



FAMILY CAREERS

**Rethinking the
Developmental
Perspective**

Joan Aldous

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Preface

⊗ An observer could characterize what has happened to the family scene in the United States over the past several decades as a transformation of seismic proportions. There have always been other families besides the garden variety of husband, wife, and children, just as women along with men have long contributed to the domestic purse. Among present-day families, however, there are, in addition to nuclear families, sizable numbers of single-parent households: some due to death of a spouse, others resulting from divorce, and still others the outcome of parenthood outside of marriage. In addition to the other family groups, there are stepfamilies and cohabiting partners. All of them can be labeled *families*, because they constitute intimate residential units of some duration joined by blood, marriage, or custom and are usually to some degree economically interdependent. Also, with a majority of women joining the paid labor force, regardless of marital or parental status, breadwinning is no longer associated with only one gender, although homemaking largely continues to be.

Family Careers: Rethinking the Developmental Perspective is the result of just that—a rethinking. To take account of these changes in families, I have had to expand and modify

the family development framework to demarcate the expectable sequences, transitions, and outcomes of the various families present in the current era. The thought I have devoted to this task, along with the research I have examined, has convinced me that in the lives of families there are continuities in the midst of transformation. Otherwise, how could we gauge the degree of change? Consequently, I am able to write of the patterns that characterize different family composition types from their formation until their dissolution. The framework enabled me to trace the careers of domestic units, whether initiated by marriage, by living together, or by parenthood, until their dissolution due to the death of a partner, a divorce, or children's leaving home, often to begin their own family careers.

To do all this in the following pages, I present in the first segment of the book the concepts that differentiate family development from other approaches to understanding families. The next sections contain an application of the concepts to what research tells us about turning points within the family subunits. In my discussion of them, I begin with an analysis of the patterns in partner relations over time, followed by my depiction of the expectable shifts in the interrelations of

parents and children. Both these sets of chapters cover long periods of time. Marriages and intergenerational relations after children have left their parents' hearths can be measured in decades. This is also true of sibling interactions, but the lack of research on this subject limits my consideration of this trajectory to one chapter.

Using the method of presenting the careers of partners, parents and children, and siblings separately has distinct advantages. Take partnership relations as an example. By considering the relation at its inception and then looking at the shifts that the coming of children entails, I can compare those with children and those who do not make this transition. I am able to focus on the partners and the quality of their relation as it modifies or breaks and re-forms within the context of parenthood. Similarly, in applying family development analysis to parents and children, I can discuss not only parents without partners and their children but also two-parent families, whether the parents were biological or step-parents. These different family sequences all occur within the contexts of parents' work and children's school attendance, as indicated in these chapters. In turn, the chapter on siblings provides an opportunity to concentrate on what can be the most durable of family ties as affected by relations with parents, partners, and own children.

After putting together all the pieces of concepts and research relevant to the family development framework, I am more than ever convinced of its usefulness in making sense of the family puzzle. To convince others of this, I have tried to make the presentation clear, informative, and thought provoking. To help accomplish these goals, I have included a number of quotations from letters I have received, comments from interviews, literary excerpts, and questions to advice columnists. These illustrations and my own explanations of family development are designed to sustain the interest of readers and to pique their curiosity. My hope is that you will want to continue reading and so learn about the perspective. After all, it is not an inconsiderable talent to know something about what to expect in family lives over the extended periods of their existence.

Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time in my thoughts. I have correspondence concerning it that dates back more than 10 years. Its slowness in appearing was due not just to the demise of one publishing company committed to the work and another's incorporation into a larger entity uninterested in academic publishing. Nor was it because of the mounting evidence of fundamental changes in U.S. families, changes that would necessitate a major rethinking and rewriting on my part of my initial venture into exploring family careers. The major difficulty was my own reluctance to put aside other tantalizing opportunities for the sustained and concentrated effort doing the book would require. I like to have a mix of ongoing projects, so when ideas cease to flow on one, I can turn to another. With a book, I find this is less possible. I finally decided that if I was ever going to fulfill my pledge to myself and others to work on the book, I'd better finish it. The result is in your hands.

That I persevered and reached my goal is due to several persons. Certainly, one of the most important was Linda Williams. She skillfully translated my handwriting and arcane notes on how to find portions of sentences on the top, back, and bottom of pages into readable typescript. She also patiently checked references and quotations. Adding all of these tasks together resulted in an amount of time that her husband, Joe Williams, estimates to be 14% of her life. I am grateful for her endurance, her patience, and her sense of humor. All of them made putting the book together if not always a pleasure, at least a satisfying part of my life. Some time earlier, one of her predecessors, good friend Adele Lanan, assured me she thought the book would become a reality. The memory of those words eased me over a number of difficult writing periods. Tracy Westlake, the successor to Linda Williams, completed preparing the book manuscript for publication. It was into her capable hands that I entrusted final chapter drafts and the responsibility for obtaining the permissions to use excerpts from other writers. My ideas for new charts became a reality thanks to the computer know-how of

Robert D. Woodberry, who built on the work of Paul Perl. Over the years of the book's incubation, Bob, Ruihong Zhang, and Christine Torgerson did the library work that kept me apprised not only of the most recent U.S. census reports on families but also of articles and books relevant to my subject.

The past counsel of Mitch Allen, my longtime editor at Sage and now publisher of AltaMira Press, encouraged me to keep writing when my interest was waning. Jim Nageotte, my current editor, provided sound advice when he assured me that no completed books were ever perfect. This statement provided the rationale for my finally putting an end to searching for the most applicable research study. And editorial assistant, Nancy S. Hale, answered my many questions as to manuscript format.

I continue to find discussions with University of Notre Dame colleague, David Klein, on issues large and small, exciting and thought provoking. He has kept after me to do the book and supplied suggestions that provided creative sustenance to my thinking and thereby improved it. Reviewers, Duane Crawford, of Texas Tech University, and James White, of the University of British Columbia, pointed out interpretations of research I needed to reconsider and murky writing that weakened my discussion. I am grateful to them, as my readers should be. Another intellectual debt I continue to owe is to Reuben Hill. As my thesis adviser, friend, and former university colleague, he introduced me to the family development perspective and was an unfailing source of ideas and support. His continuing influence is reflected in the book's organization and its content.

I also want to remember my parents. My childhood was a happy one. My father, a professor of agronomy at what was then Kansas State College, delighted in his family. A special treat was when he would take me along to his experimental plots, where he inspected the various strains of grass he was trying to improve. (He was the only person I have known whose doctoral thesis was written before he began his official Ph.D. training.) A strain of grass now bears his name, a tribute to his pioneering work on pasture grasses. I like to think my own interest in research goes back

to those pleasant expeditions. His sudden death, just as he was experiencing the joy of applying his research findings to the drought-fighting activities of the newly established U.S. Soil Conservation Service, was my first experience of great personal loss.

That this blow was softened by a host of warm memories is due to the indomitable spirit of my mother. Only as an adult was I able to appreciate what his death must have meant to her, for theirs was a genuinely happy marriage. They used to joke that their only quarrels occurred on moving days, and certainly my remembrance of family arguments is limited to my own disagreements with my sister. Having to support two daughters and also make a life of her own, my mother set off for New York City and obtained her master's degree from Columbia Teachers College during that institution's heyday. She returned to a position in the Department of Family and Child Development at Kansas State University, where she taught a generation of home economics students about marriage relations and the development and guidance of youths, the latter a course she inaugurated and applied to her own family.

Through her example and those of her friends, it was clear to me that women could lead just as happy lives by writing, doing research, teaching, and traveling as they could being wives and mothers. Consequently, I have never had any difficulty in visualizing women competently engaged in a whole cornucopia of roles.

It should be apparent from all this that I have been blessed with a family background that continues to comfort me. Even though my parents are now both gone, I like to think that they would find this book a suitable tribute, and in my mother's case, an addition to her knowledge as a family scholar.

Although the people who have helped me in one way or another to put this book together are not responsible for its failings, they have certainly contributed to whatever strengths it has. Because of the kind of persons they are, it has been a pleasure to remember them and all the others who in one way or another made this book possible.

—Joan Aldous

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PART I



The Family
Careers Perspective

1

Following Family Careers

Family Development

The goal of this book is to increase your knowledge concerning expectable changes in families throughout their existence using the family development conceptual framework. *Family development* is concerned with how present-day families live out the months or years they endure and with the alterations they are likely to experience. The temporal divisions that are its concern have to do with time as individuals gauge it, not the decades and centuries historians examine. Family development concentrates on how families change over their lifetimes. *Family careers*, which is also the title of this book, is another term for family development and its focus on family biographies. This approach provides markers for dividing families' social clocks into segments. These divisions make understanding family biographies more manageable than trying to look at them over all the years of their functioning.

The first five chapters of the book contain an analysis of the perspective in terms of the concepts that set it apart from other ways of studying families. Quotations and other material from family life illustrate the concepts' meanings and usefulness. As is also true in the second half of the book, these descrip-

tions come primarily from the United States. Although the approach can be applied to understanding what is going on in other societies, much of the applicable research continues to come from the United States.

The second section of the book demonstrates how the family development concepts clarify central questions facing families over time. I apply the concepts to a selection of the relevant studies available to me to give a coherent picture of how this era's families are functioning in living. The differential way of thinking a family careers perspective permits appears in the organization of the chapters in the second section. They do not follow the usual chronological approach. Instead, each subsystem of the family, whether the partner, the parent-child, or the sibling, is followed over time to indicate some of the distinctive transitions each will encounter. This organization permits me to highlight variations within these units. I can differentiate cohabitants and married couples as well as continuously married couples and those who divorce among partner units. In the chapters on parents and children, I look at single-parent families as well as stepfamilies and the childless. A summing-up of the approach and its application appears in the final chapter.

The Uses of Family Development

Family development and its uses can be of value to you. It should make you a better analyst of families in general and how they change. By learning about them, you prepare yourself to reach beyond your own family boundaries and deal with persons from other families. When you know something about families, you are better able to understand the behavior of people you have daily contact with. There are some readers who are devoting their occupational careers to studying families. The family careers approach should enable them to do a better job of working with families, whether as a member of the helping professions, by looking at families as a researcher, or by talking about families as a teacher.

Family development can help you be more objective about your own family. The regularities researchers have found in a number of families can provide a comparison with what went on in the family you are closest to and enable you to make better sense of it. By pointing up both the common elements your family shares with others and the differences, the book gives you a better perspective on the pleasures and the pains inherent in family living and those specific to your own experiences. It may also give you some ideas about how to increase the pleasures and decrease the pains. Greater insight into your own family and the lives of other families is what you can gain from your study of family development. It can be a help in getting along in your existing family or the one you are thinking of beginning. By examining expectable transitions and the changes they entail, you are better prepared to deal with them. If you pass on to intimates the insights you have gained on family careers, together you may be able to ease the disruptions in family life that transitions bring and avoid some of the associated pitfalls.

The Plan of the First Chapter

This beginning chapter presents an overview of the approach and what it is all about. Because the family development approach to studying families is distinctive from other perspectives, this first chapter serves as a means

for introducing the main features that set it apart. The discussion will indicate the special character of family development. It indicates the strengths that make it useful to students of the family. Families are too complex for students to look at every aspect of them. Family development enables us to concentrate on particular family matters. As blinders on a horse serve to limit what it can see, so family development centers our attention on predictable changes in the lives of various family types.

To explain the approach in family terms, I begin with a description of a mythical family, which I then analyze, using the approach. After covering some of the concepts specific to family careers, the discussion continues with a comparison of it with other ways of studying families. These include exchange theory and the conflict and life course perspectives. This will serve to point up its distinctive character, including aspects of family life it does not cover. Because the approach is different, it requires special ways for obtaining the kind of information appropriate for its kind of analysis. A guide to family development methodology is in Appendix A at the end of the chapter. It is followed by Appendix B on social class differences among families.

The following four chapters contain detailed discussions of various critical features of the framework. They all prepare you to be a family developmentalist in your thinking. You will then be better able to understand the application of the approach to the material on the segments of family careers I write about in the second part of the book. These initial chapters provide the concepts for making sense of the way families change over their existence. The examples along the way and throughout the book are there to clarify the analyses and to pique your interest in studying families, whether in the community, in the clinical setting, in the classroom, or in your own home.

Looking In on the Jones Family

Let us start our study of family development with a short case history of the Joneses, a mythical family. A description of some of the events this family has experienced over time in its family career shows the kind of information students of the family look for.

More important, it provides an opportunity to apply the family development approach and to indicate some of the issues it spotlights. The Jones example confronts the abstract world of ideas with the concrete reality of family life.

We all know families like the Joneses. They are the kind of people who are the backbone of the nation. They pay their taxes, obey the laws, and are active in the various organizations that make community life livable and put bread and butter on the nation's tables.

If the school needs someone to explain a proposed sex education program to parents, Principal Mary Piatrowski thinks first of Chris and Ed Jones. And the fellows on the 7 to 3 shift at Macroglomerate International see Ed Jones as the natural person to complain to the foreman about the state of the washrooms or the too short break times. He knows his job, and the so-and-sos upstairs listen good when he gets mad. He is also a voice of reassurance in a time of layoffs and rumors that the plant will shut down.

Chris Jones is presently a checkout cashier at a local supermarket. Her pay enables the family to make the house payments and put away something for the kids' college education. Chris Junior keeps talking about being a lawyer like the woman on her favorite TV program, and she has the grades to be the first Jones to go to college.

Chris remains active in local concerns despite occupational and family demands. There is the matter of serving as financial officer for the church, a first for a woman, although Chris is quick to say she's no feminist, just a fair play partisan. She's happy to leave women's issues to her daughter, who, according to Chris, is feminist enough for both of them. Chris also did some telephoning for one of the political parties at the last election and was so busy at completing her list of names that she almost didn't make it to the polls herself.

Meanwhile, back at 301 North Sample, when the front door is closed and everyone is home, life is not all sweetness and light. The Joneses have their share of the worries and disappointments that come with family living, along with the satisfactions that contribute to the family's durability as an institution. Chris comes home tired from her job and tries not to resent Ed's being stretched out on the couch most evenings, watching television and having

done nothing toward getting dinner ready. To him, housework still remains women's work, even when Chris is sharing breadwinning responsibilities.

Sixteen-year-old Chris Junior, or Tina as she insists on being called, is a credit to her parents, and aside from irritating her father by needling him to do more around the house, is seldom a source of worry. She has gotten over her earlier rivalry with younger brothers, Harry and Eddie, and has managed to stay away from the fast crowd at high school who is supposedly into drugs, fast cars, and sexual intercourse.

Harry, though, continues to be a problem. He seems to have never made new friends after the family moved, 2 years ago, into its present three-bedroom home. He was just entering high school then, and the one he attends now is in a different district from where his old buddies are. He doesn't like his teachers and has been known to skip classes, and at least twice that his parents have heard about, he has drunk enough beer to become sick. Both state law and parental rules hold that he is too young to drink. There is also his friendship with the girl next door, who, in Chris's view, has clothes that are too tight and morals that are too loose.

Tina vacillates between being Harry's severest critic and, when he and his father are arguing, his staunchest advocate. Ed never was much for physical punishment, especially when he's seen how it doesn't do any good. Like Chris, he's relied on scolding; but now that Harry is older, it seems nothing works—not loss of privileges or reasoning or yelling. The parents continue to hope that some of their daughter's ambition will rub off on their older son. According to the birth certificates, there's only a 14-month difference between 11th-grade Harry and 12th-grade Tina, but they're several years apart in maturity.

Young Eddie, however, although an unplanned "accident," is a joy to everyone. Too young at 8 to face worldly temptations, he tolerantly accepts Harry's supervision in his parents' absence, perhaps because Harry is clearly so fond of him. In fact, Harry and Tina please their parents (and themselves) by taking Eddie to various events, both educational and entertaining.

As for the parents' lives when the kids are not around, there have been some rocky times.

Shortly after the change in residences, things got so bad that Chris asked Ed to find somewhere else to live. "We're fighting too much, and it's beginning to affect the kids," was Chris's tearful explanation. The quarrels centered on her wanting to get a job and Ed's insistence that she stay home to devote her time to him and the children. As soon as Ed left for his sister Linda's house, Chris got her present job.

Friends and relatives, and especially Linda, urged Ed to give a little and accept Chris's new, more independent status. "After all," Linda pointed out, "you can use the extra money." Ed also found that his brother-in-law's welcome was wearing thin, and the lumpiness of the sofa made sleeping difficult. Moreover, he missed Chris and the kids more than he admitted even to himself. It was only after Ed agreed to Chris's working and also promised to do the weekly grocery shopping and make supper three times a week, however, that Chris admitted she also missed him and his loving. His return home was a triumphant occasion, marred only by Harry's less than enthusiastic welcome. In fact, Ed and Chris date Harry's serious difficulties from the time Ed "got his back up" and tried to make Chris remain at home.

Life has gone more smoothly for husband and wife since this troubled couple of months. Sure, there are arguments, but they get smoothed over. Ed really loves Chris and the kids, and Chris didn't relish having to face their disputes, demands, and difficulties alone. True, she continues to miss the kind of sex she remembers they had before Tina was born. Maybe though, she comforts herself, when the children have left home, things will get better. Certainly, Ed is trying hard to be more sensitive to her needs, and they are talking and laughing together more.

Ed accepts the lack of excitement in their marriage as something that comes with middle age. His attention is focused on the discrepancy between income and outgo, a worry that overshadows his contentment with the reassuring routines of television and an occasional night out with Chris. He sometimes wonders why he made such a fuss about Chris's job. After all, her weekly check keeps the family financially afloat, and his determination to be boss almost lost him the comforts of home.

While tossing on the uncomfortable daybed in his sister's living room for a month of restless nights, he had a lot of hours to realize just how much his family did mean to him.

A Family Development Analysis of the Jones Family

Now let us see what we can make of this case history, using a family development analysis. Notice that we have information from more than one time period. Without it, we could not use the approach to look at the changes that members can expect in family life throughout its existence. Thus, in examining what is going on in families with this perspective, we try to determine how the content and timing of fairly major events, in both individual and family histories, affect family interaction patterns among the members.

Events that alter family ways include age markers in children's development signaled by their births, their school progress, and their eventual departure from home, as well as the possible disruption of the marital dyad and the adults' occupational sequences. For the portion of the Jones's family history we read about, these turning points were a residential move, Ed's leaving home, Chris's return to outside employment, Ed's rejoining the family unit, and Tina's anticipated departure from home after graduating from high school.

Students applying the family development approach to the Jones family would look at the beginning of the family, in this case, the marriage of Ed and Chris, and the accompanying changes their living together brought. Another significant family time guidepost would be the coming of children, followed by their entry into and progress through school. We saw how Harry's entrance into a new school, combined with the family's residential move and the parents' difficulties, ushered in a different period in the Jones's existence.

The conflict between Ed and Chris that resulted in his leaving home threatened the existence of the Jones's two-parent family unit. If Ed had left permanently, the Jones family would have entered another stage. Like the other periods the Joneses have lived through, this one would have been qualitatively different from the ones preceding and following