

# How Families Still Matter

A Longitudinal Study of Youth in  
Two Generations

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## Families, Generations, and Achievement Orientations of Youth

*G4 son in 1997: My dad thinks I'm a slacker. But my parents pushed the hamster wheel of life without question. And they got suckered disturbingly often.*

### NEW GENERATIONS AND THEIR LEGACY FROM OLDER ONES

The birth of each new generation in a family is the occasion for celebration and rejoicing, speculation about the past and the future. Parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles ask: Does this child resemble her father or her mother? What kind of life will she have? Will she be happy and self-confident? What kind of career will she aspire to; will she fare better, or worse, than her elders? Will she adopt her parents' values, or will she follow a different path? These questions suggest a future full of possibilities, a rich palette from which to paint the life course of this new family member.

But what parents and grandparents usually do *not* think about is how this child's life will be affected by broader sociohistorical factors, such as demography and social structures within society. Her life chances will be enhanced or limited by demographic factors: the size of the cohort into which she is born, how many siblings she will have with whom to share parental resources, and how long her parents and grandparents will live. Her life will also be influenced by social structures: the educational opportunities available to her as she grows up, the labor market conditions she will face, and the governmental policies that might assist her as she carries out family responsibilities. Each of these can encourage or constrain this child's opportunities for success and well-being. But seldom do the new parents and grandparents consider how these sociohistorical conditions are linked to the newborn's future life course.

How does a child's developmental path take form out of this future of seemingly infinite possibilities – and constraints? What roles do parents play in shaping their children's orientation, in molding their aspirations and values, in enhancing their self-confidence? And in what ways are their

children's choices circumscribed by the times into which they are born, the prevailing socioeconomic conditions when they reach adulthood?

These are some of the questions addressed in this book. We want to examine how the rapid and pervasive social changes of the late twentieth century may have altered the American family's ability to influence the aspirations, values, and self-conceptions of its younger generation members. We want to understand how important families are today in influencing the aspirations and orientations of youth – compared with several decades ago, when Baby Boomers were growing up.

### **Family Influence and the Succession of Generations**

Why is it important to examine family influence and transmission processes across generations? American society at the start of the twenty-first century is characterized by economic uncertainty, marital instability, an array of family forms, and conflicting cultural values representing individualism and collectivism. It is a society where the full-time employment of mothers of young children is the norm, where longer lives and reduced fertility have changed multigenerational family structures and roles. It is a society where the basic functions of the family have been questioned as inadequate. Nevertheless, one of the basic functions of the family, along with the provision of sustenance, nurturance, and security, is to provide for the effective socialization of children into their adult years. We believe that the ability of families to influence and transmit essential attitudes, values, and resources across generations is a key indicator of how well families are doing at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Thus as parents and researchers, educators and policy makers, we need to more fully understand family socialization processes that are structural (societal) as well as psychosocial (individual), that involve intergenerational influences that are reciprocal (from child to parent as well as from parent to child), and that take into account family influences not only in childhood but also throughout the adult years. In so doing, we can address some broader questions posed by social theorists about continuity and change in society.

Intergenerational transmission and the succession of generations has been a concern of sociologists since the nineteenth century. The vitality of the family and its functions provides a window on social order: How it arises and how it is sustained through interactions of kin and their nurturance of social bonds and common values. This is one of the themes suggested by the founder of modern sociology, Emile Durkheim (1893/1984), in his classic formulation of group solidarity and the nature of social order.

It was also suggested by his German counterpart, Georg Simmel (1955), in his dictate that "... society arises from the individual and that the individual arises out of associations" (p. 163).

In our analysis we focus on the family as a primary source of the individual's integration into society. This is a theme that has received much attention recently by contemporary social theorists (Collins 1994; Fukuyama 1999; Thoits 1983; Thorlindsson and Bjarnason 1998), as well as by family historians (Coontz 1992, 2000). The general thesis underlying our study is this: *The characteristics of individuals that enable social order – their values, aspirations, and self-concepts – are both created and maintained by family socialization through processes of inheritance, influence, and transmission across generations.*

We can see family influence in the transmission of family characteristics and desired goals across generations. In this research we examine three transmission processes: the inheritance of ascribed statuses, particularly socioeconomic; social learning mechanisms; and the effects of intergenerational solidarity among the child and parents, grandparents, and other family members. Each of these will be discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

Among all the characteristics and attitudes that parents and grandparents transmit to their children, why do we select achievement orientations as our focus of analysis? We define achievement orientations as *a constellation of educational and career aspirations, prosocial values, and self-esteem.* We suggest that the achievement orientations of youth reflect how successful the family has been in preparing its children to live in society. We also suggest that achievement orientations constitute a direct means of assessing the viability and functionality of the family at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As such, these youth outcomes are central to the "family decline" debate that is so much the topic of media discussions today.

We see educational and career aspirations (which contribute to human capital) and prosocial values such as humanistic orientations (which contribute to the stock of shared values and hence the creation of social capital) as serving the common good. The term "achievement orientations" might seem more akin to individualist values than to collectivist values. We suggest, however, that from the perspective of family influence and social well-being, value orientations that promote social relations and the creation of shared values are the more functional and desirable outcome.

Concerns about family influences on youth's outcomes are not new. However, they have gained urgency in recent years as politicians and interest groups have joined with social scientists and policy makers in debating

whether families are declining as a social institution in American society, and what this means for future generations (Wilson 2002). Other social scientists and pundits have focused on the apparent contrast between today's youth, members of "Generation X," and their elders, their "Baby Boomer" parents (Bennis 2002; Howe and Strauss 1993; Males 1999). They also wonder – in an era of rapid social change – whether these differences suggest that significant generational conflicts lie ahead of us in the next decades. We examine these questions using data from six waves of the thirty-year Longitudinal Study of Generations, which was initiated in 1971, soon after these dramatic social changes began to take shape.

### **Examining Family Well-Being: The Historical Context**

Beginning in the early 1960s, American society appeared to experience a change in social norms in the direction of greater individualism and a loosening of moral constraints on private and public behavior. A series of "liberation movements" emerged that sought to free individuals from the constraints of traditional social moral rules. Survey data collected at the time indicated that people were becoming less likely to defer to the authority of social institutions than in prior decades, and that relationships seemed to be less binding and long-lasting (Alwin 1996; Cherlin 1999a; Hareven 1996; Ruggles 1996; Scott, Alwin, and Braun 1996).

There are demographic reasons why these dramatic changes occurred when they did. In the United States the number of young people aged fifteen to twenty-four increased by two million from 1950 to 1960; the next decade added 12 million to this age group. These are the Baby Boomers. Some analysts observed that the concentration of such numbers in a "youth culture" may have led to a more than proportional increase in efforts to challenge authority and existing institutions (Bengtson 1989; Fukuyama 1999; Inglehart and Baker 2000). The 1960s saw college students leading the civil rights marches, youth protesting on campus with the students' rights movement, bloody confrontations over anti-Vietnam War protests, and the Woodstock Festival of 1969, itself perhaps the apex of the counterculture movement during this decade. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, "The times they are a-changing."

In 1971, when we began to collect the first wave of data for the Longitudinal Study of Generations, there was a widespread perception that generational differences had created a significant age-based cleavage in American society: a "generation gap" (Bengtson 1970, 1975; Bengtson and Cutler 1976; Bengtson, Furlong, and Laufer 1974). This disjuncture

between youth and their parents was due to the apparent differences in values, aspirations, and behaviors of youth born after World War II – the Baby Boomers described above – and their elders, who had come of age in the 1920s and 1930s. These Baby Boomer youth are the “grandchildren” or G3 generation in our first survey in 1971; we term them “G3s,” their parents “G2s,” and their grandparents “G1s.”

However, not all G3s experienced the 1960s in the same way. Those who participated in the 1960s protest movements exhibited different life-course trajectories and outcomes from those who did not. One interesting finding from the first wave of our study is that, with maturation and the assumption of adult roles and responsibilities, “rebellious” youth increasingly resembled their parents in terms of values and life agendas over time (Dunham and Bengtson 1986, 1991, 1994).

In our initial 1971 study, we posed three research questions: (1) How different were the “revolutionary” youth in our study – the Baby Boomer grandchildren generation (G3s) – from their parents (G2s) and grandparents (G1s) in values, opinions, and world views? Were youthful protestors rebelling against or simply redefining their elders’ values? Our findings indicated surprisingly few differences among the three generations, suggesting that the “generation gap” may have been more myth than reality (Bengtson 1975; Bengtson and Kuypers 1971). (2) What was the nature and quality of family bonds between generations, and how did these vary? Our theoretical conceptualization of intergenerational solidarity and its dimensions evolved from these initial analyses (see Mangen, Bengtson, and Landry 1988; Roberts and Bengtson 1990; Roberts, Richards, and Bengtson 1991). We found that most of these youth – over two-thirds – reported high feelings of solidarity with their parents and grandparents. (3) How are mental health and psychological well-being associated with intergenerational relationships? We found a high correlation: Those youth with high parent-child solidarity also showed high levels of well-being (Bengtson 1996). In sum, we found family relationships across generations to be much stronger than the “generation gap” of popular culture suggested.

Now, thirty years later, we pose different hypotheses about American families and their ability to effectively socialize their younger generation members in what is now termed the “culture wars” surrounding the American family (Stacey 1996). We test these hypotheses with data from the same longitudinal study, updated to include “Generation X” youth – children (G4s) of the 1971 Baby Boomer youth (G3s) and great-grandchildren of the original (G1) grandparents in the study.

## YOUTH, FAMILIES, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

### Objectives

The purpose of our study is to investigate family influences on youths' developmental outcomes across recent generations, looking at their educational and career aspirations, their self-esteem, and their prosocial values, a constellation of attitudes and behaviors we term "achievement orientations." Our goal is to examine changes in family influences on youth over the past several decades by comparing family influences on Baby Boomers, born in the late 1940s and 1950s, to family influences on their children, Generation Xers, born after 1965. A second objective is to examine whether familial influences on achievement orientations of youth have weakened in recent generations, particularly in the context of changes in family structures and roles as well as in the economic opportunity structures of American society.

### Achievement Orientations of Youth

Our analysis focuses on achievement orientations, a cluster composed of educational and career aspirations, achievement values, and sense of self-confidence of youth. These psychosocial characteristics play a significant role in shaping lifetime educational and occupational trajectories. Achievement orientations take form relatively early in life, particularly from intergenerational influences within families (Roberts and Bengtson 1993, 1996; Thoits 1983; Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Huck 1994).

Many factors – both within and outside families – influence the careers and adult well-being that will be realized by youth over their adult life-course. For example, we know that intergenerational occupational similarity may reflect the fact that family generations tend to inhabit the same social structural location, subjecting younger generations to similar privileges or constraints (such as discrimination) as those experienced by their elders. Although these structural factors are important, they by no means determine a child's ultimate career attainments. There are other factors, such as the steering influences of individuals' career goals (aspirations), the value they place on prosocial orientations (values), and their feelings of personal worth (self-esteem) – the three dimensions of achievement orientations examined in this study.

Achievement orientations are not innate or genetically programmed; they are not characteristics with which we are born. Goals, values, and self-confidence are instead developed in the push and pull of social relationships through the course of life. Families play an especially critical

role in their formation. A wide body of scientific evidence indicates that children's goals – their educational and occupational aspirations – are strongly influenced by what their parents communicate to them about school and work (Biblarz, Bengtson, and Bucur 1996; Biblarz and Raftery 1993; Kohn, Slomczynski, and Schoenbach 1986; Parcel and Menaghan 1994). An equally formidable body of evidence documents strong parental influences on their offsprings' values and self-confidence (Bengtson 1975; Dunham and Bengtson 1986, 1991, 1994; Glass, Bengtson, and Dunham 1986; Roberts and Bengtson 1993, 1996; Wickrama, Lorenz, and Conger 1997). Still other evidence suggests that these attributes remain fairly stable over the life course from adolescence to old age, and that intergenerational family relationships are important to the development and maintenance of achievement orientations over a lifetime (Bengtson 2001; Mirowsky and Ross 1989; Rosenberg 1965; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Thoits 1983; Whitbeck, Simons, Conger, Lorenz, Huck, and Elder 1991).

Yet we do not know very much about how strong these lines of influence are across several generations of family members. Moreover, we do not know how sociohistorical changes in the family and the economy have affected the strength of intergenerational influences on achievement orientations during the past half-century. And there have been striking changes in the American family's structure and roles over the past decades that doubtless have affected intergenerational transmission during this recent period of rapid social change.

### **The Changing American Family**

The image of "the American family" is a convenient (though simplistic) journalistic, literary, and political construct. The term connotes a modal family type, reflective of traditional American norms and values. In popular discourse, the American Family has usually meant the "nuclear" family: a core of two parents and their children, embedded in a network of loosely connected (but not co-residing) elders, aunts, uncles, and cousins. As is often the case with popular imagery, this view is stereotypic.

Family configurations in the United States have always been much more diverse than implied by the nuclear family stereotype (Coontz 2000). Moreover, this diversity has increased dramatically during the last half-century, driven by rising divorce rates, greater female labor force participation, and more frequent out-of-marriage childbearing. At the threshold of the twenty-first century, fewer than half of American families fit this nuclear family model, and only a fraction of these reflect the traditional – and nostalgic – family "ideal" of breadwinner dad and stay-at-home mom

(Stacey 1996). This proliferation of family forms has stretched our linguistic limits to describe relations within them (Cherlin 1978). What words symbolize the role relationship between a child and the stepmother of her stepfather? Are the terms “grandmother” and “grandchild” appropriate? Under what conditions? Who decides?

The increasing diversity of family forms has been accompanied by a public debate over its short- and long-term social implications. Perhaps most vocal have been those who see family diversity as a social problem. The most ideologically or politically charged view within this camp equates increasing diversity with the “demise” of the American Family. Political figures such as Dan Quayle and William Bennett and organizations such as the Institute for American Values have characterized the growing prevalence of nonnuclear families as symptomatic of a society losing its moral compass. The reduction in numbers of two-parent families is seen as leading to poor socialization and moral development in our youth – a root cause of increasing crime rates, welfare dependence, out-of-marriage childbearing, and a weakening contract between generations. This public debate exemplifies a critique of nontraditional, nonnuclear family forms and an implicit attack on women who value career and independence as well as motherhood. The demise of the family argument has also been voiced by family scholars such as David Popenoe (1993) and Norval Glenn (1997). They argue that, because of the proliferation of divorce, contemporary families are less able to carry out their “traditional” functions of socializing youth to become responsible and productive members of society.

However, not all prognoses for the increasingly diverse American Family are gloomy. The notion that family diversity is problematic is by no means uncontested. Critics of the “demise of the family” camp (such as the National Organization of Women and the Council on Contemporary Families) have drawn attention to what they see as the implicit sexist and racist assumptions about optimal family functioning, which they view as underlying the demise argument. Family scholars such as Maxine Baca Zinn (1996) and Judith Stacey (1990, 1996) are critical of the effort to equate the nuclear family form with optimal family functioning, pointing to evidence that nonnuclear families do indeed meet their socialization and support needs of children (see Stacey and Biblarz 2002).

One reason the debate on family decline versus family solidarity lingers is the lack of sufficient data to allow researchers to draw conclusions about the relationship between historical change in family structures and intergenerational socialization outcomes over time. The primary weakness of existing data has been that one could not track changes across generations

within specific families over long periods of historical time. Claims about family weakness or strength have been based on comparing what amounted to one-time snapshots of *different* families taken in *different* historical periods, by *different* researchers guided by *different* research questions. Faced with what amounts to comparing apples and oranges, family scientists have been unable to conclude whether differences in socialization outcomes from period to period were due to historical changes in family structure, differences in the research questions from study to study, or change in something the researchers failed to examine.

The study reported in this volume is unusual because it has followed multiple generations within the same families for over three decades. It has the benefit of having asked identical questions of each generation in different historical periods, thus enabling us to compare “apples to apples” in seeking answers to questions of stability and change over time. The data provide a detailed assessment of intergenerational relationships linked to developmental socialization processes. These features allow us to empirically examine effects of changing family structures beyond the speculative rhetoric that has characterized these appraisals to date.

### **The Changing American Society**

Attempts to understand the effects of changing family structures on the achievement outcomes of youth is complicated by the simultaneous changes that have occurred in the educational and occupational structures and opportunities over recent decades. The twentieth century was marked by dramatic shifts in the United States from a largely agrarian economy to an industrial economy to a service- and information-based postindustrial economy (Fukuyama 1999; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Pescosolido and Rubin 2000; Rubin 1996). For example, in 1900 four in ten Americans were employed in agriculture. Today that number has declined to less than one in ten. Similarly, while in 1950 close to seven in ten Americans worked in industrial manufacturing, today that number is less than four in ten, while five in ten work in white-collar occupations (Hout 1997b). These changes are likely a result of significant increases in educational attainment across generations, as well as changes in modes of production, since the end of World War II.

Changes in the underlying economic base have been accompanied by a decrease in the number of children who follow in their parents' career footsteps – a traditional indicator of the family's success in effectively influencing its youth (Biblarz, Bengtson, and Bucur 1996; Hout 1988). Social scientists refer to this phenomenon as increasing *occupational*

*universalism* – a loosening of constraints binding children to their socio-economic origins. Some of this is due to the fact that the kinds of careers available to children have changed, sometimes dramatically, in the course of one or two generations. For example, many of the post-World War II manufacturing jobs filled by parents of the Baby Boom generation had vanished by the time Baby Boomers began their careers in the 1970s. By the mid-1990s, Generation Xers encountered an occupational landscape shaped by a burgeoning service sector and increasing opportunities in professional, managerial, technical, and administrative occupations. But they also faced increasing earnings inequality and a growing divergence of economic opportunity based on level of education (McCall 2000). This was a profound contrast to the agricultural and industrial opportunity structures encountered by their great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents only a few decades earlier.

Any attempt to evaluate the family's role in shaping sons' and daughters' career trajectories is complicated by this simultaneous increase in occupational universalism. One effect of universalism is that the importance of certain family-ascribed characteristics – such as race and social class – have become poorer predictors of intergenerational career resemblance over time and socioeconomic status. One of the questions we explore in this book is whether these “traditional” sources of family ascription have been supplanted – for better or for worse – by new sources of career-influencing family characteristics, particularly, parental divorce and alternate family structures.

A further complication is that changes in the economy and in the family are intertwined. Increasing occupational universalism has been accompanied by greater female labor force participation. Employed mothers model new career possibilities and gender roles for daughters, who themselves approach and enter adulthood with new expectations and occupational goals. Recent research suggests that working women's greater economic independence may have contributed to increased divorce rates and higher incidence of single- or step-parenting (Esterberg, Moen, and Dempster-McCain 1994; South and Lloyd 1995). The need for an increasingly mobile work force may have further isolated children from families through decreased intergenerational residential proximity (Amato and Keith 1991; Astone and McLanahan 1991). How much intergenerational influence will exist in these new family configurations? How might this impact the future economy?

The interconnections of the global economy and family life are complex. Macroeconomic and microrelational change seem to exist in a dialectical

relationship; historical change can best be described as a swirl of leaves rather than a linear march. Because of this swirling, it is often difficult to sort out specific lines of influence on youth in successive generations – across changing levels of social organization and structure and changing sociohistorical conditions.

In our analyses we have attempted to confront this dilemma by focusing on one axis around which the swirl of economics and family life revolves: the development of achievement orientations among new generations of family members. Because we have data from four generations within individual families over several decades, we are able to document both stability and change in family structure and female labor force participation from one generation of parents to the next. Knowing when and whether these changes have occurred across generations in families allows us to estimate their effects on family socialization processes and outcomes.

#### **FOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT GENERATIONS, FAMILY INFLUENCES, AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

We have organized our study around four central research questions. These reflect concerns confronting Americans at the start of the twenty-first century regarding the achievement orientations of youth, generational continuities and differences, family influences on youths' outcomes, and the effects of social change. Our inquiry focuses on the well-being of American families and their ability to effectively socialize and influence their children, in the context of three decades of unprecedented sociohistorical change. In this volume we examine four specific research questions:

1. *How different are today's youth from previous generations? Are Generation Xers a "breed apart"? Are they a "generation at risk"? How different are youths born in the 1980s from their parents, the Baby Boomers, or their grandparents and great-grandparents – in terms of career aspirations, self-esteem, values, and family solidarity?*

2. *How have changes in family structures and roles affected the achievement orientations and well-being of successive generations? Do contemporary youth whose parents have divorced score lower in career aspirations, self-esteem, prosocial values, and family solidarity than youth from nondivorced families? Has the rise in divorce and increased labor force participation of mothers led to a decline in youth's achievement orientations across generations?*

3. *How have family influences changed across recent generations? Has there been a "family decline" over recent generations in the ability of parents to*

positively influence their children for future achievement and well-being? Or is “family solidarity” a more appropriate model, with intergenerational influences on youth outcomes remaining strong despite the many changes in family structures and roles as well as changes in social and economic conditions over the last half of the twentieth century?

4. *To what extent are there gender differences in achievement orientations and parental influences across recent generations?* Are mothers more influential than fathers? Are same-gender intergenerational transmission patterns stronger than cross-gender transmission patterns? How is this affected by divorce, or by whether the mother works or not? How have these historical changes affected gender-based transmission?

These questions form the basis for the research described in this volume. We examine them with data from the thirty-year Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG).

## THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF GENERATIONS

Begun in 1970–71, the LSOG is an investigation of the reciprocal linkages between the quality of intergenerational family relationships and an individual’s lifetime psychosocial development. The study began with the participation of 2,044 individuals representing three generations of adults within more than 300 families. The study involves periodic survey assessments of each family member’s social attitudes and values, physical and mental health, educational and occupational attainments, and relationships with other family members up and down the generational ladder. The survey assessments are supplemented by contemporaneous macrolevel economic data, including information reflecting the changing educational and occupational opportunity structures integral to our four major research questions. This combination of individual, family, and socioeconomic data provides the basis for the analyses we present in this book.

Appendix A provides details about the sampling frame, the demographic characteristics of family members in each generation, and response rates over each of the six periods of longitudinal measurement. Below is a general description of our sample and study design. We also describe six features of the LSOG design that enable us to evaluate relationships among family processes, individual outcomes, and social change: (1) longitudinal design, (2) multigenerational scope, (3) development overlap across generations; (4) social-psychological focus, (5) combined retrospective and prospective measurement, and (6) placing individuals, families, and generations in historical context.

### **Participating Families and Individuals in the LSOG**

The original design of the LSOG in the late 1960s involved families that had at least three living generations: grandparents (G1s), their children (G2s), and their young adult grandchildren (G3s). Because we were interested in multigeneration families with youth undergoing the transition to adulthood, we had to ensure that each of the participating families had at least one grandchild between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six. The research team sought to identify a population of eligible families from which to draw a random sample. Their strategy was to begin by identifying a group of grandparents, and then reducing that list to those who had living grandchildren between sixteen and twenty-six. A household-by-household sampling strategy to identify such multigeneration families would have been prohibitively expensive; this was in the days before telephone-access sampling was appropriate, and federal support for nationally representative samples was nonexistent. However, the researchers were allowed access to a list of over 840,000 subscribers to Southern California's first HMO. This allowed them to identify a population of grandparents with age-eligible grandchildren representing over 7,000 families. The pool of participating families represented the result of a random sampling process.

The original sample of families consisted of 516 G1s (who were born between 1896 and 1911), 701 G2s (born between 1916 and 1931), and 827 G3s (born between 1945 and 1955). Each of these generational cohorts is distinguished in relation to the sociohistorical events of its youth: The G1s faced World War I and the "Roaring '20s"; for G2s, it was the Great Depression and World War II; the G3s are Baby Boomers born during the prosperous postwar period who came of age during the turbulent 1960s and '70s. The HMO primarily served union members working in heavy industry (steel production). Because of this, the resulting sample primarily consisted of white working- and middle-class families. People of color, including recent immigrants from Latin America and Asia, comprised only about 10 percent of the original sample, and the highest and the lowest socioeconomic levels were not represented. However, levels of educational attainment among family members in 1971 were consistent with national norms (see Appendix A).

The LSOG families have changed in structure and numbers since they were originally queried in 1971, reflecting the deaths of many of the G1s, the births of great grandchildren (G4s), and divorce and remarriage in all generations. We also find a higher proportion of minority respondents, the

products of interracial and interethnic marriages. Beginning in 1991, the LSOG began adding G4s (biological, adopted, as well as step-children from current marriages) to the study as they reached sixteen years of age. New spouses (from first and remarriages) were also added. The G4 generation included respondents born between 1978 and 1983, our “Generation X.” The LSOG families have also changed in geographical dispersion due to a high degree of residential mobility among family members. Although the study base was originally from Southern California, today nearly half of the longitudinal sample members live outside the region. Family members now live in nearly every state in the Union and some live abroad.

### **Longitudinal Design**

To truly assess change, researchers must be able to make comparisons of equivalent measurements taken at different time points. The LSOG provides such data through repeated survey assessments of family members at regular time intervals. The baseline assessment for the study was conducted in 1971 (Wave 1). This assessment was repeated in 1985 (Wave 2) and at three-year intervals thereafter (Wave 3 in 1988, Wave 4 in 1991, Wave 5 in 1994, Wave 6 in 1997, and Wave 8 in 2000, though this most recent wave is not reported in this volume). The repeated assessments of educational and occupational aspirations, values, self-esteem, and perceptions of family relationships allow us to chart the familial influences on younger generation members’ developing achievement orientations over time. Each respondent has been asked identical questions over each time of measurement to provide data about how the respondent and his or her family is changing as they grow older and as new generations replace the old.

### **Multigenerational Scope**

A second feature of the LSOG is its accumulation of parallel longitudinal assessments for multiple generations in each family. This multilayered design allows comparisons for developmental trajectories across several generations at once, comparing, for example, the quality of parent-child relationships across multiple generations in the family (G1-G2 vs. G2-G3 vs. G3-G4). The longitudinal nature of the relationship assessments provides a “before and after” picture that allows evaluation effects of events like divorce and remarriage on the quality of relationships up and down the generational lineage.

### **Life-Course Developmental Overlap: The Generational Sequential Design**

Perhaps the most striking feature of the LSOG study design is that sufficient time has elapsed since 1971, when data were first collected, that the chronological ages at which members of different generations were assessed have begun to overlap. These data allow us to compare G3s' achievement orientations in 1971, when they were making the transition to adulthood, to the achievement orientations of their G4 children, who were entering adulthood in the late 1990s. Similarly, we can compare the quality of the G2-G3 parent-child relationships in 1971 to those of the G3-G4 parent-child relationships in the 1990s. No other study of families provides such overlapping developmental data across generations – what is technically referred to as a *generation-sequential* design.

Moreover, the generation-sequential nature of the LSOG data also enables assessment of social change on family processes and outcomes. With these data it is possible to compare family functioning and individual development across successive generations in different historical periods and social contexts. In addition, the detailed assessment protocol allows us to distinguish between families that are more or less affected by social-structural change (e.g., families where divorce occurs vs. nondivorcing lineages).

### **Social Psychological Focus**

A fourth characteristic of the LSOG design is the ability to focus on the interconnections between family relationships and individual psychosocial development over time. Unlike more demographically oriented studies, such as the Health and Retirement Survey (Soldo and Hill 1993) and the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988), the LSOG provides uniquely detailed measurements of the quality of family relations and of individual family members' attitudes, values, well-being, and behaviors. Several aspects of the quality of each respondent's intra- and intergenerational relationships (levels of affection, communication, support, agreement) are assessed in each wave of the LSOG survey. Equally elaborate assessments of respondents' social attitudes and values (including orientations toward school and work, feelings of self-esteem, affective mood, plans for the future, and feelings about the past) are measured at each time of measurement. These social psychological data provide a detailed set of measurements with which to

explore questions about how social change may have affected the family's role in shaping children's achievement orientations over time.

### **Retrospective and Prospective Measurement**

A fifth advantage of the LSOG for the analyses we present is that it combines prospective measurement with retrospective accounts in a way that effectively extends the analysis frame. In a longitudinal study, data that reflect a respondent's current state or perceptions are considered "prospective" insofar as they provide a real-time baseline from which to evaluate changes captured in subsequent assessments. In contrast, "retrospective" data are those that reflect a respondent's recollection of earlier events. The LSOG collects both types of data in order to examine more fully the intergenerational processes in families. Especially beneficial for our purposes are retrospective accounts elicited from G1s and G2s about their own earlier educational and occupational experiences (the baseline prospective data for each group were gathered in mid- to later life), as well as those of their parents and grandparents. By combining these retrospective accounts with the prospective data for the G3s and G4s, we are able to construct a portrait of educational and occupational achievement trajectories that span five generations.

### **Conceptualizing Families and the Life Course**

A sixth characteristic of the LSOG design is the ability to place families and family members in the context of historical events and trends. One of the contributions of the life-course model is its emphasis on how much macrosocial events (such as wars, economic downturns and upturns, the rise of political movements, and the enactment of governmental policies) affect microsocial phenomena (the choice of careers for youth, the timing of marriage and parenthood, the structure of households, and within-family processes). Elder (1974) demonstrated this several decades ago, showing how the macrosocial changes brought about by the Depression and World War II greatly altered the life course and future fortunes of those who lived through them. More recently, he has shown how the economic downturn of the 1980s has affected the life course and family relationships of Iowa farm families (Elder and Conger 2002).

With the LSOG's longitudinal design, we can examine how sociohistorical events and trends have influenced the life course and family relationships of two generations of youth. Baby Boomers and Generation Xers grew up in significantly different historical contexts, particularly in terms of three historical trends: improvements in the economic opportunity

structure, the rise in divorce rates, and the rise in maternal employment rates. These, in turn, were influenced by historical events. Prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s (when the Baby Boomers were growing up) was followed by the oil crisis of the 1970s (when they were starting to pay mortgages). The recession of the late 1970s and 1980s was followed by the prosperity of the late 1990s (when Generations Xers came of age). The Vietnam War changed many lives; the Persian Gulf War few. The rise of the women's movement and the civil rights movement of the 1960s led to affirmative action legislation in the 1980s and to expansion of white-collar employment opportunities for women. The stigma associated with divorce eased in the 1980s and beyond, accompanying an increase in single-parent and stepfamilies in the 1980s and the 1990s.

### **Limits to Generalization of the LSOG Data**

Data from the LSOG provide an opportunity to examine family influences over time, in successive generations, within a sample followed over a third of a century of time. Nevertheless, we feel it is important to note at the outset some limitations of this dataset in making generalizations to broader trends within American society and to the entire population of multi-generation families.

Our sample excludes both the highest and the lowest income families. It was derived from a Southern California population of members enrolled in a prepaid health care plan during the 1960s. These were primarily labor union workers in the steel industry (although UCLA faculty were also participants in this program). Thus, the sample is representative of predominantly working-class and union-affiliated men aged fifty-five or over who were included in this 840,000-member health plan four decades ago.

This sample of families does not reflect the ethnically diverse population of families today in the Southern California region. The LSOG baseline sample drawn in 1970 is 90 percent white, indicating the representation of working-class, labor-union families enrolled in the 1960s health plan membership. There were few African-Americans or Hispanics in labor unions in the 1960s. Since then the ethnic composition of Southern California has changed greatly, with more Hispanics, Asians, and other immigrants from Armenia, Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan.

The LSOG is not a nationally representative sample. Since the study started in 1970, other studies of family relationships – notably, the National Survey of Families and Households, which started in 1986 – have begun collecting data from large, nationally representative samples that are more

obviously generalizable to the American population. We note the similarities and the differences of our findings relative to these nationally representative samples in later chapters; in general, the conclusion is that our results are similar to national trends (see Appendix A).

This is an American sample: It may not be generalizable to the experiences of families in other nations or of other cultures. However, some of the trends and issues we report are remarkably similar to those facing other industrializing societies, both from the East and from the West (Bengtson, Kim, Myers, and Eun 2000).

For these reasons, our examination of generations, family influences and transmission processes, and young adults' outcomes should be considered as hypotheses for future investigations in the early twenty-first century. In this volume we present findings about intergenerational influences over the past three decades from our Southern California sample. We believe the relationships we find can be generalized to the broader population of American families, but they are best considered as hypotheses to test with larger and nationally representative samples.

## **OVERVIEW**

We address the four research questions concerning generations, family influences, and youth's outcomes with longitudinal data from the LSOG. In our analyses we hope to contribute to the development of a theoretical explanation of intergenerational transmission of achievement orientations under conditions of rapid social change. We have organized the book to reflect this aim, first introducing the state of theory about processes of intergenerational transmission, next reviewing the sociohistorical context of these microlevel processes, and then presenting findings that test and extend these theories.