

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction and Overview

*Arland Thornton*

Family and child well-being are central concerns in America today. Almost every day brings an event or news story that focuses attention on the well-being of America's children and the families in which they live. We hear disturbing stories of neglect, violence, abuse, illiteracy, disease, and family breakdown and disruption— anecdotes and statistics that make us wonder about the future of our children and families. At the same time, there are remarkable counterbalancing stories of educational and occupational accomplishment, prosocial action, commitment to family and community, and triumph over adversity— leading us to believe that the future of our families, communities, and country is in good hands.

The dramatic mixture of negative and positive outcomes and the diversity of outlooks for family and child well-being in the future raise numerous scientific and policy questions about the factors influencing today's children and families and what interventions might improve the prospects for current and future generations of children and parents. Scientists, policymakers, and the general public are increasingly asking about the underlying cultural, social, psychological, economic, and political forces creating family and child well-being. What are the factors determining whether a child is healthy or ill physically and mentally, succeeds or

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fails in school, has supportive or conflictual relationships with parents and peers, and is a negative or positive force in the neighborhood and community? What forces influence family formation and dissolution, the bearing and rearing of children, the functioning of nuclear and extended families, and the integration of families within the larger community and economy? How are children and families influenced by the national economy, the structure of local industry, and community and family economic resources? In what ways are children and families influenced by the norms, values, and beliefs that they hold concerning altruism, commitment, delayed gratification, hard work, risk taking, and the formation and dissolution of marital unions? How are all of these causal dynamics influenced by the interventions of government agencies, laws, and programs?

Questions such as these motivate this volume. We are particularly interested in the state of knowledge concerning these important issues. What do we know about these central scientific and policy questions, and what further understanding is needed? We are also interested in identifying future research directions—both data collection and analysis—that will enhance our knowledge of family and child well-being and the forces producing it. To these ends we have invited a multidisciplinary group of scholars to address these issues from a number of different disciplinary perspectives. These scholars have been asked to evaluate the state of knowledge in their disciplines, identify promising future research directions, and make suggestions for future data collections and analyses.

We have invited contributors from a wide range of academic disciplines, including anthropology, biology, demography, economics, family science, genetics, medicine, psychology, public policy, and sociology. This multidisciplinary approach has been followed because child development and family life are very complex and multifaceted phenomena that cannot be satisfactorily and completely described and explained by only one—or even a few—disciplinary perspectives or points of view. Our goal is to bring together into one volume the perspectives, ideas, and suggestions of experts from a wide array of disciplines.

Although the value of multidisciplinary work is increasingly recognized, discussions across disciplinary boundaries are not easy because each academic discipline and methodological perspective begins with its own fundamental assumptions and views of the world. Each discipline and school contains its own culture defining what is important, what it is that needs to be understood or explained, and what factors are most powerful in causing the world to be the way it is. Each has its own normative ways of doing things, specialized language, and ways of communicating. The different disciplines and approaches also have their own hierarchy of the

importance of different threats to the validity of conclusions. These differences are socialized and reinforced through the standard academic processes of education, peer review, and the allocation of rewards.

The contributors to this volume have been invited to bring their own disciplinary cultures and languages to this volume—to let us know the important ideas, issues, and research directions from their own perspectives and points of view. While we know that the multitude of languages and perspectives will at times inhibit communication across boundaries, we also believe that this approach will provide some of the same advantages of a multiethnic fair with its rich and intriguing set of colors, smells, and tastes. This approach should also enhance the recognition of similarities across disciplines, as many disciplines work with and define similar concepts with somewhat different words and symbols.

Although there are places in the various chapters where connections between disciplines are noted, the fundamental structure of each of the chapters is oriented around only a small number of disciplines. The individual chapters do not attempt to draw in material from all disciplines and do not attempt to integrate the perspectives of all disciplines. Instead, as a collection they provide readers the perspectives of contributors representing many different disciplines. Thus, although these essays are generally disciplinary, we believe that together they will help motivate future interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, integration, and collaborative data collection and analysis.

The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the volume and the perspectives and directions advocated by individual authors. Historical perspective concerning the study of family and child well-being is provided in chapter 2. In chapters 3 through 6 the authors turn to child and family well-being itself and identify gaps and make recommendations concerning the conceptualization and measurement of well-being. Subsequent sections of the book examine the determinants of family and child well-being and make suggestions for improvements in research and data for studying the forces influencing well-being. Chapters 7 and 8 begin this examination of forces producing family and child well-being with consideration of genetic and physiological foundations while chapters 9 through 11 focus on the influence of culture, values, and preferences. In chapters 12 and 13 the emphasis is upon the influence of family structure and decision making while chapters 14 through 17 focus on such contextual factors as schools, neighborhoods, and public policy. The final chapter is authored by the Family and Child Well-Being Research Network of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and provides the synthesis of the Network concerning recommendations for future research and data collection concerning the well-being of children and families.

## **Historical Perspective**

Chapter 2 in this volume was designed by historian John Modell to provide historical perspective to the study of family and child well-being. Modell provides a fascinating cautionary tale from the history of longitudinal research in America. He considers three longitudinal studies of child development that began in the first three decades of this century: Helen Thompson Woolley's child-worker study, the Harvard Growth Study, and the Fels Longitudinal Study. Although these three studies are different in many respects, they also contain many common characteristics. Modell suggests that these studies were very ambitious. They generally took a broad approach and studied the child as a complex whole with a multitude of interrelated dimensions. The studies also included large numbers of individuals and families who were selected broadly within the communities of the researchers. The studies also collected data from individuals over multiple years, with some of the panels extending over extensive periods of time.

Despite the time, energy, and resources devoted to these projects, Modell asserts that the investigators were able to provide only "a molehill of secure understanding" from their "mountain of data." Modell portrays each of the research teams as being rather overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task of processing all of this information—especially without the help of today's computer technology. Modell's assessment of the success of our intellectual ancestors should provide room for both humility and excitement as we contemplate future research efforts.

## **Conceptualizing and Measuring Family and Child Well-Being**

The essays in this volume take a strong position that family and child well-being should be defined broadly to include a wide range of child and family phenomena. Family and child well-being is a complex and multifaceted concept so that overall well-being is a composite or aggregate with many different dimensions and factors. While there are numerous ways to conceptualize and differentiate the global concepts of family and child well-being, we note that individual well-being is frequently differentiated into the following five dimensions or domains: physical well-being; psychological and emotional well-being; social well-being; cognitive and educational well-being; and economic well-being (Family and Child Well-Being Network 1995; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1994; Hofferth 1994; Bentham 1970; National Commission on Children 1993; Watts and Hernandez 1982; Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families 1989; Carnegie Task

Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children 1994; Hauser et al. 1997). The dimension of physical well-being focuses upon individual health, including such factors as weight, height, fitness, diseases, immunizations, substance use, and physical abilities and limitations. The second dimension, psychological and emotional well-being, covers a wide range of factors that include such specific dimensions of mental health as happiness, self-esteem, autonomy, security, and stress. The third category, social well-being, considers the quality of people's relationships with their social environments. It includes interactions with others, social coping skills, delinquency, and prosocial behavior. Cognitive and educational well-being, the fourth dimension identified, includes a range of factors such as mental ability, knowledge, and school attendance and achievement. The fifth and final dimension of well-being focuses on financial issues and includes such things as employment, income, assets, and standard of living. Further specification of concepts of well-being that might be situated within these five broad categories is provided in table 1.1.

In chapter 3 Kristin Moore, Jeffery Evans, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Jodie Roth argue that good child outcomes can be considered from three broad perspectives: attainment of the competencies of development; human capital attainment; and social capacity—noting that these “three perspectives are loosely represented by developmental psychology, economics, and sociology.” From a developmental point of view they note the importance of children attaining at appropriate ages such key attributes as trust and security, curiosity and exploration, self-regulation, competency in mathematics and reading, interpersonal social problem-solving skills, personal identity, and empathy and caring. In the human capital arena Moore et al. accept the common indicators of school achievement, cognition and language, skill acquisition, and job experience, but also suggest less studied attributes such as delayed gratification, appropriate risk taking, and the ability to make occupational decisions. They also note that as social animals it is important for children to have positive relationships with family members, including parents and siblings, if available, to be able to cooperate with others, to have friends, and to display empathy, concern, and positive behavior toward other individuals and groups.

The theme of broad approaches to the conceptualization of well-being is echoed by Desmond Runyan in chapter 4, although Runyan approaches the topic from the perspective of medicine and the language of health. Beginning with the World Health Organization definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO 1978), Runyan suggests that, “at the very least, the domains of mental health, physical health, pain or discomfort, role function, and social function” should be included in studies of children's well-being. Although Runyan recognizes the value of

**TABLE 1.1. Dimensions of Individual Well-Being**

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1. Physical Well-Being
  - a. weight and height
  - b. fitness
  - c. physical abilities (dexterity, coordination, motor skills, strength)
  - d. physical limitations, problems, and conditions
  - e. diseases
  - f. immunizations
  - g. drug, alcohol, and tobacco use
  
2. Psychological and Emotional Well-Being
  - a. happiness, satisfaction, enjoyment
  - b. personal identity
  - c. sense of effectiveness and competence
  - d. sense of acceptance, esteem, and worthiness
  - e. realistic assessment of competencies
  - f. autonomy
  - g. trust and security
  - h. worries, fears
  - i. feeling rushed, overwhelmed, weary
  - j. conditions and symptoms (for example, depression, anxiety, stress, temperament)
  - k. curiosity and exploration
  - l. self-regulation
  - m. adaptability
  
3. Social Well-Being
  - a. ability to cooperate and get along with others
  - b. interpersonal problem-solving skills
  - c. relationships with peers and friends
  - d. relationships with teachers (for children)
  - e. relationships with relatives (parents, siblings, and others)
  - f. relationships with caregivers (for children)
  - g. donations and assistance
  - h. volunteer work and community service
  - i. work at home
  - j. family, community, and peer responsibility and respect
  - k. citizenship
  - l. concern for others, altruism, empathy
  - m. delinquency (stealing, vandalism, fighting, cheating, lying, breaking rules, possession of weapons)
  
4. Cognitive and Educational Well-Being
  - a. mental abilities (reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, artistic, body kinesthetic, musical, logic, reasoning, memory, creativity, intelligence, learning abilities and disabilities)
  - b. knowledge (science, history, geography, literature, arts, parenting, world and national affairs)
  - c. school attendance, attainment, credentials, type of school
  - d. school grades and achievement
  - e. school conduct (absenteeism, tardiness, discipline problems)
  - f. curriculum

- g. school readiness (for preschool children)
- h. ability to take practical risks
- i. ability to delay gratification
- j. ability to make occupational decisions

#### 5. Economic Well-Being

- a. work experience (occupation, hours, earnings, training)
  - b. work history
  - c. income and assets (amount, source, adequacy)
  - d. consumption and expenditures (also, relative to wants)
  - e. benefits and noncash income
  - f. housing quantity and quality
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detailed measurement of these dimensions of child health, he also advocates the development of a set of brief summary global measures that can be used in large social science surveys—suggesting several candidates for testing and refinement. He believes that the development and use of such summary measures will provide further opportunities to study the complex intersections of health with the broad physical, social, and economic environment.

To this point, we have conceptualized health and well-being for individuals, although the relationships of an individual with relevant others can also be included as attributes of individuals. In chapter 5 Randal Day, Stephen Gavazzi, and Alan Acock shift the focus and unit of analysis from individuals and individual characteristics to families and family processes. They indicate that family processes are characteristics of relationships among family members and not characteristics of individuals—with family processes being “patterns of interaction (behavior) and sentiment (affection, attitudes, expectations, and obligations) occurring within a family.” Among the compelling family processes identified by Day et al. are the amount of individuality and belongingness in the family system, family flexibility, supervision and monitoring, and caring, kindness, and love.

The emphasis of Day and his colleagues on families and family processes remind us that health and well-being can be defined at multiple levels. While table 1.1 and the essays of Moore et al. and Runyan conceptualize health and well-being at the individual level, well-being can also be defined at both the dyadic and family system levels. Some of these important dyadic and familial dimensions are outlined in table 1.2. Important here are family and household composition and the transitions that take individuals into and out of family relationships and roles. Included in family transitions are exits from and returns to the parental home, courtship, marriage, pregnancy, and childbearing. The initiation and termination of

dating and sexual relationships are included, even though they are not directly familial in nature, because these relationships can, sometimes quickly, lead to family relationships through childbearing and/or marriage. Also included are entrances into and exits from cohabiting and marital relationships.

Relationships between familial dyads are also included as important familial dimensions because they are central elements of the overall family system. Our particular emphasis here is upon three familial dyads: husband/wife/partner, parents and children, and siblings. Cohabiting relationships are included along with spousal relationships because of the substantial number and importance of cohabiting relationships in the United States today. A number of relevant dimensions of the quality of each of these dyadal relationships is listed. Both positive and negative items are included because of previous research indicating that positive and negative dimensions of relationships are not necessarily the inverse of each other (Orden and Bradburn 1968).

Finally, we include in table 1.2 the well-being of the family system as a whole. This dimension of family well-being is included because families and households are bigger and more complex than the sum of individuals and their dyadic relationships with each other (Day 1995; Minuchin 1985; Peterson and Rollins 1987; Gable et al. 1992). Among the subdimensions of family well-being included here are the concepts of individuality and belongingness, monitoring and supervision, flexibility, and caring and kindness advocated by Day and his colleagues. Shelley Lundberg and Robert Pollak, in chapter 13, indicate that family bargaining is an important family process, although acknowledging the difficulty of studying it beyond the dyadal level. Another subdimension of importance here is family financial well-being.

In chapter 6 Linda Burton and Rukmalie Jayakody join Day et al. in emphasizing the importance and difficulty of measuring family variables. Burton and Jayakody, for example, stress the importance of family structure—particularly the number of parents in the home—as a dimension of child well-being, but emphasize the substantial variation existing within the category of “single” parents. They note that substantial numbers of single parents share the home with other adults, including parents, relatives, housemates, and/or cohabitators. Remarriage is also a frequent sequela of single parenthood, and the addition of a new husband or wife can have substantial ramifications for a family. All of these living arrangements could have both negative and positive dimensions.

Burton and Jayakody also make the crucial distinction between the concepts of family and household, noting that households frequently contain people who are not family members and some important family members live outside the household. These extended family relationships can

be important elements of the well-being of both children and adults and deserve to be included within the familial rubric.

Although the dimensions of individual and family well-being discussed above and outlined in tables 1.1 and 1.2 are broad, they are not necessarily comprehensive. They do not, for example, include the quality of neighborhoods, communities, schools, day-care centers, governments, jobs, economies, and religious institutions that form the environments for children and families. It would be possible to argue that the quality of the physical, social, and economic environments of people are important

**TABLE 1.2. Dimensions of Family Relationships**

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1. Family and Household Composition
  2. Family Transitions (formation and dissolution)
    - a. dating relationships
    - b. sexual relationships
    - c. pregnancy
    - d. childbearing
    - e. residence (leaves/returns to the parental home)
    - f. cohabiting relationships
    - g. marriage
  3. Husband/Wife/Partner Relationships
    - a. love, affection, warmth, emotional availability, empathy
    - b. altruism
    - c. attachment, identification
    - d. interaction, association
    - e. communication
    - f. overlap of individual utility preferences
    - g. relationship happiness/satisfaction/adjustment
    - h. conflict, disagreement, difficulty, instability
    - i. violence, abuse
    - j. concern, commitment, support
    - k. reward/costs from relationship
    - l. overlap of values/attitudes
  4. Parent-Child Relationships (similar subcategories as #3)
  5. Sibling Relationships (similar subcategories as #3)
  6. Family System
    - a. individuality
    - b. belongingness
    - c. flexibility
    - d. supervision and monitoring
    - e. caring, kindness, and love
    - f. bargaining
    - g. economic standard of living
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dimensions of child and family well-being. Other dimensions of family and child well-being could probably be identified as well, but for the purposes of this book, the dimensions of family and child well-being discussed above are our central foci.

### **Influences on Child and Family Well-Being**

Understanding the well-being of children and families requires conceptual and theoretical models to guide the formulation and operationalization of research designs. Conceptual and theoretical frameworks are particularly important in this enterprise because they identify the potential influences on the various dimensions of family and child well-being. They provide hypotheses about the forces in individual, family, and community lives that may affect well-being. In doing so, theory guides us to the choice of explanatory variables to be used in the prediction and understanding of the various dimensions of family and child well-being.

Theoretical and conceptual models also provide a framework for understanding and interpreting the linkages between the explanatory or independent variables and the dependent variables of family and child well-being. What are the reasons for expecting a particular set of explanatory variables to be related to the dependent variables? What causal forces lead the predictor variables to affect variance in family and child well-being? What other factors must be taken into account when evaluating the influence of particular independent variables upon a specific dependent variable?

Of course, the process of building theoretical models to guide empirical research is most effective when it is done precisely for a specific dependent variable. That is, each dependent variable may represent a unique dimension of life with a unique set of forces and processes producing it. Consequently, the theory, research design, and data necessary for understanding one variable may be very different from those affecting other dimensions of family and child well-being. This means that potentially different causal models may be required for each dimension of family and child well-being. Given the breadth and variety of dimensions of well-being, providing such theoretical models for each of the dimensions of family and child well-being is a substantial and daunting task—one that is clearly beyond the scope of this volume.

Nevertheless, these authors have identified a number of theoretical and conceptual forces that are important for understanding many dimensions of family and child well-being. It is to a discussion of these determinants of family and child well-being that we now turn our attention.

## **Population Renewal and Genetic and Physiological Foundations**

Modell ends his essay (chap. 2) with the suggestion that child development should be studied in part as the “demography of person-processing institutions.” This leads us to the demographic observation that the bearing and rearing of children is the central engine of population, community, and family renewal. Through the process of conception and birth a mother and father create a new human being. Following years of nurturance and socialization by the parents and other individuals and institutions, the surviving newborn will eventually mature into adulthood. With the death of the older generation, the young will replace their ancestors in the human population.

We believe that the demographic linkage of childbearing and child rearing as the two central processes of population renewal suggests the likelihood that these two processes are linked together in intricate ways in the lives of the individuals involved. Expected child-rearing patterns and practices probably influence childbearing decisions, and decisions about childbearing probably influence subsequent child-rearing behavior and outcomes.

This suggests that the two dimensions of childbearing and child rearing should be studied together whereas historically they have often been studied separately. Although there are exceptions, fertility studies often begin with individuals and couples who are at risk of bearing children and end with the birth of children, with little attention given to the ways in which the children are raised. Similarly, studies of children and child rearing typically begin with the conception or birth of a child and give little attention to the decision-making processes leading up to the birth of the child. We argue that movement away from separate studies and toward a merger of childbearing and child-rearing studies should enhance inquiry in both arenas. A similar argument is made in a later chapter (chap. 12) by Larry Bumpass and James Sweet who believe that the high level of unmarried childbearing requires “a reintegration of family and fertility studies.”

The essay by David Rowe and Jay Teachman (chap. 7) and the essay by Megan Gunnar, Jacqueline Bruce, and Bonny Donzella (chap. 8) remind us of the genetic and biological underpinnings of human behavior. While each infant is a new beginning, she or he also receives a genetic inheritance from both parents at the time of conception. Through complex biological and chemical processes this genetic information will guide important physical and chemical features of the new human being as she or he matures through life (Wilson 1975; Troost and Filsinger 1993; Udry 1995). Genetic variability across individual human beings also helps to

create diversity in physical characteristics and hormone levels (Draper and Harpending 1982; Belsky et al. 1991; Udry 1995).

The potential influence of genetic factors extends far beyond physical characteristics and biological processes to include a broad range of social, psychological, and behavioral dimensions. In fact, behavioral geneticists have produced an impressive array of findings suggesting that genetics have an important role in a large number of dimensions of human behavior and well-being that have frequently been thought to be the domain of environmental influences. These studies suggest genetic influence on each of the following aspects of human behavior, interactions, and well-being: antisocial behavior, self-perceived competence, social responsibilities, behavioral disorders, alcoholism, vocational interests, extroversion, spatial and verbal reasoning, scholastic achievement, intelligence, family cohesion, family expressiveness, family conflict, parent-child relationships, child monitoring, parent-child disagreements, the expression of affection, self-worth, emotional stability, mental health, divorce, and the use of tobacco (Udry 1995; Plomin et al. 1988, 1989, 1994a, 1994b; Rowe and Osgood 1984; Rowe 1994).

A central point demonstrated by Rowe and Teachman is the importance of controlling for genetic factors when studying social and environmental effects. Because of the heritability of many dimensions of family and child well-being, studies that fail to take into account genetic effects may inappropriately attribute observed correlations between two social or environmental factors to causal factors operating between the two observed variables when those correlations are, in fact, the results of common genetic factors. Rowe and Teachman specify a substantial array of mechanisms through which genetic factors might cause such correlations between observed environmental factors and family and child well-being. The authors therefore argue for the value of embedding studies of environmental determinants in designs that allow for the control of the influence of genetics.

An important element of the discussion by Rowe and Teachman of the influence of heredity and environment is that these two broad classes of influences can combine and interact in complex ways. While heredity and environment may combine additively to influence individual characteristics and behavior, they may also combine interactively in a subtle fashion. Further understanding of the ways in which genes and environment combine is an important and fruitful frontier for research studies of family and child well-being in the coming decades.

The essay by Gunnar, Bruce, and Donzella (chap. 8) focuses our attention on physiological phenomena and their intersection with health and behavioral development, with particular emphasis upon stress. A central thrust of the essay concerns the complex and reciprocal intersections

between the environment and physiological systems of individuals. Gunnar et al. write that there are multiple stress systems that incorporate both physiological and behavioral responses when the individual experiences threat or stress. Stress may have both positive and negative influences on individual functioning. Furthermore, the effects of stress can be substantially different across individuals, varying with personality, perceptions, and the social context of the individual. The social support experienced in the family can be a particularly important buffer of stress in a child's life. An important area for future research in the stress arena concerns the ways in which early life-course experiences influence the development of the stress system. We extend this conclusion more broadly to suggest a general need for a wide array of studies examining the intersection between physiological and social and behavioral phenomena, noting that studies of causal influences in multiple directions are needed.

Gunnar and her colleagues illustrate a rather important methodological point as well. Physiological phenomena can be measured directly and relatively inexpensively in general population studies through the collection of biological specimens. Gunnar et al. specify procedures for measuring cortisol through collection of saliva, although noting pitfalls and difficulties that can occur in collecting and assessing these specimens. A wide range of other physiological data can also be utilized in analyses through the collection of biological specimens from individuals. For example, studies have found substantial effects of hormones on important dimensions of human behavior (Udry 1995; Udry et al. 1986).

### **Culture, Values, and Preferences**

Just as children receive a biological and physiological heritage from their parents, they also receive a cultural inheritance from their parents and community. Chapters 9 and 10 discuss the role of cultural influences on children and families—with chapter 9 being authored by Arland Thornton, William Axinn, Tom Fricke, and Duane Alwin and with Cynthia García Coll the author of chapter 10. As Thornton and colleagues write, culture provides models both for experiencing reality and for living with that reality. This specification of reality defines the good life, identifies what it means to be moral and virtuous, provides a definition of success, and indicates methods to achieve that success. Thus, these cultural schemata define the ends and means for human action and provide motivations for individual behavior. As García Coll indicates, these culturally defined values and goals organize the daily activities and experiences that influence and guide the processes of development. Cultural systems also provide roles that individuals can occupy, such as child, spouse, and par-

ent; these roles provide models of behavior, emotions, and relationships appropriate for the incumbents of the role.

Cultural systems generally go beyond identifying the good life and procedures for achieving it; they frequently identify inappropriate goals, behavior, and methods. As such, they form a moral system of rules and judgments for evaluating relevant conduct. These standards of behavior have normative properties in that they are moral obligations that demand to be obeyed (D'Andrade 1992; Marini 1984, 1992; Spates 1983).

While culture is sometimes pictured as producing homogeneity in behavior and thought, it usually offers considerable variability and leeway for what is acceptable and moral (Hannerz 1992; Marini 1984). In addition, behaviors vary in the degree to which they are viewed as compulsory or voluntary (Taylor 1985). Values also vary in the confidence in which they are held and to the extent they are shared within communities (Goodnow 1988). Similarly, societies vary in how much variance they allow in the thought and behavior of individuals, with contemporary American society portrayed as generally offering more variability and pluralism than many others. As Thornton and colleagues note, cultural schemata and values can also be in competition within the same population, as we see in the United States today.

As García Coll notes, individuals, including children, are not merely passive receptacles for receiving culture; instead they are actively involved in the enculturation process, influencing their families and others. In culturally diverse societies such as the United States, children and adults may actually have considerable leeway in choosing among competing cultural schemata, values, and preferences, which, in turn, help to organize and guide subsequent behavior. Cultural schemata are also not static but frequently changing, sometimes dramatically. Changes in human culture can occur through many mechanisms, including the "creation" of new cultural elements, through the importation of cultural elements from other societies, through differential biological survival of people with different cultural systems, through changes in the environment that make one set of values more or less useful, and through the differential successes of competing cultural beliefs, models, and norms in the socialization process.

Thornton et al. and García Coll each argue that culture and individual values, beliefs, preferences, and attitudes have been tangential components of mainstream studies of family and child well-being. Both essays call for the systematic centralization of these concepts in today's studies of family and child well-being, with their inclusion occurring at multiple levels of measurement and analysis.

An increasingly important cultural concept in economic analysis, as discussed in chapter 11 by Elizabeth Peters and Sinan Ünür, is altruism. They conceptualize altruistic preferences as the extent to which individuals

weight the welfare of others relative to their own well-being. That is, compared to their own well-being, what value do people put on the well-being of people around them? What is the place of helping or prosocial behavior?

As Peters and Ünür argue, altruistic values and behavior can have substantial economic and social consequences. The family is a particularly important potential locus for the existence and operationalization of altruism, with altruistic parents hypothesized to “devote a larger share of their available time, energy, and money resources toward child rearing,” with potentially dramatic benefits for those children. Altruism can also positively influence society more generally through a number of mechanisms, including a reduction of the costs of bargaining and monitoring of agreements. Investigation of altruism and the way it influences well-being at both individual and community levels is an important agenda for the coming decades.

Given the tremendous potential import of altruism in affecting human behavior and well-being, Peters and Ünür argue that more attention needs to be given to studies of its origins. How does altruism survive the strong forces of selfishness both at the biological and social levels? What factors in a child’s socialization and upbringing make some young people more altruistic than others? Similarly, how do community norms reinforce or depress the acquisition of altruism among the young?

### **Family Structure and Decision Making**

Children are born into environments, both social and physical, that have been passed down from the ancestors. Family and kinship groups have been particularly important elements of the social ecology because much of human action is conducted within them. Families may be conceptualized as systems of interacting individuals consisting of women, men, boys, and girls filling numerous familial roles, including wife, husband, son, daughter, mother, father, and sibling (Minuchin 1985; Peterson and Rollins 1987; Belsky 1981; Larson and Richards 1994; Day 1995). We noted earlier the importance of studying the well-being of such familial groups as important dimensions of well-being in their own right. Here, we emphasize the importance of family environments and relationships for the well-being of the individuals, both children and parents, in families.

As we noted earlier, Burton and Jayakody in chapter 6 stress the importance of the composition of the family for children’s well-being. Particularly important for Burton and Jayakody is the number and relationships of adults in the family—with particular emphasis placed on the marital (or marital-like) histories and relationships among the key adults in the family. Issues of union formation—both marriage and cohabitation—

also emerge as central issues for Larry Bumpass and James Sweet in chapter 12 as they stress the extent to which our understanding of this central family institution is limited.

Bumpass and Sweet argue that the changing meaning of marriage is at the heart of many issues concerning union formation and dissolution. They believe that marriage has declined in significance as a lifelong relationship commitment, as an environment for rearing children, as a prerequisite for childbearing and child rearing, and as a necessity for intimate relationships. Particularly important for Bumpass and Sweet is the shift in cultural values that has surrounded marriage in recent decades—issues about individualism, commitment, sharing, obligations to partner or spouse, and the place of marriage in people's lives. Bumpass and Sweet call for in-depth analyses of these many interrelated dimensions of marriage using both qualitative and quantitative data.

Bumpass and Sweet also identify several key issues associated with union disruption that need further explication. Following up on the finding of McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) about the importance of residential changes in explaining the effects of divorce on children, they suggest the need for studying this intervening relationship more extensively by considering both the occurrence and meaning of residential relocations following divorce. Bumpass and Sweet also suggest the importance of studying the role of gender in understanding the dissolution process. Also important for them are the mediating forces that transmit the influence of socioeconomic forces on marital disruption.

Family processes can also be important determinants of the well-being of children and parents. We noted earlier the arguments of Peters and Ünür (chap. 11) about the importance of altruism. We also note the potential importance of the family processes identified by Day et al. (chap. 5)—individuality and belongingness, flexibility and supervision, and caring, kindness, and love—for the well-being of family members. Sandra Hofferth, Deborah Phillips, and Natasha Cabrera in chapter 16 also emphasize the influence of the home environment on children, stressing the ways in which it helps to explain the effects of poverty on children.

Family processes at both the dyadal and system levels are potentially important determinants of individual and family well-being. There are at least three potentially central dyadal relationships within families: one being the mother-wife and father-husband dyad; another being the mother-child and father-child dyads; and another consisting of sibling dyads. As pointed out by Burton and Jayakody (chap. 6), other dyads, such as child and grandparent, or child and mother's new partner or spouse, can also be important.

These dyadic relationships within the family can be described along a number of different lines including the degree of love, affection, commu-

nication, interaction, time together, attachment, identification, and commitment. These dyads can also be characterized by the amount of conflict, violence, disagreement, and abuse occurring in the relationship. The quality of these relationships can be important elements of the well-being and behavior of the family members involved in them. The behavior and well-being of individuals can also be influenced by the relationships among other family members.

A central family process identified by Shelly Lundberg and Robert Pollak in chapter 13 is bargaining and decision making. Lundberg and Pollak indicate that in the past economists typically assumed consensus within family units, with all members maximizing a single utility function. Although powerful, this model is deficient in its ability to account for marriage and divorce where individual people can and do consider their individual utilities and their expected well-being inside and outside of a particular marriage. Furthermore, decision making within marriage does not appear to conform to a single utility function model.

Because of these limitations, economists have developed models involving two or more individual actors with their own distinct preferences. In such relationships, bargaining becomes a key process—one that is hypothesized to be influenced by both perceived opportunities outside the relationship and by one's willingness to live in an inefficient and non-cooperative relationship. According to Lundberg and Pollak, bargaining in these circumstances is influenced by a number of factors, including income outside the relationship and income and control over income within the relationship. Such models can be applied to a number of situations such as marriage, cohabitation, and relationships between parents and children. In the case of marriage, gender roles reflecting social norms are hypothesized to play an important role, raising for the authors questions about the origin and maintenance of social norms or culture. In fact, according to Lundberg and Pollak, these social norms and gender roles may be so central in marital bargaining that explanation of them is where the real action is.

In the arena of intergenerational relations Lundberg and Pollak bring us back to the topic of altruism and its influence on parent-child relationships, suggesting a range of models of parental interactions with children. Also important in this process is the substantial disparity in income and power between parents and children.

### **Schools, Neighborhoods, and Public Policy**

Although the social environments of individuals have always been diverse, a virtually universal feature of societies in the past, including our own, was

heavy reliance on familial modes of organization (Thornton and Fricke 1987; Thornton and Lin 1994). In these historical societies, family units were central institutions in organizing individual lives and interpersonal relationships. Children were generally born into and reared by family units where they received much of their information and knowledge. The activities of both children and adults were largely conducted within family settings where individuals associated primarily with kinsmen. Individuals generally received the necessities and luxuries of life through the familial economy. Protection from harmful forces was largely provided by kinsmen. Familial authority was very important in the lives of both parents and children. Of course, this heavy use of family units in organizing and managing human activities in the Western past was also done within a social milieu that contained other social institutions including the state and church.

One of the most dramatic and important changes of the past several centuries in the United States and numerous other societies has been the transformation of social organization from a familial toward a nonfamilial mode of organization (Thornton and Fricke 1987; Coleman 1990, 1993; Hernandez 1993). Social life has increasingly shifted from being organized largely around family, kinship, and household structures to being organized by both family and nonfamilial institutions. The proliferation of social organizations in America today means that individual lives intersect with numerous social institutions and settings, including the family, neighborhood, friendship group, church, school, economic bureaucracy, child-care center, protective agency, medical center, restaurant, the mass media, and local, state, and national governments. These settings are contexts within which activities occur, authority is exercised, information is distributed, and goods and services are produced, distributed, or consumed. Each of these settings also contains its own institutional roles that people enter, occupy, and depart. Participation in these social organizations helps to define and guide the activities and well-being of individuals and families.

Although recognizing the potential importance of all of these nonfamilial organizations and environments, this volume focuses primarily on five of these settings: schools, day care, religious institutions, neighborhoods, and government. We begin with schools, one of the most important of these nonfamilial institutions for children. Although extensive research has been done about schools, education, and their intersections with the lives of children and families, Harold Stevenson suggests in chapter 14 that there are many gaps in knowledge concerning the education of children, and he provides a sample of some of the most pressing issues for additional research.

Stevenson notes the low academic achievement of American children, especially when compared to children in East Asia. He puts research con-

cerning the reasons for this low performance among the most important agenda items for the future. He identifies many differences between the United States and East Asian societies that may account for the differentials in academic performance, including “beliefs about the paths to academic success, the teaching styles practiced in . . . schools, educational standards, textbooks and teaching materials, mechanisms for avoiding fatigue and boredom, [and] children’s participation in lessons.”

Three cultural determinants of children’s cognitive and educational well-being are identified by Stevenson for further study. Stevenson notes that the definition of intelligence has broadened substantially beyond problem solving to include such areas as social and emotional intelligence, with implications for curriculum and teaching approaches. Another cultural influence on schools, children, and learning is the relative importance people place on innate abilities or effort in determining a child’s ability to learn. Another issue centers on the idea that high self-esteem is an important goal of the educational system, with the institution of programs designed to improve children’s sense of esteem and respect. Stevenson notes the strong potential influence of these beliefs and practices on cognitive development and educational achievement, and he calls for research programs to address them.

Stevenson also identifies several organizational and behavioral issues in education for further research. One concerns the role of homework in the educational system—addressing both its impact on the extent of learning and its influence on relationships in the home and school. A second concerns classroom behavior, both of students and teachers, and the way it influences learning. The goals and organization of preschools and their long-term impact on children is another area of interest, as is the involvement of parents with the educational process. Stevenson also notes the growing number of out-of-school activities and suggests investigation of their influence on the learning process.

Greg Duncan and Stephen Raudenbush report in chapter 15 that while there are strong theoretical reasons for believing that differences among schools in available resources should influence children’s performance, research from large school surveys has failed to find substantial resource effects. They offer several methodological critiques of the studies that have not found strong school resource effects, noting particularly the general focus on current educational status rather than changes in achievement across time, which would be expected to be connected more closely to the school setting at the same time. Studies that focus on educational change have apparently been more successful than those focusing on educational level in identifying important school effects.

An especially important new nonfamilial institution in the lives of young children is institutionalized day care, a topic addressed in chapter

16 by Sandra Hofferth, Deborah Phillips, and Natasha Cabrera. Although most children in the past were taken care of by their mothers and other relatives in the home, the rise of women's paid employment outside the home has led to large fractions of young children experiencing nonfamilial day care. This change in the environments of young children raises a multitude of questions about the influence of child-care arrangements on children's well-being. Hofferth and colleagues suggest that nonmaternal child care itself has little impact on child outcomes, but that the quality of child care does have significant effects. The child development literature has generally focused on three interrelated dimensions of day-care quality: structure as reflected in such indicators as staff ratio and group size; process qualities as measured by general environment and social relations in the center; and developmental aspects. Hofferth et al. identify several gaps in the research literature, including the examination of a full range of child-care qualities, people using multiple day-care arrangements, and adequate use of experimental designs.

Thornton and colleagues note in chapter 9 that religious institutions have played a substantial role in shaping cultural schemata in Western societies. Religious institutions have been particularly important in defining morality, particularly as it relates to families, marriage, sexuality, and the bearing and rearing of children (Thornton 1985). Religion can influence the behavior and well-being of individuals both by shaping values and preferences and by offering rewards and sanctions for specified behaviors (Ellison 1993; Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Religious institutions also frequently provide a sense of belonging and connectedness, social support, and a range of services that can influence the lives of children and families.

Duncan and Raudenbush take up the issue of neighborhood effects in chapter 15 and provide an interesting review of the theoretical and empirical literature concerning the effects of neighborhoods on children and families. They suggest several theoretical reasons and mechanisms for neighborhoods to influence their residents. They also note that the empirical evidence concerning the effects of neighborhoods on children is mixed, with some studies suggesting only small effects, while others indicate greater importance for neighborhoods. An important point for Duncan and Raudenbush is that it is difficult to "do context right" and that there is a need for a new round of studies that improve the conceptualization, measurement, and analysis of neighborhood effects.

Hofferth and colleagues (chap. 16) address another very important nonfamilial influence on children—government policy and programs. The authors note that there are literally hundreds of programs at the federal level that influence children and families. They review several key federal programs: public assistance programs, social insurance policies, food

stamps, income tax policies, and direct child-care subsidies to families and programs. They note many important changes that have occurred in federal government policy concerning children and families in recent years—changes that are likely to have effects that deserve attention from the scientific and policy research communities in the coming years.

Local, state, and national governments can powerfully influence the lives of individuals and families. This can occur directly through legislative action that prohibits, compels, encourages, or discourages specific behaviors. These include laws about marriage, divorce, the use of contraception, abortion, child support, and school attendance. Governmental units also frequently fund and/or operate specific institutions such as schools, preschool programs, foster homes, medical units, and police and fire protection agencies. When services such as these are not provided by governmental bodies, the government can still play a role in licensing and certifying these and similar institutions such as day-care centers. Governmental policies and programs can also influence the distribution of income and access to goods and services. This can occur through general governmental economic policy affecting the overall vigor of the economy. It can also occur through direct transfer programs such as aid to families with dependent children, social security, and Medicaid. Another mechanism is direct government subsidization of services, such as child-care programs, that benefit children and families. Taxation programs that influence various families and individuals differentially can also modify the distribution of well-being among children and families. Hofferth and colleagues provide a number of examples of how such policies affect the quantity and quality of child care available to parents and their children.

As Duncan and Raudenbush suggest (chap. 15), research concerning contextual effects—including the effects of neighborhoods, schools, child-care arrangements, religious affiliations, and government policies—faces numerous methodological obstacles to its success. We have already alluded to the issue of dynamic versus static measurement and analysis, with the authors suggesting that in some cases multiple measurements in the same year are necessary to study the schooling process. They also discuss issues of geographical mobility and children's involvement in multiple contexts over their growing-up years, with the decisions about context locations intertwined with the attributes of children and their families. There are also many important conceptual and methodological issues concerning the definition of neighborhoods, the measurement of neighborhood contexts, the size and composition of neighborhood and individual samples, and the statistical modeling of multilevel effects. An important contribution of the chapter is a set of recommendations concerning the design of contextual studies.

Another key methodological theme of the volume is known by multi-

ple names: heterogeneity bias; misspecification bias; endogeneity bias; and unobserved heterogeneity. We have already discussed this issue in the guise of studying social influences on individuals without controlling for genetic and biological factors (Rowe and Teachman, chap. 7) and in discussing neighborhood effects without taking into account individual decision making that placed individuals in neighborhoods and gave the neighborhoods the characteristics they had (Duncan and Raudenbush, chap. 15). This issue is addressed more globally by Paul Schultz in chapter 17 where he discusses the difficulties associated with most nonexperimental research.

As Schultz explains, this heterogeneity bias problem occurs because the inputs or determinants of the well-being of children and families do not occur randomly across individuals and families but rather are determined by the children, their parents, or influential people who know something about the child or family and use that information in making decisions relevant to the child and her/his family. With such unobserved heterogeneity it is difficult to obtain unbiased estimates of the parameters of interest. Schultz suggests that one appropriate way of dealing with this problem is to bring in additional information that can be used by the investigator as “instrumental variables” to properly estimate unbiased parameters.

Schultz argues that the best instrumental variables come from information exogenous to the family rather than from family or individual data. Thus, he joins with Duncan and Raudenbush (chap. 15) in calling for additional community-level data. He suggests three possible approaches for collecting these community data: through a parallel but independent community survey; independent data systems such as the decennial census; and the aggregation of data from household surveys to estimate community properties. However, Schultz recognizes that even community data have limitations for model specification, as individuals and families may select their neighborhoods and as community policymakers make decisions about neighborhoods based on their knowledge of the residents. Schultz suggests that some leverage on such problems might be gained by collecting dynamic information concerning neighborhoods as well as individuals.

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