Growing Together

Personal Relationships across the Life Span

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Coming Together: A Perspective on Relationships across the Life Span

Karen L. Fingerman and Frieder R. Lang

This chapter introduces a life-span perspective on personal relationships by emphasizing how the structure, processes, and outcomes of relationships are interwoven with human development. The social arena serves as a metaphor for changes and continuities individuals experience in their social partners, activities, and goals over the life span. We consider mutual influences between individual development and relationship partners, including 1) individual changes, 2) the development of relationships themselves, and 3) the context of the larger social network. A life-span understanding of personal relationships considers the structure of relationships (e.g., the types of social partners individuals of different ages interact with), the processes underlying personal relationships (e.g., personality, motivation for social contact, cognition), and the outcomes or precursors of relationship change across the life span.

We, the editors of this book, are parents of young children. As a result, when the weather allows it, we spend considerable time at our local parks and frequently have the opportunity to observe a microcosm of life-span relationships. People of all ages engage in activities, from sitting under a tree watching the clouds, to playing softball in mixed groups of adults and children. Our little ones vie for attention among the other children who run around the slide or swings. Older children throw balls or participate in organized activities. A group of teenagers sit apart and listen to music on a portable compact disc player. Multiple generations come together for a family picnic. Young couples hold hands as they stroll. A community league plays weekly soccer games. A middle-aged couple expresses fatigue as they chase a grandchild. And one particular older gentleman reminisces alone as he feeds the birds. These patterns can be found in the city and the countryside all over Europe, Australia, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The pervasiveness of social ties from birth to old age is evident to us on such gentle summer evenings. Of course, not all people spend their weekends at the park; the neighborhood park may be dangerous in some communities

or nonexistent in some cultures. Yet the type of park we describe illustrates the complex nature of relationships across the life span.

Our personal relationships span decades, generations, cultures, and even continents. Each liaison is embedded within larger familial, institutional, societal, and cultural contexts. Personal relationships accompany us at each phase of life, yet the overall social network changes over time. We retain ties to our parents and siblings as we move through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. A few of our childhood pals become lifelong friends, some live in the vicinity (and we run into them at the market from time to time), but others move on and remain distant memories from class photographs. After high school, we make new friends, some of whom remain close for life, some of whom we lose again, some of whom we fall in love with, and others with whom we lose contact. Sometimes we meet someone who has been the friend of a very good friend; and we are surprised how small the world is. (And this may remind us that we even belong to "networks" of personal relationships without our overt knowledge.) Over time, we establish ties to coworkers or colleagues. Later in life, we may experience the loss of an "old friend," for deliberate, or for not so controllable, reasons. At the same time, in-laws and grandchildren may become new members of our families. These ties serve certain functions in the social world we inhabit: they provide entertainment, they inspire or encourage us, they help us with daily tasks, they make demands, and they influence our evaluations of other people and of ourselves. This volume addresses such changes and continuities in personal relationships across the life span.

At all stages of the life course, personal relationships accompany, set forth, or hold back developmental progress. At the same time, social relationships arise from and are important outcomes of individual growth. Whether due to maturation, life experience, or social context, individuals of different ages bring different capacities to their relationships. A two-year-old child cannot aspire to be the type of friend a seven-year-old child can easily be. In young adulthood, romantic partners engage in sexual behaviors beyond the physical maturation of pre-adolescent children. Likewise, middle-aged adults provide mentorship to youth reflecting their accumulated knowledge. In sum, social ties shape and emerge from human development. In this manner, individuals and their social worlds are woven together throughout life.

This chapter introduces our central purposes for editing this volume on personal relationships across the life span. We submit the notion that a life-span conceptualization of personal relationships must be grounded in understanding relational structures, processes, and outcomes. First, we discuss the meaning of personal relationships and how such ties are defined. Next, we outline the challenges scholars confront in taking a life-span developmental approach to understanding social ties. Then, we provide a

rubric for this volume and explain how the structure of the social world, the processes involved in maintaining social ties, the precursors of these ties, and the outcomes of social ties vary across the life span. Family and friendships, peripheral and intimate ties, short-term and long-term relationships, threaded together in different configurations at different points in life, constitute the "structure" of individuals' social worlds. The term "process" refers to processes underlying and arising from relationships, including individuals' emotional and cognitive capacities, their personalities and predispositions, and their motivation to engage in relationships with other people. Finally, "outcomes" include the benefits and costs of an individual's social ties (e.g., satisfaction or anger, instruction or obstruction, support or demands, well-being, and health). We recognize that individuals' capacities and characteristics also serve as precursors to relationship formation and maintenance, but for the sake of simplicity we refer to these matters as "outcomes" here. We consider how these three aspects of relationships fit together across the life span.

THE MEANING OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Human beings are inherently social creatures. Indeed, the capacity and need for affiliation may be an evolved psychological mechanism that contributes to better reproductive fitness of the human species (e.g., Axelrod, 1985; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buss, 1999, Neyer & Lang, 2003). At the most basic level, social ties are necessary for humans to have children and raise those children. Yet, individuals' social ties persist beyond these basic functions to include a wide array of partners. As adults, we may serve multiple roles in multiple relationships. We are simultaneously romantic partners, parents of growing children, children of older parents, relatives of in-laws and siblings, neighbors, and co-workers. A myriad of relationships persists at stages of development where autonomous functioning is possible and sometimes even at high cost to the individuals involved. Consideration of how and why individuals maintain such ties throughout life warrants consideration.

The social world includes many levels of social interaction. Intimate dyads, family units, workplace organizations, larger ethnic groups, social institutions, and the cultural milieu may have an impact on individual development. This volume focuses more specifically on personal relationships and their role in human development. The term "personal relationships" implies that individuals have social connections to specific people who affect their lives. Such a focus pursues the meaning of social ties at an individual rather than a societal level. Elsewhere, scholars have argued that relationships involve repeated interactions or interdependencies between social partners (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1997; Kelley et al., 1983). We do not constrain "relationships" under such a premise of active

engagement. Rather, certain social ties may involve few exchanges, and may be based primarily on individuals' cognitive representations (e.g., Fingerman, Chap. 8, this volume). This approach considers a fetus in the womb, a child's tie to a stuffed elephant, an older adult's ties to a friend from college whom he has not seen in decades, and even ties to friends and relatives who have passed away. Indeed, the chapters in this volume consider personal relationships in the broadest sense, from individuals' representations of their closest, most intimate social partners to the array of social partners who constitute the background of everyday life. We use the terms "social relationships" and "social ties" interchangeably with the term "personal relationships," in keeping with an interdisciplinary and inclusive approach to the topic.

A "social arena" serves as a metaphor for the interweaving of social ties as they come and go throughout an individual's life. An arena character-izes a large area for social contact. If we think of a traditional Roman arena, activities may vary from highly structured games to interactions surround-ing market days to loose conversation arising from a spontaneous meeting of two partners. Even the same game may look different if the players in-volved are young children versus older adults. In this manner, we attempt to disentangle the structure of the social network (the people who are in the arena) from the activities involved, and from the larger cultural and social structures that support or inhibit these ties. We consider the social arena as a metaphor for the many configurations, the dynamics and the activities associated with social ties across the life course. The social arena is potentially available to all individuals, while at the same time it is used in particular and individualized ways. From a life-span perspective, the so-cial partners present in the arena at any given time may vary – some of the people may remain the same, but others come and go. We can observe the interplay between the structure (partners in the social arena), the processes (interactions that take place in the arena), and the outcomes (of being in the arena). Individuals alter the nature of the arena while the arena, in turn, changes the individuals. It is this image of a social arena that guided us throughout the course of editing this book, from the initial brainstorming of ideas to the final proofreading.

The literature regarding personal relationships typically addresses such topics as commitment, communication patterns, relationship maintenance, exchanges of social support, intimacy, emotional qualities, and cognitive representations of relationships (e.g., Auhagen & Von Salisch, 1996; Duck, 1998). Current conceptions of the social arena do not fully encompass a sense of human development underlying this flow of social ties, however. Volumes that have linked the topics of social ties and development have broadened our understanding of these topics (e.g., Hartup & Rubin, 1986; Turner, 1996), but additional work remains to pull together scholarship addressing human development and personal relationships. Elsewhere,

scholars have linked historical and social events to individual development through the life-course perspective (e.g., Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1987; Elder, 1998a, 1998b). Chapters in this volume touch on these issues but look more specifically at individuals in transactions with their social partners. We consider such questions as how the infant's singular fascination with the mother in the first year of life relates to the widow's needs for assistance with transportation and emotional support at the end of life, and how the small child's refusal to come to dinner when called by his father differs from the feelings of efficacy that adults derive from a loving romantic partner.

ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL ARENA

A life-span perspective on relationships requires us to consider the larger social arena. All people tied to a specific target individual are located somewhere in that arena. Take, for example, a graduate student working on an advanced degree. To understand her relationships, we consider her romantic partner, her father and her mother with their respective families of origin, her stepparents or in-laws, her brother and his best friends, her past and her current friends, her current classmates and teachers, her former schoolmates, her past and her current neighbors, and the lady who sells a newspaper to her at the train station each morning. Anyone who is or has been related to this student is a member of this social progression. We are interested in the people in the arena, how these people are positioned relative to the student, and how they are positioned relative to each other. From a life-span perspective, we are also interested in how this structure varies from infancy to later life, and even before birth and after death. We consider the precursors and implications of such age differences and how social ties arise from and influence life goals and tasks. We ask why some persons are in the social arena whereas others are not.

Different people in the social arena appear to be associated with different developmental processes and outcomes in the individual's life course. As such, we may ask when and why individuals of different ages choose to interact with different types of social partners and how they interpret their social partners' behaviors. Using our student as an example, to whom does she turn when she is upset about a personal problem? How do other students enhance her feelings about her academic abilities? The student may expect her romantic partner to support her when she is upset about a family member's problems, and she may turn to her advisor to open professional doors for her. The things the student seeks from her social partners are different at this stage of her life than when she was in elementary school and will change again when she has completed her degree and has students and a family of her own.

Indeed, the social arena may be marked by change and variability throughout life. The scientific endeavor asks what happens when an

individual behaves in certain ways, and what happens when people who are located in the individual's social arena behave in certain ways. We may wonder how the student's behaviors affect other people and vice versa. In this realm, we might be interested in microgenetic, interpersonal transactional, ontogenetic, or even phylogenetic processes as they occur within the individual's social arena. In sum, the social arena might be illustrated using a three-dimensional cube encompassing the array of relationships, the psychological processes, precursors, and outcomes underlying these changes in relationships. Mechanisms of change over time might be illustrated on a continuum from micro to macro-level influences.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the interweaving of structure, processes, and outcomes in a life-span perspective on personal relationships. We also include mechanisms of change that might instigate associations between
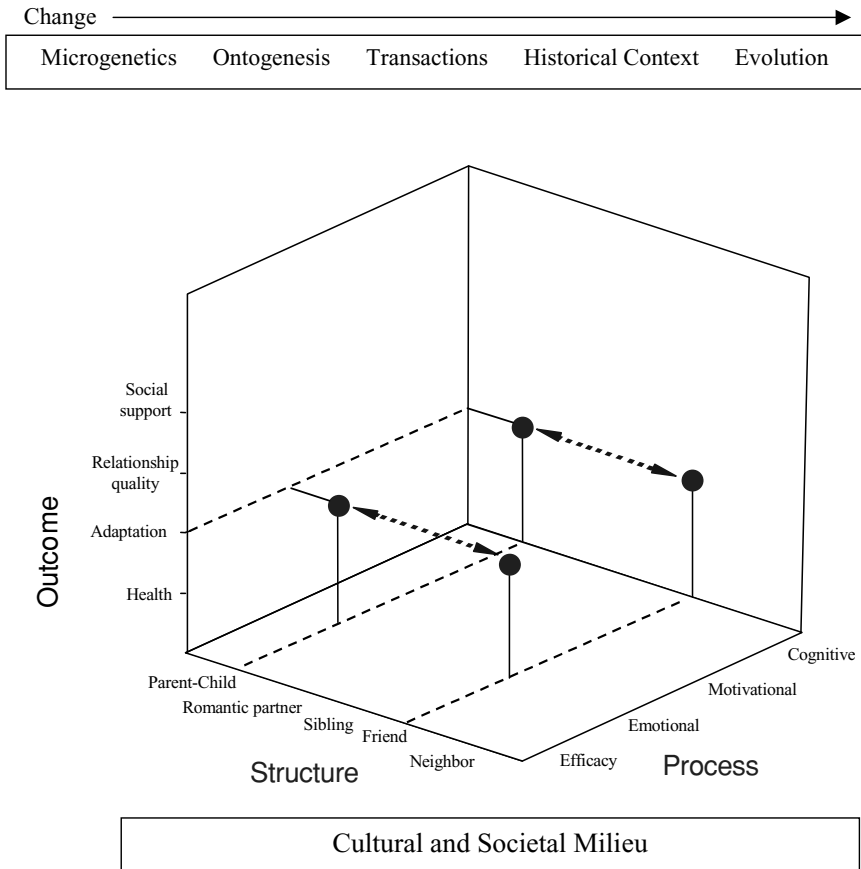

FIGURE 1.1. Personal Relationships across the Life Span: A Cube Model of Classifying Perspectives.

these features of relationships from the microgenetic to evolutionary level influences. These terms (e.g., structure, process, outcomes) and categories are presented to provide an organizing framework for this volume. Research on personal relationships typically focuses on specific pieces of this cube. For example, as can be seen in Figure 1.1, researchers may be interested in the ontogenetic development of emotional aspects in the mother-child tie in adolescence or in middle adulthood or across the life span. Alternately, the health benefits of ties to family may be compared to the health benefits of friendships in late life. One may ask whether cognitions play a different role in transactions between romantic partners than between friends over time. Furthermore, we refer to health, adaptation, and relationship quality loosely as "outcomes" of relationships, cognizant of the fact that these variables are also precursors to different types of relationships.

The mechanisms of change involve a variety of theoretical explanations for mutual influences between individuals and their social partners over time. Microgenetic influences are described in an understanding of behavioral genetic influences on relationships (Bierhoff & Schmohr, Chap. 5, this volume), social structures and technologies clearly shape different relationships and the effects of those relationships on individual development (see, in this volume: Adams & Stevenson, Chap. 15; Antonucci, Langfahl, & Akiyama, Chap. 2; Blieszner & Roberto, Chap. 7), and evolutionary pressures may influence the types of romantic partners individuals seek or the attachment that parents form with young children (Bierhoff & Schmohr, Chap. 5, this volume; Takahashi, Chap. 6, this volume). Each chapter describes multiple mechanisms that may contribute to interactions between individuals and their social partners. These and other chapters also consider the benefits or harms individuals derive from those ties.

Of course, the cube offers only a rough, analytic distinction between the structure, processes, precursors, and outcomes of relationships for a purely illustrative purpose. Cultural and socioeconomic contexts clearly influence these dimensions of the social arena. Culture shapes individuals' opportunities for different types of relationships, the salience and importance of those ties, as well as the micro and macro processes that guide those relationships over time. For example, in parts of China, an older woman's tie to a daughter-in-law may provide more support than her relationship to a grown daughter, whereas in the United States, the opposite is usually the case (Fingerman, 2002; Fischer, 1983). In addition, the emotional meanings and motivations underlying these ties vary across cultures; young women in the United States and China experience differing degrees of obligation toward their mothers and mothers-in-law. Finally, precursors of relationships and outcomes that arise from relationships, such as health and well-being, exist in cultural settings as well. We conceptualize the social arena as lying within larger social and cultural structures. Indeed,

one aim of this volume was to present a cross-cultural collection on personal relationships. We brought together scholars from North America, Europe, and Asia. Some chapters touch on personal relationships in Germany, China, Japan, Korea, France, the United States, and Kenya. Others focus predominantly on culture (e.g., Antonucci, Langfahl, & Akiyama, Chap. 2; Takahashi, Chap. 6), or discuss cultural perspectives with regard to a specific topic in the personal relationships literature.

In sum, the triarchy idea of structure, process, and outcome provides a heuristic for discussing personal relationships across the life span. The "cube" model of personal relationships offers a useful tool for uncovering constraints and limitations in existing knowledge about personal relationships. Authors consider changes and continuity in relationship structures, processes, and outcomes that bring the social world to the fore of human existence throughout life.

THE SOCIAL ARENA IN A LIFE-SPAN CONTEXT

Of central interest in this volume is how and why relationships change or remain the same across the life span. On the surface, the infant's playful engagement with his parents seems starkly different from the matriarch's family gathering with her children, children-in-law, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. A life-span perspective on personal relationships articulates how and why these relationships change over time and also considers continuities in individuals' lives. Individuals may maintain ties to a family friend from childhood into adulthood. For example, a young child who attends dinner at this friend's house may refuse an hors d'oeuvre that is offered. Yet, as the individual enters college and visits the family friend, the nature of their interactions may be transformed – this young adult brings a new perspective on politeness that necessitates eating smoked fish or other proffered delicacies. A life-span perspective in the social domain also reaches beyond the view that life stretches from birth to death. For example, certain relationships (such as ties between parents) exist prior to an individual's birth, and many relationships transcend death (such as a widow's tie to a deceased spouse). In this volume, we consider three levels of change and continuity in personal relationships, involving 1) the individual, 2) the relationship, and 3) the larger social network.

First, at the individual level, we might consider the person as a developing entity who possesses relationships. This approach takes a psychological bent and the individual is the unit of investigation. Individual development is addressed with regard to such issues as personality development (Neyer, Chap. 12), competence (Hansson, Daleiden, & Hayslip, Chap. 13), motivation for social ties (Lang, Chap. 14), cognitive representation of relationships (Blanchard-Fields & Cooper, Chap. 11), and emotional processes (Charles & Mavandadi, Chap. 10; Takahashi, Chap. 6).

In considering individuals from a life-span perspective, it is important to think about how we measure change and continuity. Nearly three decades ago, theorists noted that investigations of individual change across the life span must reflect complexities inherent to the meaning of chronological age (Wohlwill, 1973). Indeed, age (e.g., position in the life span) serves as a marker of: 1) changes within the individual; 2) differences associated with birth in a specific historical cohort; and 3) individuals' positions within the social structure. Some scholars have taken a psychological approach by emphasizing differences in the capacities individuals of different ages bring to their relationships (Lang, 2001; Marsiske, Lang, Baltes, & Baltes, 1995). For example, researchers have examined how individuals' needs and goals at specific stages of life are associated with their desire for social contact (e.g., Lang, 2001; Lang & Carstensen, 1994, 2002). Alternately, sociologists have taken a life-course perspective, considering an individual's age as an indicator of cohort and role position within society. For example, interest in the baby boomer cohort's relationships with their parents may focus on how middle-aged adults with many siblings handle their parents' aging. Likewise, in age-graded societies, age serves as a marker of the types of roles and daily environment individuals are likely to occupy. In industrialized societies, children attend schools, middle-aged adults go to work, and older adults may be retired. As such, individuals of different ages possess different abilities, experiences, and goals and bring those capacities and experiences to their social ties.

Second, relationships might be considered as developing units in their own right, with a mutual influence between partners and the relationship. The dyadic relationship includes areas of continuity and change over time. For example, friends who have known each other for years can ask for favors, read one another's mood, and go without contact for prolonged periods of time without damage to the relationship, whereas a budding friendship requires greater investment of time and politeness (Blieszner & Roberto, Chap. 7, this volume). Of course, individuals' ages and relationship duration are associated; relationship partners are often of like age – adolescent youth with adolescent friends, older parents with older children, older wives with older husbands, and so forth. As a result, it is difficult to disentangle individual age and relationship duration. Therefore, we must consider how partners' developmental tasks interface with different phases of relationship development.

Finally, as a larger unit of analysis, the social network itself changes over time. Families expand or contract as members marry, divorce, have children, have grandchildren, or pass away. Social networks reflect the changing life circumstances of the individual; children's horizons expand when they enter school settings outside the family, widows confront new challenges as they renegotiate ties to existing friends and family members as single adults (Morgan, Neal, & Carder, 1997). Moreover, personal ties are

set in different constellations of social partners. The adolescent's budding romance takes place within the larger peer network, whereas the widow's new romance may be centered in a family constellation involving grown children and grandchildren.

This volume examines multiple aspects of relationships in a life-span framework. Chapters consider changes at the individual, relationship, and social network levels. Further, reciprocal influences on change are described – how social partners influence one another over time, how the relationship influences individual development, and vice versa. In sum, this volume considers the importance of development in understanding personal relationships. In many cases, we use age as a correlate of skills, position in society, or relationship status. Focusing on age alone, however, is not sufficient for understanding personal relationships, their continuities, and changes in a life-span context. We address time more generally in this volume as a variable in the social domain.

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN: CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS

The authors who contributed to this volume present unique integrations of specific topics pertaining to personal relationships. Comprehensive studies of the social domain from birth to death are not evident in extant literature. These authors confronted several challenges in pulling this literature together. Two principal challenges are described here, 1) divisions within the disciplines that study human development, and 2) difficulties in assessing noncomparable phenomena.

With regard to disciplinary challenges, a life-span understanding of personal relationships must pull together the fields of child development, adult development, gerontology, family science, and personal relationships, to name a few. These fields are themselves multidisciplinary, and include psychologists, sociologists, demographers, anthropologists, geneticists, biologists, physiologists, policy analysts, and other scientists. Scholarship addressing relationships has become increasingly fragmented and segregated by topic over the past fifty years (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). Yet each field has acquired knowledge about particular aspects of relationships. Integration of scholarship sheds light on the meaning of the social arena throughout life.

With regard to phenomenological issues, people of different ages possess different capacities and goals. Differences between infants, children, adolescents, and adults of different ages challenge researchers who wish to study relationships across this broad age span; for example, researchers have to use different methodologies for children and for older adults. Difficulties of designing studies that could encompass such a wide range of individuals hamper studies of relationships from birth to death. In the next

section, we describe historical and disciplinary distinctions that present challenges to integrating the literature examining personal relationships across the life span.

DIFFERENT HISTORIES OF THE STUDY OF CHILD AND ADULT DEVELOPMENT

There is a long history of interest in life-span development. In Germany, life-span perspectives on human development date back to the eighteenth century. Johan Nikolaus Tetens (1777) is considered one of the founders of the field of developmental psychology (P. Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999). Throughout the twentieth century, developmental psychologists in Germany and the United States elaborated the perspective of lifelong ontogeny (e.g., Bühler, 1933/1935; Erikson, 1950; Hall, 1922; Thomae, 1959). Yet empirical research addressing relationships over the life span has not yielded a comprehensive understanding of how social partners affect individuals of different ages and vice versa.

Empirical studies on age differences in personal relationships are embedded in the distinct fields of child development and adult development. These two fields differ with regard to their degree of understanding of phenomena of interest. The field of child development has a longer history than the field of adult development. Scholars such as Jean Jacques Rousseau expounded theories about how and why children develop as early as the 1700s (Ariès, 1962; Hilgard, 1987). The modern study of child development began in the late nineteenth century, however, catalyzed by the rising interest in evolutionary theory as well as by societal concerns for the welfare of children. The early years of the study of children involved observational and experimental methods for assessing children and the instigation of longitudinal studies that continue to have an impact on the field of human development today (Hilgard, 1987). Furthermore, from the start, scholars who studied child development were interested in relationships between parents and children, instigating a relationship perspective in the field.

By contrast, the study of adult development and aging began more recently; the Gerontological Society of America was founded in 1945 and involved only a small cadre of interested scholars at that time. Although many well-known longitudinal studies on development that were started in the twenties, thirties, and forties of the twentieth century have become studies on aging as the participants grew old over the decades, only a few scholars have attempted to examine relationship processes in these studies (e.g., Carstensen, 1992; Field, 1981).

Although both fields of human development are relatively young in comparison to more established fields of study (e.g., mathematics), differences in their etiologies have had an impact on the way in which scholars

conceptualize topics of interest. We know more about children's social worlds than we do about adults' social worlds. Attempts to extend theories that address children to understand adults have been hampered by complexities in conceptualization and measurement. For example, scholars in the 1980s and 1990s attempted to understand how early internalized working models of the social world derived from infant attachment relationships might extend into adults' romantic ties (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Yet, despite abundant empirical studies, it has been difficult to establish continuities in attachment patterns throughout life (Levitt, 2000). A challenge of this volume was to disentangle discontinuities as well as describing continuities in social ties, based on a disparate literature.

DISPARATE FIELDS OF STUDY

Adding to these early historical differences in the fields of child and adult development, the past fifty years have seen both increasing dissection of scholarly topics across and within the behavioral and social sciences (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000; Hinde 1997) as well as increasing efforts to integrate the entire life span in the developmental sciences (e.g., Carstensen, Graff, & Lang, 2000). For example, certain professional societies (i.e., International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development, Society for the Study of Human Development) attempt to bring together scholars from across fields of human development. However, in many academic settings, a fragmented approach to the life span remains dominant. A cursory examination of job advertisements reflects the dissection of the life span; in the United States it is still rare to find a university advertising to hire a scholar who studies the "life span."

Furthermore, research interests on social relationships vary considerably depending on life phases. Research on social relationships in childhood often addresses different issues than research on social relationships in late adulthood or in adolescence. For example, we know a great deal about parents and children in early life and at the end of life, but we know relatively little about this tie when offspring are young adults. We know a great deal about friendships in childhood and old age, but gaps in knowledge about friendships in middle adulthood persist (e.g., Blieszner & Roberto, Chap. 7, this volume). With regard to young adults, romantic ties and marriage receive greatest attention. Scholars interested in late life have tended to consider intergenerational relationships or the larger social network and support functions social partners may provide. Clearly, relationships are not as discontinuous as the extant literature on these topics; individuals have ties to their parents well into adulthood and children value their friends beginning in early childhood, but the literature remains uneven. A life-span perspective on personal relationships must

pull together disparate information about the processes underlying social ties.

Of course, these biases are not arbitrary. It is not simply that researchers who study infants drew the relationship "mother" in a lottery, and researchers who study teenagers drew "peer group." Rather, the salience of different relationships varies at different points in the life span; more salient relationships receive more research attention. Children are embedded in families with parents and siblings. Young adults may live alone or with a romantic partner. Middle-aged adults may confront a myriad of ties to generations above and below them as well as to coworkers, neighbors, and siblings. As such, a life-span understanding of the social arena seeks to understand how and why the salience of social ties varies over time.

Given the state of empirical inquiry concerning human development, the authors who contributed to this volume provide integration across noncomparable literatures. As such, this volume ties up the continuities in a discontinuous literature and a discontinuous social world.

METHODOLOGICAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The complexities involved in putting together a life-span portrait of the social domain go beyond bringing together scholars from different areas of study. People of different ages have different skills, capacities, goals, and needs. These skills, capacities, and goals shape their social behaviors, their perceptions of their relationships, and their responses to researchers' queries. As such, a life-span understanding of the social domain is hampered by inherent conceptual challenges. In this section, we describe difficulties in finding comparable ways to measure children's and adults' relationships and difficulties in recruiting people of different ages to participate in research.

Social processes that are highly salient in the social world at one point in time may be dormant or disappear altogether at another point in time. Sibling rivalries provide an example. In early childhood, many siblings are keenly aware of disparities in their treatment across a variety of domains, such as privileges, discipline, and companionship (Dunn & Plomin, 1990). By middle adulthood, such issues may be less important or more global; siblings may be aware of which party the parent favors but less concerned with the meaning of that favoritism or the domain in which it takes place (Bedford, 1992; Bedford & Volling, Chap. 4, this volume; Davey, Fingerman, & Jenkins-Tucker, 2002; Suitor & Pillemer, 1997). In late life, as parents require care, earlier patterns within the family may resurface (Connidis, Rosenthal, & McMullin, 1996; Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). Such complexities are inherent to the social domain and cannot be treated simply as confounds. Methodological and sampling challenges further cloud these matters.