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ABSTRACT

Theories about, methods of studying, and definitions of family have undergone profound shifts over the last several decades, and change continues to characterize developmental research on family functioning. In the 1990s, researchers have recognized the need for more descriptive studies as well as more process-oriented work. Research is beginning to integrate knowledge of biological, affective, social, and cognitive processes in families into multi-process frameworks, with the goal of developing models that capture the variability and richness of these processes in different types of families. Sampling strategies have also changed, leading to an increased interest in large, representative national samples. The study of families will likely become an increasingly interdisciplinary enterprise in which sociologists, demographers, anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and psychologists all play a role. (MM)

Family Research in the 1990s

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Families have been a mainstay topic of develcpmental research for decades and as a field we are at least in middle age. However our theories, methods and even our definition of the family have undergone profound shifts over the last several decades and change continues to characterize this domain of research.

To dispel any notions that research in this area has not progressed consider for a moment the kinds of family studies that were common only a few decades ago. A mother might be interviewed about child rearing practices, especially disciplinary techniques (to capture warmth, affection, punitiveness, and love withdrawal) and inquires would be made about perceived similarity between mother and child (to capture identificatory processes). And the mother would often comment as well on the child's conscience development, dependency, adherence to sex-role standards (gender roles were not yet in vogue) or their aggression and impulse control. The theory that largely guided the selection of these outcome measures as well as the explanatory processes such as identification were largely drawn from a Freudian inspired theory dressed up in the language of Hullian learning theory or later in social learning theory terms.

What is most interesting are the processes that were <u>not</u> evident, the methods <u>not</u> used and the assumptions <u>not</u> made about the child's role in the family. Biological processes were given little weight - either in terms of behavioral genetics or in terms of contemporaneous influences such as hormones or other biochemical markers. Second, cognitive processes were given short shrift as explanatory processes; even though child-rearing attitudes were of central interest, the cognition - behavior link was not a focus. The child's role was a passive one and uni-directional effects were widely accepted with parent to child influence being commonly assumed. Interviews dominated as a preferred method and observational methods were underutilized. Moreover the players that constituted families were limited largely to mothers and children. Siblings received attention largely in the context of the pursuit of the still elusive ordinal position effects and fathers were assumed to be

still (to borrow Margaret Mead's phase) a "biological necessity but a social accident." Finally, interest in the contexts in which families existed beyond social class were low as we are continued to believe in the myth of the isolated nuclear family. A lot has changed by the 1990's and in some ways earlier tillers in the family field would hardly recognize their own stomping ground.

In the 1990's we have recognized the need for more descriptive studies as well as more process-oriented work. In part the call for more description flows from our recognition that families are located in historical and cultural circumstances that need to be constantly updated. At the same time, theoretically we have moved beyond only descriptive studies of families to more process-oriented studies. Several processes including biological, affective and cognitive mediational are gaining increased attention. First, biological processes are increasingly recognized; this influence assumes several forms. Recent studies of behavior genetics have produced a potentially important re-evaluation of the role of family research in our continuing attempts to partition genetic and environmental influences. Studies of nonshared environmental influences suggest that within family variation in the experiences of siblings may, in fact, be more important than between family variation. This viewpoint suggests that new designs need to be utilized to capture the impact of nonshared environmental influences. At the same time, it is recognized that the controversy over this shift in emphasis from between to within family variation is far from settled and the implicit failure of non-shared advocates to give sufficient recognition to the measurement of specific and sometimes subtle environmental effects remains a central concern. A second biological trend concerns the measurement of <u>biological processes</u> in families. This assumes a variety of forms from the psychophysiology of families to the measurement of hormones and other biochemical markers. New advances in brain imaging will, in turn, likely to provide new tools for assessing both similarities across family members but also serve as important adjuncts for assessing the dynamics of family

functioning.

Second, and closely related is increasing interest in the role of affective processes in families and how these processes can, in part, account for both variations in family functioning, regulation and outcomes. These studies are increasingly likely to be linked with studies of biological mechanisms, on one hand, and to be embedded in the context of ongoing social processes within a family on the other hand. The decade of the 1990's will continue the trend that began in the 1980's of the study of "socially embedded affect." Several examples illustrate these trends including work by Gottman on emotional interchanges in marital couples or current work on emotional recognition, production and regulation between parent and child.

Third, the cognitive family will be increasingly evident in the this decade, as continuing advances in cognitive science are increasingly recognized by family researchers. Work on beliefs, attitudes, values and attributions will continue to flourish in its own right but more importantly a set of mediating processes that will be central for understanding the behavior and actions of family members. Linking cognition and action remains a major challenge. Increased attention will be given to stories, rituals, narratives and myths -- as vehicles for the transmission of family values and beliefs as part of the socialization process. The work of Barbara Fiese on family rituals and Peggy Miller's use of family narratives are examples of these trends.

A cross-cutting issue that needs more attention is how to interpret microanalytic and moment to moment changes in these processes with longer terms and more stable styles of responding. A number of people have tackled this issue but it remains a major challenge for the field. For example, Gayla Magolin's work on how daily shifts in marital conflict affect parent-child interaction and how this, in turn, relates to longer term assessments of marriage is illustrative of this type of research.

Perhaps even more important in the future will be efforts to integrate multiple processes into a single framework to account for family functioning.

Studies that simultaneously measure sweat, spit and heart rate, assess cognitive models about family myths and tap the emotional tone and intensity that accompanies the retelling of these family stories will be increasingly common. The boundaries across processes are clearly crumbling. Our challenge is to develop models that capture this cross-process complexity in a dynamic fashion that does not do too much injustice to the processes that we are trying to model.

Fourth, the contextualized family will hopefully receive more than attention at the level of rhetoric. The embedness of families in a variety of social contexts will, of course, continue to be described. However more research will focus on "the interrelation of relationships" or the linkage between the family and other social contexts. As in the case of other family research the work will move beyond description of linkage and focus on the mediating processes that account for the mutual influence between contexts. Particularly promising are recent studies of cognition is close relationships, especially the kinds of models of social relationships that children develop in the context of the family that, in turn, serve as a guide for relationships in other contexts. While studies of working models in the attachment tradition represent a good beginning, much more specificity concerning the dimensions that characterize social relationships such as goals, expectations, anticipated consequences are needed in future research (see recent work by Burks & Parke for example). In addition more attention needs to be paid to the bi-directionality of influence especially of children's and adult's experience in extra-familial settings on family functioning. With the possible exception of the day care-attachment issue, the flow of influence has been confined to the impact of families on children's adaptation in extra-familial contexts. Promising work on this issue is being done by Kena Reppetti and her colleagues who have shown the impact of stress in the workplace on family functioning in her studies of air-traffic controllers. More recently her work has addressed the impact of a bad day at school on children's subsequent interaction with family members. The range of contexts

that merit consideration also needs to be expanded to include religious organizations, the legal and welfare systems. Finally, we need to examine the ways in which shifts in technology and the ways in which work roles are organized impact on family roles and family life. Studies of the "electronic family" with modems and faxes and the telecomuting family are needed to understand how shifts toward home-based work via computers are changing family patterns.

Context assumes another meaning beyond the description of setting, such as school or neighborhood namely in reference to culture and historical era. As repeatedly noted in recent years, our choice of samples of families has been highly restricted and "predominantly white and middle class" (Sandra Graham). In prior decades, it was assumed that our theories were universally applicable and relatively little attention was paid to contributions of culture to our explanations. In the 1970's and 1980's more attention was paid to cross-cultural work in the domain of infant social development (Field, Sostek, Vietze, & Leiderman, 1981; Leiderman, Tulkin, & Rosenfeld, 1977). These studies have served as important reminders that the generalizations concerning development derived from studies of American samples may, in fact, not be valid in some other cultural contexts. Although advances have been made in our understanding of families of other races, ethnic groups and social classes, there is a real gap in both our descriptive base and even more so in our understanding of the processes that account for similarities and differences across families of differing cultural heritage.

These variations across ethnic lines represent important opportunities to explore not only the universality of processes and mechanisms of family-peer linkages, but also provide naturally-occurring variations in the relative salience of certain key determinants such as interactive style or emotional expressiveness. As our own culture becomes increasingly diverse it becomes increasingly important that we begin to make a serious commitment to an exploration of this diversity--both theoretically and through systematic empirical inquiry. The search for a balance between processes that are

universal and processes that are unique to particular cultures, racial or ethnic groups probably represents one of our greatest challenges for the future.

Family transitions--both normative and non-normative will continue to be of interest but will move beyond the consideration of single transitions to the evaluation of the impact of multiple transitions on children and adult development.

These theoretical changes imply a variety of methodological shifts. Multiple levels of analysis are an increasingly common strategy. This is reflected in measurement at both the microanalytic level where moment to moment changes are monitored as well as macroanalytic levels, where larger structural shifts in families are detected. In turn, the units of analysis in studies of families include not just individual adults and children but larger units such as dyads, triads and the family system as the unit of analysis per se. Moreover, it will become increasingly common to recognize that these units of analysis each follow their own developmental trajectory and that the interplay among these separate developmental trajectories can produce a diverse set of effects on the functioning of the units themselves (Elder; Parke). The timing and impact of events in families need to take these developmental trajectories into account. To illustrate, the effects of divorce and remarriage are markedly different depending on the age of the child, with adolescence being a time that exacerbates the stress of remarriage for children. In this case an individual level effect is only understood by considering dyadic and family level effects as well.

Finally, our sampling strategies have changed. In earlier eras we were satisfied with our highly selected non-representative samples, is part due to our focus in the search for experimentally-derived process oriented laws of development. A variety of conditions have conspired to increase our awareness of the limitations of samples, including our awareness of cultural and historical diversity, as well as the increasing interest in testing multivariate models of development.

These shifts in our awareness regarding sampling issues have led to an increase in interest in large representative national samples. While this has typically been the domain of sociologists and survey researchers, developmentalists in the early 1990's are showing increase awareness of the potential value of supplementing their usual small sample strategies with these large-sample approaches. The most prominent example is the rise in the use of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY) for the examination of a variety of developmental issues, including divorce, achievement and day care (Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Landsdale & Phillips, 1990). These surveys have several advantages, including the large number of subjects, more representative samples, the multi-faceted range of variables and the longitudinal nature of the designs. In turn, these characteristics permit us to test more complex models of development that require large numbers of subjects. In addition these studies allow examination of connections across content-based domains, as well as encourage and permit interdisciplinary co-operation. Finally, they permit us to test the cultural generality of our models.

It should be underscored that these approaches are not free of methodological limitations. Often the measures are limited to only a few items that must be relied upon to operationalize the construct of interest. Moreover the impact of repeated testing may present problems. In addition, the reliance on easily administered tests which are often based on self-reports may limit the value of these approaches. However, recent waves of the NLSY have included a variety of cognitive and social measures that are based on observed performance rather than self-reports. In any case, the increased utilization of these large-scale data bases is a new and emerging trend in the 1990's that will likely continue throughout this decade.

Newer, innovative approaches that combine levels of sampling are becoming increasingly common as well. As a supplement to a large scale survey approach, researchers are selecting a subsample of subjects for more intensive examination of particular process of interest. Similarly, Reiss, Hetherington, & Plomin (1990) have generated a nationally-representative

sample of step-families and then in a second stage of their work, they have observed these families in interaction tasks in the home. These combined approaches increase both the generalizability of our findings and at the same time allow us to illuminate basic social processes.

In summary, new work will begin to integrate knowledge of biological, affective, social and cognitive processes in families into multi-process frameworks, with the goal of developing models which capture the variability and richness of these processes in different types of families. Moreover, it is likely that the study of families will become an increasingly interdisciplinary enterprise in which sociologists, demographers, anthropologists, psychiatrists, historians and psychologists play a role. The issues are too complex and too important to be left to any single discipline. The family research of the 1990's has changed and perhaps even progressed. At least we are more aware of the complexity that we need to describe and explain. Awareness at least, is a first step toward real progress. Eventually we may not only endorse the metaphor that families function as social systems, but to more beyond mere metaphor to understanding.