes the family’s relationships. Focusing on these relationships promotes enhanced fathering, mothering, and collaborative parenting. Developing and implementing family-friendly parental leave and workforce policies that take into account the unique circumstances and family constellations in today’s world are necessary to maintain family economic stability and nurture the development of healthy, strong relationships throughout the family life cycle.

REFERENCES


HOW AND WHY IS PARENTHOOD GENDERED?


