Overview

The Changing Family Life Cycle: A Framework for Family Therapy

Betty Carter, M.S.W.
and Monica McGoldrick, M.S.W.

In the short span of years since the first edition of this book appeared there have been a great many changes in the family therapy field with regard to this topic, and in life cycle patterns themselves. First of all there is a burgeoning literature discussing families in relation to their developmental phase, and referring to divorce, remarriage, and chronic illness in developmental terms. Second there has been a small revolution in awareness of differences in male and female development (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976; etc.) and in their implications for the family life cycle. The conservative, or even reactionary, stance that the family therapy field has taken regarding the role of women has come under strong criticism (Goldner, 1986; Taggert, 1986; Libow, 1984; Hare-Mustin, 1978, 1980 & 1987; The Women's Project in Family Therapy, in press; McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, in press, etc) and requires a careful rethinking of our assumptions about "normality," the notion of "family" and who is responsible for its maintenance, and the role of the therapist in responding to changing norms and sociopolitical realities. Awareness has also increased about the importance of ethnic patterns and cultural variability in life cycle definitions of normality (McGoldrick, 1982). In this second edition, we have tried to reassess and reformulate our first edition in light of these changing perspectives.

We want to emphasize two cautions about a life cycle perspective. A rigid application of psychological ideas to the "normal" life cycle can have a detrimental effect if it promotes anxious self-scrutiny that raises fears that
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The family life cycle perspective views symptoms and dysfunctions in relation to normal functioning over time and views therapy as helping to reestablish the family's developmental momentum. It frames problems within the context of the individual family's development. The individual life cycle takes place within the family life cycle, which is the primary context of human development. We think this perspective is crucial to understanding the emotional problems that people develop as they move through life.

It is surprising how little explicit attention therapists have paid to a life cycle framework until recently. Perhaps it is the dramatically changing life patterns in our time that are drawing our attention to this perspective. In any case it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine what family life cycle patterns are "normal," and this in itself is often a cause of great stress for family members, who have few models for the passages they are going through.

In this book we look at the family life cycle in relation to three aspects: (1) the predictable stages of "normal" family development in traditional middle-class America as we near the end of the 20th century, and typical clinical patterns when families have trouble negotiating these transitions; (2) the changing stages of the family life cycle in our time and the shifts in what is considered "normal"; and (3) a clinical perspective that views therapy as helping families that have become derailed in the family life cycle to get back on their developmental track, and which invites you, the therapist, to include yourself and your own life cycle stage in the equation (Chapter 5).

THE FAMILY AS A SYSTEM MOVING THROUGH TIME

In our view family stress is often greatest at transition points from one stage to another of the family developmental process, and symptoms are most likely to appear when there is an interruption or dislocation in the unfolding family life cycle. Therapeutic efforts often need to be directed toward helping family members reorganize so that they can proceed developmentally. Michael Solomon (1973), one of the first therapists to discuss a family life cycle perspective, outlined tasks for a five-stage family life cycle and suggested using this framework as a diagnostic base upon which to plan treatment. Others have divided the family life cycle into different numbers of stages. The most widely accepted is the breakdown of the sociologist Duvall (1977), who has been working for many years to define normal family development. Duvall broke the family life cycle into stages, all of them addressing the nodal events related to the comings and goings of family members: marriage, the birth and raising of children, the departure of children from the household, retirement, and death. The most complex breakdown of the life cycle was that proposed by Hill (1970) emphasized three generational aspects of the life cycle, describing parents of married children as forming a "lineage bridge" between the older and younger generations of the family. His view is that at each stage of the life cycle there is a distinctive role change for family members with each other. Combrinck-Graham (1985) has suggested an emphasis on oscillations between centrifugal and centripetal periods in family development, emphasizing life experiences, such as birth or infancy, that require a pulling together and primacy of relationships, and other experiences, such as starting school or a new job, that demand focus on individuality. Obviously the many ways family members rely on one another within the "generation spiral" (Duvall, 1977, p. 153) in a mutual interdependence are part of the richness of the family context as generations move through life.

The development of a life cycle perspective for the individual has been greatly facilitated by the creative work of Erikson (1950), Levinson (1978), Miller (1976), Gilligan (1982), and others in defining the transitions of adult life. Recent studies of the couple over the life cycle have helped us gain a time sensitive perspective on the two-person system (Campbell, 1975; Gould, 1972; Duvall, 1976; Schram, 1979; Nachson, et al., 1984). The three-person or family model has been elaborated most carefully by Duvall, who focuses on child rearing as the organizing element of family life.

We should like to consider the motion of the entire three- or four-generational system as it moves through time. Relationships with parents, siblings (Cicirelli, 1985), and other family members go through stages as one moves along the life cycle, just as parent-child and spouse relationships do. It is extremely difficult, however, to think of the family as a whole because of the complexity involved. As a system moving through time, the family has basically different properties from all other systems. Unlike all other organizations, families incorporate new members only by birth, adoption, or marriage, and members can leave only by death. If then. No other system is subject to these constraints. A business organization can fire members it views as dys-
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There is ample evidence by now that family stresses, which are likely to cur around life cycle transition points, frequently create disruptions of the cycle and produce symptoms and dysfunction. Halley and his colleagues (1974) found that symptom onset correlated significantly with family developmental crises of addition and loss of family members. Walsh (1978) and Ristadis (1977) both found that a significant life cycle event (death of a grandparent), when closely related in time to another life cycle event (birth of a child), correlated with patterns of symptom development at a much later transition in the family life cycle (the launching of the next generation). There growing evidence that life cycle events have a continuing impact on family development over a long period of time. It is probably the clinicians' own limited perspective that inhibits our noticing these patterns. Research is rarely carried out over periods of more than a few years, and thus longitudinal connections can easily be lost. One research group, headed by Thomas, studied the family patterns of medical students at Johns Hopkins and then allowed them over many years. They found numerous life cycle connections between early family patterns and later symptom development (Thomas & Huszynski, 1974). Such research supports the clinical method of Bowen, who tracks family patterns through their life cycle over several generations, focusing especially on nodal events and transition points in family development in seeking to understand family dysfunction at the present moment (Bowen, 1978).

As illustrated in Figure 1-1, we view the flow of anxiety in a family as being both "vertical" and "horizontal" (Carter, 1978). The vertical flow in a system includes patterns of relating and functioning that are transmitted down the generations of a family primarily through the mechanism of emotional triangling (Bowen, 1978). It includes all the family attitudes, taboos, expectations, labels, and loaded issues with which we grow up. One could say that these aspects of our lives are like the hand we are dealt: they are the given. What we do with them is the issue for us.

The horizontal flow in the system includes the anxiety produced by the stresses on the family as it moves forward through time, coping with the changes and transitions of the family life cycle. This includes both the predictable developmental stresses and those unpredictable events, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," that may disrupt the life cycle process (untimely death, birth of a handicapped child, chronic illness, war, etc.). Given enough stress on the horizontal axis, any family will appear extremely dysfunctional. Even a small horizontal stress on a family in which the vertical axis is full of intense stress will create great disruption in the system.

In our view the degree of anxiety engendered by the stress on the vertical and horizontal axes at the points where they converge is the key determinant of how well the family will manage its transitions through life. It becomes imperative, therefore, to assess not only the dimensions of the current life cycle stress, but also their connections to family themes, triangles, and labels coming down in the family over historical time (Carter, 1978). Although all normative change is to some degree stressful, we have observed that when the horizontal (developmental) stress intersects with a vertical (transgenerational) stress, there is a quantum leap in anxiety in the system. If, to give a global example, one's parents were basically pleased to be parents and handled the job without too much anxiety, the birth of the first child will produce just the normal stresses of a system expanding its boundaries in our era. If, on the other hand, parenting was a cause célèbre of some kind in the family of origin of one or both spouses, and has not been dealt with, the transition to parenthood may produce heightened anxiety for the couple. The greater the anxiety generated in the family at any transition point, the more difficult or dysfunctional the transition will be.

In addition to the stress "inherited" from past generations and that experienced while moving through the family life cycle, there is, of course, the stress of living in this place at this time. One cannot ignore the social, economic, and political context and its impact on families moving through different phases of the life cycle at each point in history. We must realize that there are huge discrepancies in social and economic circumstances between families in our culture, and this inequality has been escalating. At present the top 10% of the population have 57% of the net wealth of the country while the bottom 50% of the population share 4.3% of the total net worth (Thurow, 1987). Among working men only 22% will earn as much as $31,000 and among working women only 3% will earn this much. (Society's treatment of working women is
still grossly unequal, with working women earning no more than 65% of what their male counterparts in the work force earn, and with women and children accounting for 17% of those in poverty. We are rapidly moving to the point where only a family with two full-time working parents will be able to support a middle-class existence (Thurow, 1987).

Cultural factors also play a major role in how families go through the life cycle. Not only do cultural groups vary greatly in their breakdown of life cycle stages and definitions of the tasks at each stage (Chapter 3), but it is clear that even several generations after immigration the family life cycle patterns of groups differ markedly (Woelk, 1982; Gelfand & Kutzik, 1979; Lieberman, 1974). One must also recognize the strain that the vastly accelerated rate of change puts on families today, whether the changes themselves are for better or for worse.

Even the stages of the life cycle are rather arbitrary breakdowns. The notion of childhood has been described as the invention of 18th-century Western society and adolescence as the invention of the 19th century (Aficts, 1962), related to cultural, economic, and political contexts of those eras. The notion of young adulthood as an independent phase could easily be argued to be the invention of the 20th century, and for women as independent persons of the late 20th century, if that is accepted even now. The phases of the empty nest and older age are also developments primarily of this century, brought about by the smaller number of children and the longer life span in our era. Given the present rates of divorce and remarriage, the 21st century may become known for developing the norm of serial marriage as part of the life cycle process. Developmental psychology has tended to take on a historical approach to the life cycle. In virtually all other contemporary cultures and during virtually all other historical eras, the breakdown of life cycle stages has been different from our current definitions. To add to this complexity, cohorts born and living through different periods differ in fertility, mortality, acceptable gender roles, migration patterns, education, needs and resources, and attitudes toward family and aging.

Families characteristically lack time perspective when they are having problems. They tend generally to magnify the present moment, overwhelmed and immobilized by their immediate feelings; or they become fixed on a moment in the future that they dread or long for. They lose the awareness that life means continual motion from the past and into the future with a continual transformation of familial relationships. As the sense of motion becomes lost or distorted, therapy involves restoring a sense of life as process and movement from and toward.

THE CHANGING FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

Within the past generation, the changes in family life cycle patterns have escalated dramatically, due especially to the lower birth rate, the longer life expectancy, the changing role of women, and the increasing divorce and remarriage rate. While it used to be that child rearing occupied adults for their entire active life span, it now occupies less than half the time span of adult life prior to old age. The meaning of the family is changing drastically, since it is no longer organized primarily around this activity.

The changing role of women in families is central in these shifting family life cycle patterns. Women have always been central to the functioning of the family. Their identities were determined primarily by their family functions as mother and wife. Their life cycle phases were linked almost exclusively to their stages in child-rearing activities. For men, on the other hand, chronological age has been seen as a key variable in life cycle determinations. But this description no longer fits. Today women are moving through the parenting cycle more rapidly than their grandmothers; they may put off developing personal goals beyond the realm of the family, but they can no longer ignore such goals. Even women who choose a primary role of mother and homemaker must now face an “empty nest” phase that equals in length the years devoted primarily to child care. Perhaps the modern feminist movement was inevitable, as women have come to need a personal identity. Having always had primary responsibility for home, family, and child care, women necessarily began to struggle under their burdens as they came to have more options for their own lives. Given their pivotal role in the family and their difficulty in establishing concurrent functions outside the family, it is perhaps not surprising that women have been the most prone to symptom development at life cycle transitions. For men the goals of career and family are parallel. For women these goals conflict and present a severe dilemma. While women are more positive than men about the prospect of marriage, they are less content than men generally with the reality of it (Bernard, 1972). Women, not men, are likely to become depressed at the time of childbirth; this appears to have a great deal to do with the dilemma that this shift creates in their lives. Women, more than men, seek help during the child-rearing years, and as their children reach adolescence and leave home and as their spouses retire or die. And women, not men, have had primary responsibility for older relatives. Surely women’s seeking help for problems has much to do with the different ways in which they are socialized, but it also reflects the special life cycle stresses on women, whose role has been to bear emotional responsibility for all family relationships (Chapter 2).

Actually, at an ever-accelerating pace over the decades of this century, women have radically changed—and are still changing—the face of the traditional family life cycle that had existed for centuries. In fact the present generation of young women is the first in history to insist on their right to the first phase of the family life cycle—the phase in which the young adult leaves the parents’ home, establishes personal life goals, and starts a career. Historically women were denied this most crucial step in adult development and were handed, instead, from their fathers to their husbands. In the next phase, that of the newly married couple, women are establishing two-career marriages, having children later, having fewer children, or choosing not to have children at all.
In the “pressure cooker” phase of the family life cycle—that of families with young children—the majority of divorces take place, many of them initiated by women; in the next phase, that of families with adolescents, couples have the fastest growth in divorce rates at present. It is during this phase that the “midlife crisis” has sent unprecedented numbers of women back to school and work. Finally, when the children are gone, a married couple—if they are still married—can expect an average of 20 years “lonely together, the newest and longest phase of the family life cycle. In former times one spouse, usually the husband, died within two years of the marriage of the youngest child. Old age, the final phase of the family life cycle, has almost become a phase for women only, both because they outlive men and because they live longer than they used to. At ages 75–79, only 24% of women have husbands whereas 61% of men have wives. At ages 80–84, 14% of women have husbands and 49% of men have wives. At age 85, 6% of women have husbands and 34% of men have wives (Bianchi & Spain, 1986; Glick, 1984b; U.S. Senate Special Committee Report, 1985).

The recent changes in these patterns make our task of defining the “normal” family life cycle even more difficult. An ever increasing percent of the population are living together without marrying (3% of couples at any one point in time), and a rapidly increasing number are having children without marrying. At present 6% or more of the population is homosexual. Present estimates are that 12% of young women will never marry, three times the percent for their parents’ generation; 25% will never have children; 50% will end their marriages in divorce and 20% will have two divorces. Thus families often are not going through the “normal” phases at the “normal” times. If one adds to this the number of families that experience the death of a member before old age and those that have a chronically ill or handicapped or alcoholic family member, which alters their life cycle pattern, the number of “normal” families is even smaller. Another major factor affecting all families at one time or another is migration (Shutzki, 1979; McGoldrick, 1982). The break in cultural and family continuity created by migration affects family life cycle patterns for several generations. Given the enormous number of Americans who have immigrated within the past two generations, the percentage of “normal” families is diminished still further.

Thus our paradigm for middle-class American families is currently more or less mythological, though statistically accurate, relating in part to existing patterns and in part to the ideal standards of the past against which most families compare themselves.

It is imperative that therapists at least recognize the extent of change and variations in the norm that are now widespread and that they help families to stop comparing their structure and life cycle course with that of the family of the 1950s. While relationship patterns and family themes may continue to sound familiar, the structure, ages, stages, and form of the American family have changed radically.

It is time for professionals to give up attachments to the old ideals and to put a more positive conceptual frame around what is: two paycheck marriages; permanent “single-parent” households; unmarried couples and remarried couples; single-parent adoptions; and women of all ages alone. It is past time to stop thinking of transitional crises as permanent traumas, and to stop from our vocabulary words and phrases that link us to the norms and prejudices of the past: children of divorce, out-of-wedlock child, fatherless home, working mother, and the like.

#### The Stages of the Intact Middle-Class American Family Life Cycle

Our classification of family life cycle stages of American middle-class families in the last quarter of the 20th century highlights our view that the central underlying process to be negotiated is the expansion, contraction, and realignment of the relationship system to support the entry, exit, and development of family members in a functional way. We offer suggestions about process of change required of families at each transition, as well as hypotheses about the clinical fallout at each phase.

#### The Launching of the Single Young Adult

In outlining the stages of the family life cycle, we have departed from the traditional sociological depiction of the family life cycle as commencing at courtship or marriage and ending with the death of one spouse. Rather, considering the family to be the operative emotional unit from the cradle to the grave, we see a new family life cycle beginning at the stage of “young adults,” whose completion of the primary task of coming to terms with their family of origin most profoundly influences who, when, how, and whether they will marry and how they will carry out all succeeding stages of the family life cycle. Adequate completion of this requires that the young adult separate from the family of origin without cutting off or fleeing reactively to a substitute emotional refuge (Chapter 9). Seen in this way, the “young adult” phase is a cornerstone. It is a time in which personal life goals and to become a self before joining with another to form a new family subsystem. The more adequately young adults can differentiate themselves from the emotional programs of the family of origin at this phase, the fewer vertical stressors will follow them through their new family’s life cycle. This is the chance for them to sort out emotionally what they will take along from the family of origin what they will leave behind and what they will create for themselves. As mentioned above, of greatest significance is the fact that until the present generation this crucial phase was never considered necessary for women, who had no individual
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Table 1-1. The Stages of the Family Life Cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Life Cycle Stage</th>
<th>Emotional Process of Transition: Key Principles</th>
<th>Second-Order Changes in Family Status Required to Proceed Developmentally</th>
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b. Development of intimate peer relationships  
c. Establishment of self-reliance and financial independence |
| 2. The joining of families through marriage: The new couple | Commitment to new system | a. Formation of marital system  
b. Realignment of relationships with extended families and friends to include spouse |
| 3. Families with young children | Accepting new members into the system | a. Adjusting marital system to make space for children  
b. Joining in childrearing, financial, and household tasks  
c. Realignment of relationships with extended family to include parenting and grandparenting roles |
| 4. Families with adolescents | Increasing flexibility of family boundaries to include children's independence and grandparents' frailties | a. Shifting of parent-child relationships to permit adolescent to move in and out of family system  
b. Refocus on middle marital and career issues  
c. Beginning shift toward joint caring for older generation |
| 5. Launching children and moving on | Accepting a multitude of exits from and entries into the family system | a. Renegotiation of marital system as a dyad  
b. Development of adult-to-adult relationships between grown children and their parents  
c. Realignment of relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren  
d. Dealing with disabilities and death of parents (grandparents) |
| 6. Families in later life | Accepting the shifting of generational roles | a. Maintaining own and/or couple functioning and interest in face of physiological decline; exploration of new familial and social roles options  
b. Support for a more central role of middle generation  
c. Making room in the system for the wisdom and experience of the elderly, supporting the older generation without overfunctioning for them  
d. Dealing with loss of spouse, siblings, and other peers and preparation for own death. Life review and integration |

family members are placing a much greater burden on couples to define their relationship for themselves than was true in traditional and precedent-bound family structures (Chapter 10). While any two family systems are always different and have conflicting patterns and expectations, in our present culture couples are less bound by family traditions and freer than ever before to develop male-female relationships unlike those they experienced in their families of origin. Marriage tends to be misunderstood as a joining of two individuals. What it really represents is the changing of two entire systems and an overlapping to develop a third subsystem. As Jessie Bernard pointed out long
Becoming Parents: Families with Young Children

The shift to this stage of the family life cycle requires that adults now move up a generation and become caretakers to the younger generation. Typical problems that occur when parents cannot make this shift are struggles with each other about taking responsibility, or refusal or inability to behave as parents to their children. Often parents find themselves unable to set limits and exert the required authority, or they lack the patience to allow their children to express themselves as they develop. Often, parents with children who present clinically at this phase are somehow not accepting the generation boundary between themselves and their children. They may complain that their four-year-old is “impossible to control.” Or, on the other hand, they may expect their children to behave more like adults, reflecting too strong a generational boundary or barrier. In any case, child centered problems are typically addressed by helping parents gain a view of themselves as part of a new generational level with specific responsibilities and tasks in relation to the next level of the family.

The central struggle of this phase, however, in the modern two-paycheck (and sometimes two-career) marriage is the disposition of child-care responsibilities and household chores when both parents work full-time. The pressure of trying to find adequate child care when there is no satisfactory social provision for this family need produces serious consequences: the two full-time jobs may fall on the woman; the family may live in conflict and chaos; children may be neglected or sexually abused in inadequate child-care facilities; recreation and vacations may be sharply curtailed to pay for child care; or the woman may give up her career to stay home or work part-time. This problem is at the center of marital conflict presented at this stage, and often leads to complaints of sexual dysfunction and depression. It is not possible to work successfully with couples at this phase without dealing with the issues of gender and the impact of sex-role functioning that is still regarded as the norm for most men and women. It is not really surprising that this is the family life cycle phase that has the highest rate of divorce.

Chapter 11 focuses largely on the impact of this transition on the working couple because of its relevance to today’s family. However, therapists need also to inform themselves about child behavior and development, learning disabilities, serious disorders of childhood, etc., so that they do not overlook these in their focus on parent-child or marital conflict.

The shift at this transition for grandparents is to move to a back seat from which they can allow their children to be the central parental authorities and yet form a new type of caring relationship with their grandchildren. For many adults this is a particularly gratifying transition, which allows them to have intimacy without the responsibility that parenting requires.

The Transformation of the Family System in Adolescence

While many have broken down the stages of families with young children into different phases, in our view the shifts are incremental until adolescence, which ushers in a new era because it marks a new definition of the children within the family and of the parents’ roles in relation to their children. Families
with adolescents must establish qualitatively different boundaries than families with younger children, a job made more difficult in our times by the lack of built-in rituals to facilitate this transition (Quinn et al., 1985). The boundaries must now be permeable. Parents can no longer maintain complete authority. Adolescents can and do open the family to a whole array of new values as they bring friends and new ideals into the family arena. Families that become derailed at this stage may be rather closed to new values and threatened by them and they are frequently stuck in an earlier view of their children. They may try to control every aspect of their lives at a time when, developmentally, this is impossible to do successfully. Either the adolescent withdraws from the appropriate involvements for this developmental stage, or the parents become increasingly frustrated with what they perceive as their own impotence. For this phase the old Alcoholics Anonymous adage is particularly apt for parents: “May I have the ability to accept the things I cannot change, the strength to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Flexible boundaries that allow adolescents to move in and be dependent at times when they cannot handle things alone, and to move out and experiment with increasing degrees of independence when they are ready, put special strains on all family members in their new status with one another. This is also a time when adolescents begin to establish their own independent relationships with the extended family, and it requires special adjustments between parents and grandparents to allow and foster these new patterns.

Therapy in such situations needs to help families make the appropriate transformation of their view of themselves to allow for the increasing independence of the new generation, while maintaining appropriate boundaries and structure to foster continued family development.

The central event in the marital relationship at this phase is usually the “midlife crisis” of one or both spouses, with an exploration of personal, career, and marital satisfactions and dissatisfactions. There is usually an intense renegotiation of the marriage, and sometimes a decision to divorce. A focus on parent-adolescent complaints by either the family or the therapist may mask an affair or a secretly pondered divorce, or may prevent the marital problems from coming to the surface. This is not to say that common adolescent symptoms, such as drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, or delinquency or psychotic behavior, should not be carefully assessed and dealt with.

Families at Midlife: Launching Children and Moving On

This phase of the family life cycle is the newest and the longest, and for these reasons, it is in many ways the most problematic of all phases (Chapter 13). Until about a generation ago, most families were occupied with raising their children for their entire active adult lives until old age. Now, because of the low birth rate and the long life span of most adults, parents launch their children almost 20 years before retirement and must then find other life activities. The difficulties of this transition can lead families to hold on to their children or can lead to parental feelings of emptiness and depression, particularly for women who have focused their main energies on their children and who now feel unprepared to face a new career in the work world. The most significant aspect of this phase is that it is marked by the greatest number of exits and entries of family members. It begins with the launching of grown children and proceeds with the entry of their spouses and children. It is a time when older parents are often becoming ill or dying. This, in conjunction with the difficulties of finding meaningful new life activities during this phase itself, may make it a particularly difficult period. Parents not only must deal with the change in their own status as they make room for the next generation and prepare to move up to grandparental positions, but also with a different type of relationship with their own parents, who may become dependent, giving them (particularly women) considerable caretaking responsibilities. This can also be a liberating time, in that finances may be easier than during the primary years of family responsibilities and there is the potential for moving into new and unexplored areas—travel, hobbies, new careers. For some families this stage is seen as a time of fruition and completion and as a second opportunity to consolidate or expand by exploring new avenues and new roles. For others it leads to disruption, a sense of emptiness and overwhelming loss, depression, and general disintegration. The phase necessitates a restructuring of the marital relationship now that parenting responsibilities are no longer required. As Solomon (1973) has noted, if the solidification of the marriage has not taken place and reinvestment is not possible, the family often mobilizes itself to hold onto the last child. Where this does not happen, the couple may move toward divorce.

The Family in Later Life

As Walsh (Chapter 14) has pointed out, few of the visions of old age we are offered in our culture provide us with positive perspectives for healthy later-life adjustment within a family or social context. Pessimistic views of later life prevail. The current myths are that most elderly people have no families; that those who do have families have little relationship with them and are usually set aside in institutions; or that all family interactions with older family members are minimal. On the contrary, the vast majority of adults over 65 do not live alone but with other family members. Over 80% live within an hour of at least one child (Chapter 14).

Another myth about the elderly is that they are sick, senile, and feeble and can be best handled in nursing homes or hospitals. Only 4% of the elderly live in institutions (Streib, 1972), and the average age at admission is 80. There are indications that if others did not foster their dependence or ignore them as functional family members, even this degree of dependence would be less.

Among the tasks of families in later life are adjustments to retirement, which not only may create the obvious vacuum for the retiring person, but may
put a special strain on a marriage that until then has been balanced in different spheres. Financial insecurity and dependence are also special difficulties, especially for family members who value managing for themselves. And, while loss of friends and relatives is a particular difficulty at this phase, the loss of a spouse is the most difficult adjustment, with its problems of reorganizing one's entire life alone after many years as a couple and of having fewer relationships to help replace the loss. Grandparenthood can, however, offer a new lease on life, and opportunities for special close relationships without the responsibilities of parenthood.

Difficultly in making the status changes required for this phase of life are reflected in older family members' refusal to relinquish some of their power, as when a grandfather refuses to turn over the company or make plans for his succession. The inability to shift status is reflected also when older adults give up and become totally dependent on the next generation, or when the next generation does not accept their lessening powers or treat them as totally incompetent or irrelevant. The evidence suggests that men and women respond very differently to their roles in aging and this too must be carefully assessed (Hesse-Biber & Williamson, 1984).

Even when members of the older generation are quite enfeebled, there is not really a reversal of roles between one generation and the next, because parents always have a great many years of extra experience and remain models to the next generations for the phases of life ahead. Nevertheless, because older age is totally devalued in our culture, family members of the middle generation often do not know how to make the appropriate shift in relational status with their parents.

Clinically it is rarely the older family members themselves who seek help, although they do suffer from many clinical problems, primary among which is depression. More often it is members of the next generation who seek help, and even they often do not present with their problem defined as relating to an elderly parent. It is often only through careful history taking that one learns that an aging grandparent is just about to move in or to be taken to a nursing home, and that the relationship issues around this shift have been left totally submerged in the family.

Helping family members recognize the status changes and the need for resolving their relationships in a new balance can help families move on developmentally.

MAJOR VARIATIONS IN THE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

Divorce and Remarriage

While the statistical majority of the American middle and upper classes still go through the traditional family life cycle stages as outlined above, the largest variation from that norm consists of families in which divorce has occurred. With the divorce rate currently at 50% and the rate of redivorce at 61% (Glick, 1984a), divorce in the American family is close to the point at which it will occur in the majority of families and will thus be thought of more and more as a normative event. In our experience as clinicians and teachers, we have found it useful to conceptualize divorce as an interruption or dislocation of the traditional family life cycle, which produces the kind of profound disequilibrium that is associated throughout the entire family life cycle with shifts, gains, and losses in family membership (Chapter 15; Ahrens & Rodgers, 1987). As in other life cycle phases, there are crucial shifts in relationship status and important emotional tasks that must be completed by the members of divorcing families in order for them to proceed developmentally. As in other phases, emotional issues not resolved at this phase will be carried along as hindrances in future relationships (Chapter 15).

Therefore, we conceptualize the need for families in which divorce occurs to go through one or two additional phases of the family life cycle in order to restabilize and go forward developmentally again at a more complex level. Of women who divorce, at least 35% do not remarry. These families go through one additional phase and can restabilize permanently as post-divorce families (Chapter 16). The other 65% of women who divorce remarry, and these families can be said to require negotiation of two additional phases of the family life cycle before permanent restabilization (Chapter 17).

Our concept of the divorce and postdivorce family emotional process can be visualized as a roller-coaster graph, with peaks of emotional tension at all transition points:

1. At the time of the decision to separate or divorce
2. When this decision is announced to family and friends
3. When money and custody/visitation arrangements are discussed
4. When the physical separation takes place
5. When the actual legal divorce takes place
6. When separated spouses or ex-spouses have contact about money or children
7. As each child graduates, marries, has children or becomes ill
8. As each spouse is remarried, moves, becomes ill, or dies.

These emotional pressure peaks are found in all divorcing families—not necessarily in the above order—and many of them take place over and over again, for months or years. A more detailed depiction of the process appears in Table 1-2.

The emotions released during the process of divorce relate primarily to the work of emotional divorce—that is, the retrieval of self from the marriage. Each partner must retrieve the hopes, dreams, plans, and expectations that were invested in this spouse and in this marriage. This requires mourning what is lost and dealing with hurt, anger, blame, guilt, shame, and loss in oneself, in the spouse, in the children, and in the extended family.
In our clinical work with divorcing families, we subscribe to the basic systems view that cutoffs are emotionally harmful, and we work to help divorcing spouses continue to relate as cooperative parents and to permit maximum feasible contact between children and natural parents and grandparents. Our experience supports that of others (Hetherington et al., 1977; Ahrons, 1980), who have found that it takes a minimum of two years and a great deal of effort after divorce for a family to readjust to its new structure and proceed to the next life cycle stage, which may or may not include remarriage.

Families in which the emotional issues of divorce are not adequately resolved can remain stuck emotionally for years, if not for generations. The predictable peaks of emotional tension in the transition to remarriage occur at the time of serious commitment to a new relationship; at the time a plan to remarry is announced to families and friends; at the time of the actual remarriage and formation of a stepfamily, which takes place simultaneously and as the logistics of stepfamily life are put into practice.

The family emotional process at the transition to remarriage consists of struggling with fears about investment in a new marriage and a new family: one's own fears, the new spouse's fears, and the children's fears (of either or both spouses); dealing with hostile or upset reactions of the children, the extended families, and the ex-spouse; struggling with the ambiguity of the new family structure, roles, and relationships; reappraisal of parental guilt and concerns about the welfare of children; and reassessment of the old attachment to ex-spouse (negative or positive). Table 1-3 depicts the process in somewhat greater detail.

Our society offers stepfamilies a choice of two conceptual models, neither of which work: families that act like the intact family next door; glorified in the situation comedies of TV; and the wicked stepparents of the fairy tales. Our first clinical step, then, is to validate for stepfamilies the lack of social support and clarity in the paradigm of family they are offered. Clinicians can offer them the challenge of helping to invent a new form of family structure, with the following guidelines making good systems sense: giving up the old model of family and accepting the complexity of a new form; maintaining permeable boundaries to permit shifting of household memberships; and working for open lines of communication between all sets of parents and between natural parents and grandparents and their children or grandchildren. (Chapter 17).

In our experience the residue of an angry and vengeful divorce can block stepfamily integration for years or forever. The reassessment of the old emotional attachment to an ex-spouse, which characteristically surfaces at the time of remarriage and at subsequent life cycle transitions of children, is usually not understood as a predictable process and therefore leads to denial, misinterpretation, cutoff, and assorted difficulties. As in the case of adjustment to a new family structure after divorce, stepfamily integration seems also to require a minimum of two or three years before a workable new structure permits family members to move on emotionally.

### The Family Life Cycle of the Poor

The adaptation of multiproblem poor families to a stark political, social, and economic context has produced a family life cycle pattern that varies significantly from the middle-class paradigm so often and so erroneously used
Table 1-3. Remarried Family Formation: A Developmental Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Prerequisite Attitude</th>
<th>Developmental Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Entering the new relationship</td>
<td>Recovery from loss of first marriage (adequate “emotional divorce”)</td>
<td>Reconciliation to marriage and to forming a family with readiness to deal with the complexity and ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conceptualizing and planning new marriage and family</td>
<td>Accepting one's own fears and those of new spouse and children about remarriage and forming a stepparent</td>
<td>a. Work on openness in the new relationships to avoid pseudomutuality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accepting need for time and patience for adjustment to complexity and ambiguity of:</td>
<td>b. Plan for maintenance of cooperative financial and coparental relationships with ex-spouses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Multiple new roles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Boundaries: space, time, membership, and authority.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Affective issues: guilt, loyalty conflicts, desire for mutuality, unresolvable past hurts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Remarriage and reconstitution of family</td>
<td>Final resolution of attachment to previous spouse and ideal of “intact” family: Acceptance of a different model of family with permeable boundaries</td>
<td>a. Restructuring family boundaries to allow for inclusion of new spouse-stepparent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance of a different model of family with permeable boundaries</td>
<td>b. Realignment of relationships and financial arrangements throughout subsystems to permit interweaving of several systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance of a different model of family with permeable boundaries</td>
<td>c. Making room for relationships of all children with biological (noncustodial) parents, grandparents, and other extended family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance of a different model of family with permeable boundaries</td>
<td>d. Sharing memories and histories to enhance stepparent integration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Variation on a developmental scheme presented by Ransom et al. (1979)*

To conceptualize their situation, Hines (Chapter 21) offers a thought-provoking breakdown of the family life cycle of the poor into three phases: the “unattached young adult” (who may actually be 11 or 12 years old), who is virtually on his or her own, unaccountable to adults; families with children—a phase that occupies most of the life span and commonly includes three- and four-generation households; and the phase of the non-evolved grandmother, still involved in a central childrearing role in old age—still actively in charge of the generations below.

In addition to the chapter referred to above, readers are referred to Aponte (1974, 1976) and Minuchin and colleagues (1967) for clinical approaches to poor families, and to Fulner’s provocative contrast of the family life cycle in two different socio-economic classes (Chapter 22). Such polarities have become a characteristic feature of American life in the 1980s, particularly in urban areas where the middle class is often outnumbered by a combination of “yuppies,” poor and homeless.

**Cultural Variation**

Most descriptions of the typical family life cycle (including ours) fail to convey the considerable effects of ethnicity and religion in all aspects of how, when, and in what way a family makes its transitions from phase to phase. Although we may ignore these variables for the theoretical clarity of focus on our commonalities, a clinician working with real families in the real world cannot afford to ignore this. The definition of “family,” as well as the timing of life cycle phases and the importance of different transitions, varies depending on a family’s cultural background. It is essential for clinicians to consider how ethnicity intersects with the life cycle and to encourage families to take active responsibility for carrying out the rituals of their ethnic or religious group(s) to mark each phase (Chapter 20). It is also extremely important for us as clinicians to help families develop rituals that correspond to the actual transitions of their lives, including those transitions that the culture has not validated (Chapter 8).

**CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, we direct the reader’s thoughts toward the powerful (and preventive) implications of family life cycle celebration: those rituals, religious or secular, that have been designed by families in every culture to ease the passage of its members from one status to the next. As Friedman (Chapter 7) points out, all family relationships in the system seem to unlock during the time just before and after such events, and it is often possible to shift things with less effort during these intensive periods than could ordinarily be expended in years of struggle.

**REFERENCES**

Overview: The Changing Family Life Cycle


Overview: The Changing Family Life Cycle


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