Chapter 3
Aging Individuals, Families, and Societies: Micro–Meso–Macro Linkages in the Life Course

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As a conceptual lens with which to view and understand changes over the human life span, the life course perspective has achieved a dominant, some might say near hegemonic, status in social gerontology over the last several decades. It is difficult to overstate the importance of life course concepts to the sociology of aging and the science of human development. In simple terms, the life course framework considers the process of human growth and senescence within historical context, producing unique life experiences and trajectories for different birth cohorts (Elder 1994; Riley and Riley 1994). For its sweeping scope and focus on biographical and historical dynamics, the life course perspective is a powerful tool in the social scientific investigation of aging, but it is not without conceptual and empirical challenges.

The purpose of this chapter is to bring institutional contexts more fully into the purview of the life course framework by developing a dynamic *biographical–institutional–societal* model of the life course that hierarchically links micro, meso, and macro levels of analyses. In our conceptualization, these three temporal metrics simultaneously and interdependently exert a dynamic force on aging individuals. By presenting an empirical example of this model, we hope to increase the likelihood that researchers will consider human development as guided simultaneously by individual, institutional, and societal forces.

We begin the chapter with an overview of the life course perspective in its twin guises as the interplay of individual development with changing historical conditions and institutional structures. Next, we present a model with three levels of analysis that formally incorporates social institutions as pivotal links between individual development and historical conditions. Finally, we discuss a unique methodological design that allows us to test the three-level model by treating the *aging family* as a set of micro-level experiences, a meso-level social institution, and a macro-level societal construct, each fully dynamic with respect to its respective time metric.

Dynamic and Structured Aspects of the Life Course

Underlying the life course perspective is the notion that individuals advance through time in two ways: (1) ontologically through chronological aging and the structured dynamics of development and decline and (2) historically by passing through epochal periods that shape value orientations and give rise to unique opportunities and constraints. When aging and historical time meet in particular configurations – that is, when particular historical periods are experienced

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at key junctions in life – individuals may bear the indelible imprint of the conditions of those periods in their dispositions and value orientations as well as in their stock of social, health, and economic resources. A fundamental principle of the life course perspective is that exposure of birth cohorts to unique events and social conditions variously constrains or expands opportunities that structure life circumstances and pathways. Ryder's (1965) treatise on inter-cohort change as the engine of societal transformation formalized in earlier discussions by Mannheim (1952) about how "fresh contact" with the world by newly minted cohorts brought about social change through questioning the implicit arrangements and taken-for-granted conventions forged by their predecessors.

Treatment of the role of history in shaping human lives has several traditions in life course scholarship that we divide into three general approaches: those focusing on *great-events*, *cultural Zeitgeists,* and *institutional change*. We discuss each approach in turn below.

Great Events

The life course perspective has gathered some of its most compelling support through evidence showing how human lives are abruptly influenced by great events such as wars and economic depressions. Consideration of cataclysmic historical events of World War II, the Great Depression, and the farm crisis of the 1980s has shed light on how life choices and life chances are structured by far-reaching events (Elder and Conger 2002; Clausen 1993; Conger and Elder 1994). Elder's epic research into the children of the Great Depression (Elder 1974) is a transformative piece in life course scholarship for demonstrating the ripple effect of an economic catastrophe on the life paths of a whole generation in terms of subsequent timing of marriage, family formation, schooling, and careers. The macro-policy environment has been an object of study as well in life course research, such as in investigations of how military service and the periodicity of benefits affect career development and long-term quality of life among veterans (London and Wilmoth 2006; Settersten 2006).

Political transformations provide the opportunity to conduct natural experiments that test how sudden macro-societal change alters the social institutions that govern the metabolism of human lives. Notable in this regard is the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany, a seminal historical event that obliterated the social order of the former East Germany, shifting schedules of educational achievement, career advancement, family formation, and fertility in subpopulations at risk (Diewald et al. 2006). As a result of reunification, retired East Germans also saw increases to their state pensions that in conjunction with a strong sense of family duty resulted in increased economic transfers from older to younger generations (Kohli 2005).

Cultural Zeitgeist

A second stream of life course scholarship that we label the *cultural Zeitgeist* approach most often focuses on the social climate to which birth cohorts are exposed at critical junctions in their lives. For instance, shifting gender norms and lifestyle preferences may be incorporated by individuals differently depending on when in the lifespan those shifts were encountered. Formally, a cohort-based model focuses on how cohort turnover – the process by which new birth cohorts replace older ones – changes attitudes and behaviors in the population. Key to this logic is that birth cohorts are indelibly shaped in their world views by the historical conditions into which they emerge as newly

formed adults. Such a mechanism is suggested in the *impressionable youth hypothesis* positing that fundamental values are absorbed from the wider culture during the early adult years (when world views and preferences are beginning to coalesce) and then remain fairly stable over the remainder of the life span (Alwin et al. 1991). The concept of cohort turnover has become a staple in the study of how social change results from cohort differentiation, and has been related to such diverse outcomes as socio-political orientations (Alwin and Krosnick 1991), gender role attitudes (Brooks and Bolzendahl 2004), crime rates (O'Brien et al. 1999), and perceived age discrimination (Gee et al. 2007).

Another application of the *Zeitgeist* approach traces evolutionary change in society and its influence on the entire population (a "period" effect). In this version, the force of history and aging may be seen as simultaneously and independently influencing individuals as they age across the lifespan. One multi-generational longitudinal study of competing values of individualism and collectivism from the 1970s through the 1990s found that both values strengthened over time. Collectivism strengthened due to chronological aging (family and social ties gaining salience in middle and old age) and individualism strengthened due to advancing historical time (presumably a post-1970s shift in the socio-political climate toward favoring self-interest over altruism) (Roberts and Bengtson 1999). What is clear from the overall evidence is that several time clocks operating at personal and historical levels of analysis guide the pace and junctions of human development.

Institutional Change

An *institutional* approach to the life course stresses how the major institutions of society – social organizations such as the workplace, the educational system, and the family – guide orderly transitions in role and status positions across the lifespan by fostering collective expectations for an orderly life path, and by providing incentives and disincentives for particular actions. When institutional arrangements change or their rules are in flux, new social conventions may emerge as older ones are discarded. For instance, institutional age markers for appropriate role transitions in families are malleable based on the changing normative basis of family life guiding if and when to marry and have children (Bengtson and Allen 1993). Much contemporary commentary has focused on the *deinstitutionalization* of the life course, by which it is generally meant that the coercive power of social institutions to standardize life transitions by age has ebbed, in favor of greater individual discretion and flexibility in the timing of important life transition decisions of marriage, fertility, schooling, work, and retirement (Settersten 2003).

Age constraints on role transitions have weakened leading to a variegated set of lifestyle options available to individuals (Bruckner and Mayer 2005; MacMillan and Copher 2005). A study of family and non-family role configurations in two cohorts of British young adults separated by 12 years found a distinct move away from traditional social arrangements, related to marriage and children, to a diversified set of arrangements that were more focused on career and less on family (Ross et al. 2009). Some social theorists suggest that de-standardization of the life course is the result of economic turbulence and globalization which rendered the normal life course and its institutionalized pathways less certain. In late modern society, labor markets are increasingly fluid and contingent, while individuals have greater freedom but also less certainty (Phillipson 2003). Because of greater difficulty in building a work career with continuity and security, family life and human capital acquisition are also less certain. The timing of individual life course transitions has been affected, as reflected in the increasingly later ages of marriage and childbearing, delayed completion of education, and later ages of retirement (Heinz 2003). That the de-evolution of a single dominant cultural script is predicated on interdependent structural social changes – such as increased

economic inequality, entry of women into the labor force, diversity in family structure – lies at the heart of the idea that life courses are institutionally embedded and multi-level in form.

While institutional approaches include cohort-turnover and historical change in their formulations, they tend to focus on social institutions as mediating bridges between macro-historical conditions and individual outcomes, providing explicit middle-range explanations for *how* social change occurs. Institutional approaches are also consistent with ecological orientations toward the life course that conceptualize human lives as hierarchically embedded within families, communities, political regimes, and, the most distal of all, global systems (Bronfenbrenner 1995; Dannefer 2003).

The life course perspective has roots in the institutionally focused conceptual framework developed by Riley and Riley (1994) known as the age and society paradigm. Their model specifies that lifespan development could be understood as the process by which human lives are shaped by the social institutions – family, education, work, and leisure – through which they passed on their developmental journey (Riley et al. 1972). This approach provided a sharp analytic lens to describe how key life transitions are organized by the expectations and opportunities structured into the institutions of society at the particular historical time they are encountered. A key tenet of this perspective is that social institutions, while not static, change at a considerably slower pace than emergent needs and preferences rising out of cohort replacement. In other words, lifestyles transform faster than the institutions meant to accommodate them, a phenomenon known as structural lag (Riley et al. 1994). Such different rates of change between cohort flows and institutional transformation may lead to dilemmas such as workplace polices incapable of accommodating older workers who prefer to remain in the labor force, and family support systems unable to serve elders in divorced and remarried families.

A Dynamic Biographical–Institutional–Societal Model of the Life Course

Using the life course perspective as a sensitizing concept, we propose a *biographical–institutional–societal* model of life span development that hierarchically links three levels of analysis: micro, meso, and macro. Our model resembles Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1995) positing that human development unfolds within multiple social spaces and embedded contextual systems that spiral outward from micro to macro-realms. In our conceptualization, three temporal metrics simultaneously and interdependently exert dynamic force on aging individuals through time (see Fig. 3.1).

At the micro-biographical level, we note that physical, mental, social, and financial forms of well-being evolve over biographical time as individuals grow up and grow old through the life-span. At the meso-institutional level, family, education, work, and leisure institutions guide expectations and provide incentive (and disincentive) structures for making (or delaying) life transitions and taking (or not taking) certain pathways. Finally at the macro-societal level, the wider social environment exerts influence over the population by virtue of society-wide norms, economic conditions, public policies, and demographic structures (cataclysmic events such as depressions and wars fit into this category). Three important contributions of the model are that (1) social institutions are considered to be dynamic, evolving with individuals and societies through time and most likely at different rates, (2) each of the three levels is considered mutually interdependent with the other two (for example, changes at the micro-biographical level when aggregated can produce institutional and societal change), and (3) substantive areas within each level interact to produce unique outcomes (for example, at the meso-institutional level, incompatibility between work and family institutions may result in individual manifestations of stress).

As with many conceptual schemes with a multiplicity of inputs, the three-level model presented in Fig. 3.1 requires quite elaborate data to empirically articulate. Few, if any, studies are

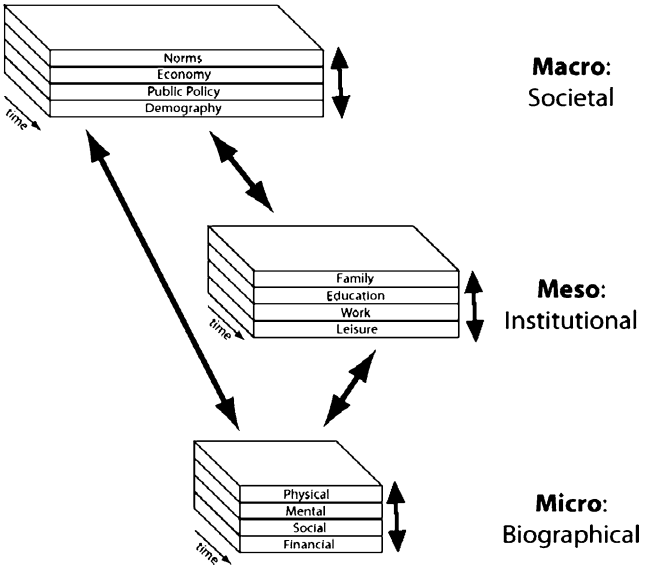

Fig. 3.1 Dynamic biographical–institutional–societal model of the life course

capable of providing a test of such a model; most studies only examine two levels of the model. Therefore, before describing a unique research design and data set capable of investigating this three-level model, we briefly review an example of recent empirical work that assesses one of the two levels of the model: macro–micro, macro–meso, and meso–micro.

Multi-Level Life Course Approaches

Macro-Level Effects

The widest distance across levels is that between national state policies and the manner in which intimate social relationships are maintained. The case has been made that cultural styles of interaction, national in character, map onto the social welfare gradient (Turner 1988). Using a more structural orientation, Mayer (2009) writes that "progress may be achieved by…moving away from developmental origins towards a specific understanding of life courses as institutionally embedded purposive action," which, he adds in the European tradition, has focused on how welfare state policies have shaped the organization of social life.

At the macro-level the demands placed on families are structured by the generosity of welfare state provisions variably releasing or obligating filial duties of adult children toward older parents and affecting the emotional tenor of their relationships. Micro-interactions in the family may be shaped by the political economies and cultures within which those interactions are embedded, specifically the way in which welfare production is allocated among state, market, and family. A commonly used gradient of nation-states puts *social democratic* nations at one end of the spectrum (citizens are incorporated under a single universal benefits system) and *residualist* nations at the other end (benefits provided by the state only when personal resources are exhausted), with the middle ground occupied by *liberal-market* nations (benefits are means-tested and modest social insurance plans exist) (Esping-Anderson 1999). Welfare production influences helping behavior,

interaction, and coresidence between adult generations with generally weaker filial behavior in the social democratic states of northern Europe than in the residualist states of southern Europe (e.g., Brandt et al. 2009; Broese van Groenou et al. 2006; Hank 2007).

Policy changes within a welfare regime may motivate behavioral change at the micro-level. For instance, a study in Sweden found that an increase in the proportion of elders supported by family members followed the restriction of eligibility rules for home-help services (Sundstrom et al. 2002). In another example – but from a less-developed country – Yi (1996) found that fertility rates declined in an area of rural China where an experimental pension program was initiated, concluding that pension availability weakened the belief that having children was necessary to ensure old age security.

In a study of the influence of national membership on intimacy in close personal relationships (arguably representing the largest gap between macro- and micro-environments), Silverstein et al. (2010) examined how state structures influence the emotional quality of older parent–child relations in England, Germany, Israel, Norway, Spain, and the United States. The authors found four relational styles across the six nations: (1) *detached* – low affection and low conflict, (2) *amicable* – high affection and low conflict as, (3) *disharmonious* – low affection and high conflict, and (4) *ambivalent* – high affection and high conflict. Further, the styles were distributed differently across the six nations studied. What macro-level characteristics might explain these national differences? Relationships measured in the United States were more than twice as likely as those in the other national samples to be characterized as *disharmonious* and *detached* – the two relational styles with higher levels of conflict. Compared to its national counterparts, the United States embraces a stronger individualistic ideology with respect to kinship ties and a relatively weak public sector that may serve to obligate children to a degree not seen in the other countries (Hollinger and Haller 1990). The fact that relationships in Israel were more likely than average-to-be *ambivalent* reflects a culture that emphasizes interpersonal engagement and legitimates mild forms of conflict in intimate relationships. The greater prevalence of emotional *detachment* among parent–child relationships in Germany possibly reflects an intergenerational schism rooted in the association of older parents with the National Socialist regime, a hypothesis suggested by Szydlik (1996). The finding that intergenerational relationships in England are more likely than those in other nations to be emotionally close and free of conflict could result from a cultural tendency to inhibit the expression of strong negative emotion (Peabody 1985).

Meso-Level Effects

The family represents an institution that has been in flux over the last several decades with profound implications for how individuals live their daily lives and the resources that are available to them. A large amount of attention has been devoted to tracing the micro-level consequences of divorce and remarriage, and non-marital childbearing, forcing a reconsideration of how families and kinship relations are to be defined. No longer is there a single culturally dominant family pattern, but rather a multiplicity of family and household arrangements whose forms are fluid. Indeed, the very definition of "family" has become ambiguous (Stacey 1991). Schmeeckle et al. (2006), for instance, found substantial cohort variation in the extent to which adult children perceived their parents, stepparents, and former step-parents as full family members. These findings have implications for the caregiving of aging stepparents by adult stepchildren in cohorts where family structures have increasingly diversified and become more complex.

As we discussed earlier, institutional domains are rarely independent and it is often unrealistic to partition an institution as if it were isolated from the others in society. The institutions of family and work, for instance, mutually interact but also compete with each other for the time and energy of

their constituent members. Within a multi-level perspective the protections and benefits afforded workers (e.g., equal opportunity laws, family-leave policies), and macro-economic conditions can be seen to influence interfaces between the institutions of work and family life.

One of the greatest social changes of the last half-century has been the increase of women and mothers in the paid labor force (Sayer et al. 2005). While this trend is undeniably favorable for women and the financial well-being of families, it also means that there are fewer family members available for care of family dependents such as the very young and the very old. Changes to the economy – particularly stagnation in real wages since the 1970s and relative growth of the service economy – have increased economic uncertainty in many families, consequently increasing the amount of time devoted to labor market activities. These changes have made it increasingly more difficult for families to simultaneously meet the demands of work and the obligations of family life (Moen 2003).

Empirical Test of a Biographical–Institutional–Societal Model of the Life Course

Our multi-level approach to human development presented in Fig. 3.1 takes its cue from versions of the life course that speak to historical events and epochs, as well as social institutions in structuring individual outcomes. In this section, we use intergenerational family relations as our social realm of interest and present an empirical example to explore the linkage between meso- and macro-realms on emotional cohesion between older parents and their adult children. We examine long-term change in the strength of emotional cohesion between generations as a function of changing family structures at the institutional level, and weakening strength of filial obligation at the societal level.

We rely on the dialectic between individual and contextual characteristics to examine how intergenerational relationships are shaped by the historical epochs within which they are embedded. In our empirical example we focus on two fundamental changes in families over the last few decades: (1) change at the meso-level in family structure as a result of increases in divorce, remarriage, and step-family formation and (2) change at the macro-level in norms of filial responsibility that reflect a societal drift from values of collectivism to those of individualism. We review these trends briefly below.

Change in Family Structures (Meso-Level)

Increases in marital disruption and remarriage since the 1970s have introduced uncertainties about the quality of intergenerational relations and have cast doubt on whether adult children will continue to serve as resources to their aging parents. The structure of the family within which a child is raised defines a host of social, economic, and psychological factors that set a standard for how intergenerational relations are maintained through the life span. Non-traditional family structures may adversely affect the quality of intergenerational relationships by engendering interpersonal strains with divorced parents and step parents (Amato 1994; Cherlin 1978) that may put children at risk of having distant relations with them into adulthood (Aquilino 1994; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Evidence is accumulating that the legacy of divorce and remarriage extends to later life, suppressing the economic and instrumental support exchanged between adult children and their divorced parents, stepparents, and remarried biological parents (Aquilino 2005; Ganong and Coleman 1999; Pezzin and Schone 1999). Yet cross-generational studies capable of examining the historical effects of the divorce-revolution are rare, as almost all studies to date have relied on inferences about divorce and remarriage that have occurred in a single generation.

Weakening Norms of Filial Responsibility (Macro-Level)

Filial responsibility as a social norm reflects the generalized expectation that family members should be central in each other's lives and perform particular functions with respect to each other. Much has been written about the declining importance of the family in American society over recent decades. Social scientists, historians, and cultural critics have noted that values of collectivism – including those of familism – have been overtaken by values of individualism (Bellah et al. 1985; Popenoe 1993; Putnam 1995). Gans and Silverstein (2006), for instance, found that the strength of parent-care norms weakened between the 1980s and 1990s, a trend that is not disconnected from marital instability. Some research suggests that children of divorcees feel less filial obligation to their aging parents than those who have not experienced a marital disruption (Ganong and Coleman 1999).

The Generational–Sequential Design

The superficial simplicity of the model in Fig. 3.1 belies the complexity of its underlying assumption that individuals may age differently depending on *the historical time and personal age when the institutions are experienced.* Timing of exposure to history is a key feature of our rendering of the life course paradigm, but cross-generational comparisons are difficult because generations pass asynchronously through historical time such that earlier and later generations experience the same historical periods at different life stages, or age through the same life stages in different historical periods. To remedy this difficulty, we advance a *generational–sequential design* that examines parents and their adult children at the same chronological age but in different historical periods, essentially standardizing age of exposure to different macro-institutional conditions. An example of this design is presented in Fig. 3.2 where parents and their adult children are represented as arrows being

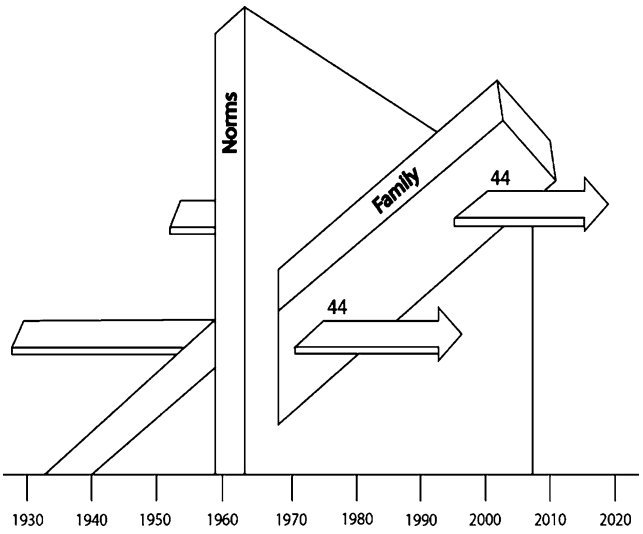

Fig. 3.2 Generation-sequential design: examines parents and adult children at the same chronological age (44 years) but in different historical periods (1970 vs. 1997)

exposed to different macro-institutional conditions (the intersection of changing norms of filial responsibility and changing family structures) at the same chronological age (44 years) but in different historical periods (1970 and 1997, respectively).

Data Set

To examine cross-cohort variation in intergenerational relations we use data from the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) (see Bengtson 1975). The LSOG began in 1971 with a survey of 2044 respondents from 328 three-generation families living in southern California and including grandparents (G1s), parents (G2), and adult children (G3). Beginning in 1985, follow-up surveys were administered every 3–5 years until 2005.

The LSOG is unique in that it follows individuals over biographical time, includes family members in linked generations, and follows them over a period of history when many of the social changes affecting families occurred. Combining these special design features leads to an important feature of the LSOG: the capacity to compare human development of adjacent generations within the same family lineages and at the same ages but under different socio-historical conditions. With data collected over three decades we provide an empirical example that examines age-standardized historical differences between generations in the strength of emotional cohesion with aging parents, as well as potential explanations for observed differences based on several social trends over the period of study.

The LSOG due to its unique multi-generational design and long time horizon allows such cross-generational comparisons. Unlike typical cohort models, the generational–sequential design is capable of accounting for the fact that individuals are intimately tied to members of other cohorts through common family membership. Approaches that use repeated cross-sectional data are highly useful for separating aging and cohort effects in *aggregates* of individuals, but are not fully able to investigate human development as an intra-familial process. A core principle of the life course paradigm is that human lives are interdependent with each other particularly as they are linked by family bonds.

Methodological Considerations

There are not insignificant practical difficulties when life course propositions are tested empirically. Attributing individual phenomena to the character of historical periods is a well-known challenge in contextual analyses given the myriad number of ways that contexts differ from one another and the often large amount of heterogeneity within them; data demands may be quite substantial.

In approaching our topic, we rely on the principle of *methodological individualism* – the idea that contexts may be represented by the aggregation of their constituent elements (Weber 1968). Extending (or reversing) this logic, we argue that if the size of contextual variation or change in a social phenomenon is reduced after statistically controlling for individual characteristics, then those characteristics hold the promise of being explanatory factors or causal agents at the contextual level (even though they are measured at the unit level). This logic is implicit in Schooler's (1996) argument that the influence of national context on a seemingly individualized psychological process is identifiable if variables representing alternative theoretical explanations are controlled *at the individual level*. Such an approach also can be used to make cross-cohort comparisons where historical location can be considered a context.

Our empirical model includes 554 G2 parents and their G3 children measured between 1971 and 1997 when the large majority of children reached the age their parents were at baseline. The mean age of generational convergence is 44 years. The outcome variable of interest is emotional closeness with mothers and fathers. To test for historical effects, we match each generational pair so they are aligned at a common age. In this approach, "generation" becomes a dummy variable to assess G3–G2 differences in the strength of intergenerational ties when the generations are approximately at the same life stage: a negative value indicates weaker intergenerational cohesion of G3 children compared to their G2 parents. Estimates are generated using Hierarchical Linear Models that consider age, historical time, and family membership.

Results

We describe the most important results of our analysis in Fig. 3.3. The first set of bars (for relations with mothers and fathers) shows a statistically significant historical difference, with G3s feeling less close to their parents than G2s felt toward *their* parents several decades earlier. In other words, using age-matched controls we found that intergenerational cohesion has weakened over historical time. We then assessed whether this generational difference was mediated by marital disruption in either of the two generations as a manifestation of institutional change in the family. The second set of bars in Fig. 3.3 shows that with marital disruption controlled there is a discernable and significant reduction in the historical loss of intergenerational cohesion, though the decline is still statistically significant. Next we examine the contribution of weakened norms of familism as an element of societal change in the salience of family life measured as the importance of discussing important life decisions with family members, and degree to which personal life-styles choices should conform to family wishes. The third set of bars shows that when norms of familism are controlled, the historical differences between generations shrinks toward zero and loses their statistical significance. Thus, we attribute historical weakening in the strength of emotional bonds between generations primarily to a secular decline in the centrality of family life. Beyond the particulars of our analysis, we demonstrate the potential of a generational–sequential design to isolate historical effects in micro-level data by using age-standardized differences and then attribute these effects to specific institutional and societal forces to which adjacent generations have differential exposure. In doing so, we also intend to alleviate anxiety over the sometimes daunting complexity and theoretical abstractness of the life course perspective – in terms of representing multiple dynamic and hierarchically embedded systems – by connecting it to the more practical realm of operational definitions, empirical modeling, and statistical method.

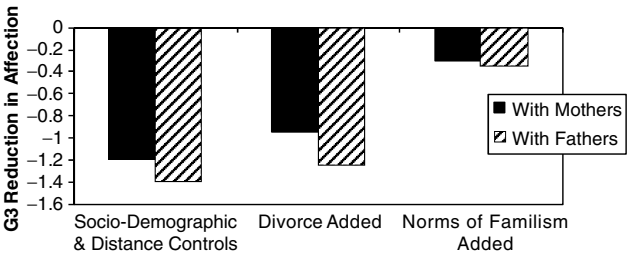

Fig. 3.3 Average G3–G2 difference in affection for parents when generations are age-matched ($M = 44$ years)

Conclusion: The Life Course as a Sensitizing Concept in Multi-Level Studies

In this chapter we considered the life course paradigm in aging research as a system of conditions that includes micro-biographical, meso-institutional, and macro-societal dimensions all moving dynamically through time and subject to change. The study of human development has deep roots in the biographical–historical framework, relying on age-period-cohort models to study the extent to which cohort replacement is responsible for social change and cohort constancy is responsible for social stability. Less considered are the institutional forces that directly influence micro-conditions and that mediate or explain the influence of macro-conditions on human lives. In synthesizing these perspectives – what might be summarized crudely as dynamic and structural perspectives – we developed a fully dynamic model of nested social processes based on the aging of individuals, the reconfiguring of social institutions, and the transformation of societies.

To bridge the division between the theoretical and empirical, we presented an example of research that showed how historically comparative research can gain explanatory leverage by selectively including theoretically relevant variables into predictive models. We employed a generational–sequential model showing that contemporary adult children maintain lower-quality intergenerational relationships when compared to those maintained by *their* parents up to one-quarter century earlier. Mapping marital disruption and norms of familism onto our multi-level model of the life course suggests the importance of institutional-level and societal-level factors as potent historical explanations for the decline in the emotional tone of intergenerational relationships within families.

The term *life course* has been applied in numerous ways to important questions in sociology, social psychology, and gerontology. While many life-course studies employ longitudinal data, a longitudinal design – even if long-term – is not sufficient, but neither is it necessary for research to gain the life course appellation. For the *life course* to have utility as an operational concept – beyond being a general heuristic to describe long-term change – it needs to be distinguished from the many other terms used to describe dynamic systems in the social and behavioral sciences (the most common being life-span development). Here the multi-level distinction may be of use. In our opinion, any formulation of a research question in the life course tradition must at minimum consider how a social context (macro and/or meso) exerts a force on more micro-level outcomes, and at its best treat social contexts as evolving through time.

We also note that the method of data collection is of lesser concern as studies invoking the life course need not be longitudinal. Retrospectively reported data may invoke the life course paradigm when accounting for the influence of divergent social contexts experienced in youth on contemporary adult behaviors (see Axinn and Yabiku 2001 for an excellent example using retrospective reports to examine how dynamic community contexts affect fertility in Nepal; see also Mayer 2007 for an application using retrospective data). A comparison of groups that experienced the same historical conditions but with different types of exposure – such as the disadvantages experienced by aging WW II combat veterans (Elder et al. 1997) – provides purchase on the specific aspects of historical contexts that matter for life trajectories.

In reviewing the literature and looking ahead, we make three general suggestions by which life course research will benefit from considering aging as a multi-level, hierarchical phenomenon and move the "field" of life course studies closer to achieving its promise.

Multi-National Studies

Our impression from reviewing the empirical literature in life course studies is that publications making use of multi-level designs have proliferated, offering insights into how variation in state

(or lower level) structures influence life choices and life chances throughout the life span. Multi-national studies, in particular, are essential for documenting the importance of the macro-level environments for micro-level processes and are to be celebrated. However, as a general rule, the larger and more heterogeneous the contexts of interest, the more difficult it is to make valid causal inferences about their influence on life choices and life chances over the life-span. Contextual level variables such as gross domestic product or public spending on dependent populations are certainly useful in documenting how nations differ on dimensions of theoretical interest, but remain essentially proxies for what remains a complex set of pathways leading from welfare regimes to individual outcomes. In addition, the attribution of causal agency to macro-level characteristics is best avoided. Consider the following counter-factual thought experiment: were the United States to instantly possess a Scandinavian-type welfare system, would outcomes (defined in terms of less inequality, improved life expectancy, and increased women's labor participation) be the same, or of the same magnitude, as that achieved by Sweden, Norway, and Denmark over the second half of the 20th century? Our guess is probably not, given the isomorphism between politics, economics, culture, and historical timing that determine how a national program of this type comes into being and is maintained over time. Nevertheless, increasing diversity in represented contexts and better targeting macro-measures to suit the object of study will better insure that multi-level studies will converge on fundamental truths about how social environments influence individuals – whether those environments are nations, regions, or birth cohorts.

Institutional Change

Consideration of dynamic institutions represents one of the most promising areas in hierarchical representations of life course studies. As we discussed, naturally occurring historical change presents opportunities to explore natural experiments at the population level. Yet few societal level factors fluctuate sufficiently to have demonstrable impacts over time (with the possible exception of the impact of German reunification and more generally the breakup of the Soviet empire) and those that do produce a myriad of changes, the effects of which are difficult to isolate. Specific changes in public policy present opportunities to more precisely link the macro to the meso and then to the micro. For instance, demographic change in the aging of populations may engender policy changes such as reduced and/or delayed retirement benefits (or in the case of less-developed Asian countries the initiation of such benefits) that ultimately alter work and family decisions. Japan's universal long-term care insurance, instituted in part because of dramatic population aging and alarming fertility reductions, may have the unintended consequence of further reducing fertility and shifting the responsibility of caregiving farther away from family members (see Takagi and Silverstein 2006 for a similar discussion with regard to older parent–child coresidence in Japan).

Cross-Generational Correspondence

Finally we note that much of the literature on social change and societal transformation is rooted in the idea that each birth cohort that arrives into adulthood (re)invents its social milieu. Although many studies have shown cohort replacement to be the engine of social change in a given population over time, they tend to ignore the main societal institution that promotes continuity from one generation to another – namely, the multi-generational family. The life course principle of *linked lives* provides a useful metaphor for describing how family members are interdependent with each other, particularly as they are linked across generations by bonds of kinship. The family as the primary

meso-social institution charged with maintaining societal stability serves as the conduit through which values and resources are reproduced in subsequent generations through time. The paradox that continuity is maintained in society even during times of great transformation has yet to be theoretically or empirically integrated into life course scholarship on social change and represents a promising direction for future development.

At its core, the life course perspective is a conceptualization of life span development as guided by the twin axes of biographical and historical time. In this chapter we strived to bring social institutions more fully under the life course umbrella and present an empirical strategy that teases out institutional explanations underlying descriptive differences in life pathways between social aggregates – in our example generations rooted in historical time. We hope that by laying out the issues in this way researchers will be more likely to consider human development as guided by micro-individual, meso-institutional, and macro-societal forces, and, where the data exist, to render as complete a depiction of the embedded life span as possible.

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