

Roads Less Taken

Developing a Nuanced View of Older Adults Without Children

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This article provides the rationale for doing research on childlessness and parenthood in late life. Childless older adults have been rendered invisible in the social scientific literature. A central goal of this issue is to make them visible and to expose unstated assumptions about normal adult life. Parenthood emerges as a key organizer of the life course and a major factor in social integration. Because the childless tend to be conceptualized as “the other,” focusing on them teaches lessons about the dangers of dichotomous thinking, that is, overlooking diversity and assuming deficiency. Studying older adults without children reveals the necessity of considering life pathways over time and of putting lives in a historical context.

Keywords: *childlessness; diversity; gender; late life; marital history; parenthood; pathways*

This issue is about a sizable category of older people—those who have no children. Even though they currently represent around one in five persons older than age 65 years, and even though 30% of the U.S. population age 70 to 85 years in 2030 will be without a spouse and without children

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(Wachter, 1997), they have been rendered invisible, relegated to dark corners of the literature on adult development, aging, life course, and family. Pick up handbooks, textbooks, and journals in these fields and chances are high that you will not find *childless* in the index.

Thus, a central goal of this issue is to make them visible and, more important, put them under social science lenses. Because the childless tend to be conceptualized as “the other,” the deviant, focusing on them teaches lessons about the dangers of dichotomous thinking. Using our critical lenses, we face unstated assumptions about normal adult lives and family bonds, discover a diversity that has not been recognized, and are confronted with the necessity of considering pathways over time. Studying the old without children not only yields valuable substantive knowledge about families and social networks but also sheds new light on gender contrasts in later life. It holds the potential of gaining new theoretical insights into the dynamics of life course organization, social integration, and inequalities in health and well-being. It also provides an impetus for sharpened analytical tools in further research.

“If You Have a Child You Have A Life” is the title of a perceptive chapter by two anthropologists (Draper & Buchanan, 1992) who quote a member of the !Kung San in the Kalahari Desert. Their studies of this group show how the presence of children is essential to continued survival when health declines. “Children are the prostheses for old age,” said Draper and Buchanan (1992, p. 144). Without care from children, there is low quality of life and survival is precarious. The notion of children as “old-age insurance” may seem of limited relevance in many Western welfare states, where pensions, health care, and social services make older adults much less dependent on adult offspring. Nevertheless, the centrality of children in the lives of aging individuals is an indisputable theme in North American and European gerontology and family studies (e.g., Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1996; Connidis, 2001; Kendig, Hashimoto, & Coppard, 1992; Knipscheer, 1990; Kohli & Szydlik, 2000; Lopata, 1978; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, & Ogg, 2001; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Wenger, 1984). Parenthood also figures centrally in writing on life course patterns and adult development. We could paraphrase Draper and Buchanan and say that most of this literature seems to assume that if you have a life, you are a parent. Let us provide a few examples.

Parenthood in Adulthood: Meanings and Markers

The “Normal Expectable Life”

We start with the life course literature, where we find that becoming and being a parent is considered part of what Neugarten (1969) described as the

“normal, expectable, life.” This is a standard life script that guides individuals’ expectations about what lies ahead in their own lives and forms benchmarks for evaluating the life progress of self and others (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Heinz, 1991; Neugarten & Danan, 1973; Neugarten & Neugarten, 1986). Such scripts are incorporated in what we might call a “folk psychology of the life course” (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996) and are also reflected in social policies and services.

Evidence for the centrality of parenthood in people’s life course expectations comes, to begin with, from studies of childbearing intentions. Survey results show that most young adults grow up intending to become parents. Few say from the outset that they do not plan to have children, though recent years show an increase in their numbers. In the 1966 fertility survey carried out by the French Demographic Institute INED, for example, only 1% of French women younger than age 30 stated that they wanted no children (Toulemon, 1996). In the 1994 survey this figure had risen to 3%, which is still very low. The 1977 Dutch Fertility and Family Survey (FFS) showed that 3% of married women age 23 to 28 did not expect to have children (Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics [NCBS], 1982). For all marital statuses taken together, the figure was 7% for women younger than age 30 in the 1998 Dutch FFS (De Graaf & Steenhof, 1999). Rates of intentional childlessness for married women age 18 to 44 were 2% in the 1966 U.S. General Social Survey and 6% in the 1988 survey (Rovi, 1994).

The percentage of young women saying that they do not plan to have children is consistently lower than the percentage that actually ends up not having children (Kiernan, 2004; Toulemon, 1996; Werner, 1986). Apparently, some unsuccessfully attempt to become pregnant, whereas others delay having children and finally decide against it. Postponement of childbearing might also be the source of fertility problems. We should note, however, that the measurement of childbearing intentions is not without problems. Werner (1986) drew attention to the high rates of nonresponse to questions on childbearing intentions in the British General Household Surveys. As Rovi (1994) pointed out, it is socially difficult for people to say that they do not intend to become parents. Consequently, the group of people with strong reservations might actually be larger than survey data suggest.

The significance of parenthood as an expected milestone is also demonstrated in studies of those who do not make that transition. It is evident, for example, in reactions of others to those who do not become parents. Childless couples are often asked to explain themselves (Veevers, 1980; Woollett, 1991). People want to hear a rationale for why they are living a life that is not in accordance with the standard script. Parents, however, are “rarely asked

to justify their conformity to ‘reproductive normality’” (Woollett, 1991, p. 52). The importance of parenthood as an expected life transition is also evident in experiences of the involuntarily childless. Wanting children but being unable to produce them is a source of deep distress (van Balen, 1991; van Balen, Ketting, & Verdurmen, 1995; Connolly, Edelman, & Cooke, 1987; Kraft et al., 1980; Monach, 1993; Pfeffer & Woollett, 1983). Matthews and Martin-Matthews (1986) spoke about “role blocking” in reference to the strain that comes from not being able to assume the desired and anticipated role of parent. It is common for those experiencing fertility problems to speak of a personal sense of “failure” (Miall, 1986). They perceive themselves as not living up to normative expectations.

The centrality of parenthood is reflected in people’s conceptions of the stages of the life course, as reflected in the term *empty nest*. Having children grow up and leave the parental home emerges as a central theme when people are asked to describe middle age (Neugarten, 1968). It is interesting to note that adults who do not have children also use parenthood as a marker of this phase of life. “Even unmarried career women often discuss middle age in terms of the family they might have had” (Neugarten, 1968, p. 95), using descriptions such as “If I had had children, they would be leaving home now.” The centrality of parenthood in conceptions of the life course is not limited to Western industrialized societies. Comparative research shows that references to children are salient in descriptions of middle age in Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe (Keith et al., 1994).

Another way in which parenthood figures in the “normal expectable life” is in the social rules about when to have children. Parenthood is one of the key life transitions for which cultural timetables exist, as is shown by Settersten and Hagestad (1996). They asked a representative sample of adults about the timing of life transitions. Some of their questions focused on the appropriate age by which people should have started and completed child-bearing. This was among the life transitions where respondents had little difficulty specifying age deadlines, especially for women. In the article on pathways into childlessness, Hagestad and Call (2007 [this issue]) show that deadlines for women’s entry into motherhood are very real in their causes and their consequences.

Patterns of Interdependence

Parenthood is a key organizer of the life course, not only in that it is central to people’s conceptions of a normal adult life but also because it introduces dependencies in people’s lives. Middle age illustrates the interdependencies among the lives of parents and children, discussed by a number of authors

(Elder, 1994; Hagestad, 1981, 2003; Hareven, 1982; Plath, 1980). Whiting (1981) gave an account of the East African Kikuyo where a mature man could not attain the highest age-related status—that of priest—until all his sons were circumcised. We easily recognize similar interweaving of lives in the Western world. Couples make plans for life after the children are settled in their adult lives and feel trapped or “derailed” when the children fail to be properly launched into adulthood (Pillemer & Suito, 1991; Umberson, 1992). The achievements of children constitute an important lens through which midlife parents judge themselves and their accomplishments in life (Ryff, Schmutte, & Lee, 1996). Parents, especially mothers, measure their lives against children’s progress: “It was the year Anne finished school, so it must have been . . .” Their own aging is often more readily perceptible in their children than in the bathroom mirror.

Life interdependencies are also formalized in social policies affecting parents (Hagestad, 1992, 2003). Public transfers are tied to the ages of children, as are financial responsibilities (Marin, 2000; Millar & Warman, 1996). Family responsibility laws stating maintenance obligations between adults and their aging parents are still common. A survey of 29 European societies found that more than two thirds of them have such legal codes (European Commission for Social Cohesion, 2000).

Parenthood also illustrates another type of interdependence across life trajectories—within an individual’s life. Although having children introduces new avenues in life, it simultaneously restricts engagements in other life spheres. People change their activity patterns in anticipation of or in response to parenthood. The childbearing and work nexus is a well-known example (Gerson, 1985; Hakim, 2000; Siegers, de Jong-Gierveld, & van Imhoff, 1991). Recognizing the problems in coordinating parenthood and employment, many women, and some men, restrict their investments in gainful employment because of difficulties in combining it with child care responsibilities. Conversely, some women forgo having children because priority is given to occupational pursuits. Of course, men’s working lives are affected by parenthood as well. Among new fathers, one is more likely to see an increase in hours spent at work (Bielski, Bosch, & Wagner, 2002). Even in societies that encourage or mandate paternal involvement, new fathers typically devote extra time and energy to their jobs in an effort to be responsible providers (Ellingseter, 1990).

Adult Development

In the literature on adult development we find the presumption that psychological growth and change in the adults years are linked to parenthood

(Rubinstein, 1987). The idea seems to be that people develop healthy personalities only if they have children. Erikson's (1950/1963) work serves as the first illustration. He assigned parenthood a central role in development because it is a means for expansion of the self. In his classic discussion of the eight stages of life, Erikson described movement through a series of psychosocial crises. The crisis in one developmental stage must be resolved before the individual can successfully move on to the next. In middle adulthood, the developmental issue to be dealt with is generativity versus stagnation. *Generativity* is a concern with supporting and guiding the next generation. The opposing tendency, *stagnation*, includes obsessive self-indulgence. Ideally, a person in midlife is concerned with fulfilling individual needs and contributing to the broader society, now and in the future. Erikson singled out parenting as an important opportunity for generativity because parents are actively involved in providing for and shaping the next generation. He acknowledged, however, that not all parents are particularly generative and that generativity can also be realized in a wide range of pursuits associated with art, education, and science. Although Erikson did not equate generativity with being a parent, his work does carry the suggestion that parents have an advantage over nonparents. In his view, it is easier for those engaged in the upbringing of children to develop healthy personalities than is the case for those without parental responsibilities.

The link between parenthood and generativity has been examined empirically. McAdams and De St. Aubin (1992) measured generativity by items such as "I try to pass along the knowledge I have gained through my experiences" and "I feel as though my contributions will exist after I die." None of the items referred explicitly to child rearing. Their findings show that generativity was positively associated with having or having had children. There was no association with marital status per se. Among men, the differences between parents and nonparents were much stronger than they were among women. Men tended to show relatively low generativity scores if they had never been fathers.

Another perspective on adult development, taken by Gutman (1975), takes an even stronger view of the centrality of parenting. According to this author, masculine and feminine behaviors are profoundly shaped by family stage. Across cultures, early adulthood has the most pronounced gender typing, in the service of parenthood. Gutmann spoke of the parental emergency or parental imperative. His argument is that the distinctive role behaviors of men and women develop in response to the universal needs of children for physical and emotional security. As parents, adults "surrender to the other the qualities that would interfere with the provision of their special

form of security” (p. 180). Men specialize in materially providing for their families and protecting their physical safety. In doing so, they repress their own inclinations to be dependent and show vulnerability. Women are the nurturers, a function that requires careful management of aggressive and competitive impulses. When children take over the responsibility for their own security, a period of “mid-life relaxation” arrives for the parents, where “both sexes can afford the luxury of living out the potentials and pleasures that they had to relinquish early on” (p. 181). Men become less aggressive and can more freely express their affiliative needs as they age, whereas women take on increasingly active and domineering roles—at least in the family realm. Several studies seem to support the conclusion that men become more affiliative in later life, whereas women become more assertive (Livson, 1983).

In later work, we also found references to the importance of parenting for adult development. Ryff and Seltzer (1995), for example, called for new research examining the linkages between family life and adult development. In their view, family researchers have neglected issues of individual development, just as students of adult development have typically conceived of development as an individual phenomenon. Ryff and Seltzer argued that conceptions of *growth* and *change* in the adult years should acknowledge the parenting experience as a context for fostering and enhancing, or impeding and diminishing, individual development.

We do not deny that parenthood exercises a pivotal and powerful role in adult life. Rather, we call into question the near-exclusive focus on parenthood. When Gutmann (1975) contended that the shifting demands of parenthood bring shifts in gender patterns, one is left wondering what happens to those who do not become parents. Where do they fit in? Do they miss out on crucial developmental phases?

Without a Child—Without a Family?

It is common to hear young adults being asked “Do you have a family?” and responding “not yet.” Seldom does the person who posed the question follow up with the query “So you have no parents, no brothers and sisters, no aunts and uncles and no cousins?” We tend to disregard the fact that everyone is someone’s child, and the parent–child ties from the family of orientation may last for more than 60 years! A strong tendency to define “the structurally normal” family (Parsons, 1959, 1965) as tied to the conjugal unit and a family of procreation is reinforced by social scientific literature.

Family Development

The strong focus on the family of procreation is evident, for example, in the literature on the “family cycle” (Feldman & Feldman, 1975; Glick, 1947, 1977; Glick & Parke, 1965) or “family development” (Duvall, 1957; Hill & Rodgers, 1964). These perspectives have been used to study the succession of stages through which the typical nuclear family passes from the time it is formed until it dissolves. Research on the presumed curvilinear course of marital satisfaction across the adult years (Rollins & Feldman, 1970; Spanier, Lewis, & Coles, 1975) is part of this tradition. Marital satisfaction is high during the early years of marriage, then declines and reaches its lowest levels during the launching of children in midlife, and subsequently climbs again and returns to the earlier high levels. Admittedly, the “family cycle” perspective has been criticized for not keeping pace with demographic reality: There is insufficient consideration of “nonstandard” family forms such as single parenthood, stepfamilies, coparenting arrangements, and unmarried cohabitation (Aldous, 1990, 1996). Suggestions have been made to modify the perspective to incorporate the transitions of divorce and remarriage and to loosen the link between marriage and childbearing (Hill, 1986; Mattessich & Hill, 1987).

Our concern is with the family cycle’s point of departure, the transitions into marriage and parenthood. Those who do not pass through those transitions disappear from view (Connidis & McMullin, 1993; Rubinstein, 1987). They simply are not considered. Individuals who never have children are not the only ones overlooked. The perspective loses sight of people who never marry and remain single, those who never marry but have same-sex relationships, and those with heterosexual relationships that are never sealed by a legal marriage. In other words, people who never start a family cycle of their own are rendered invisible. Nevertheless, they do have families and they do have adult lives. Moreover, we are not talking about a small group of people.

Families of Later Life

Despite the emphasis on children as carers, childlessness has been treated tangentially in work on family life in old age (Jerrome, 1996; Kraeger, 2004). The topic of *childlessness* is conspicuously absent in major publications on families of later life. When we surveyed volumes and overviews published in the past 30 years, we found a general lack of consideration for childless older adults.

First we looked at the decade reviews published by the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Troll (1971) wrote the first one on the family of later life. With its emphasis on the parent-child relationship, her approach is typical of what we find in the literature: "the achievement of the '60's has been the recognition of the importance of extended kin relations and the continued contact between aging individuals and their kin, particularly their children" (p. 282). Troll's decade review, and the one that followed it (Streib & Beck, 1980), has no information on childless older adults. The review of work on late-life families published in the 1980s (Brubaker, 1990a) brought a change, as research on childlessness was gathering pace. Childless families were one of seven topics considered. However, in the most recent decade review on late-life families, the childless again received very little attention. Here, the reviewers singled out the lives of the childless as an area previously ignored by researchers (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2000).

Turning next to edited volumes, we again rarely found information on childless older adults. Although each of the five editions of the *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences* (Binstock & George, 1990, 1996, 2001; Binstock & Shanas, 1976, 1985) has devoted a chapter to families and aging, childlessness has received attention in only one of them. The overview of later-life families in the third edition (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990) devotes two paragraphs to childless older adults and their support networks. The overview of the family in later years (Treas & Bengtson, 1987) in the 1987 *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* makes only passing references to the childless, namely, in descriptions of demographic change. The same holds for the *Handbook of Aging and the Family* edited by Blieszner and Bedford (1995) and for *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families* edited by Scott, Treas, and Richards (2004). Brubaker's (1990b) book *Family Relationships in Later Life* has a chapter on the unmarried but no specific discussion of childlessness. *Strengthening Aging Families* (Smith, Tobin, Robertson-Tchabo, & Power, 1995) considers a variety of family patterns; however, childlessness is not among them. *Aging and Generational Relations Over the Life Course: A Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Hareven (1996), illustrates the focus on those with children. The childless are not considered in that volume. Although it does not have a specific focus on later-life families, Coleman and Ganong's (2004) *Handbook of Contemporary Families* does have a separate section on the later-life consequences of childlessness. Kendig's (1986) volume *Ageing and Families: A Social Networks Perspective* is a favorable exception: Childlessness is considered in several chapters.

We completed our search with two books, published more than 15 years apart, in which the authors aimed to provide a comprehensive representation of family ties in later life. Both books (Brubaker, 1985; Connidis, 2001) stand out because they have separate sections on childless elderly.

A Vulnerable Group?

Above, we briefly discussed common assumptions that being a parent is at the core of having a normal adult life and a family. This notion has colored social scientific work on the childless. Research tends to start from a perspective that constructs them as “the other,” that is, different from or in opposition to the numerically dominant group that does have children (Letherby, 2002). When the childless are considered in research, they are viewed as deviants. Overwhelmingly, they are perceived in a negative light, as problem cases. Moreover, the childless are seen as being disadvantaged. In his report prepared in the context of a UN research project on population aging, Dooghe (1994) identified the childless as one of the specific risk groups among the elderly. Dooghe’s portrayal is the kind generally given. It is typically assumed that the childless have weak or tenuous ties to others—that they are marginal in support networks, in neighborhood, in community, and in society at large. As a consequence, nonparents give rise to concern about isolation, loneliness, depression, ill health, even anomie. The lack of clear family roles, anchored in social institutions, has been a strong theme in writing on the childless. The emphasis is on what they lack, the deficits in their lives—and much of the literature is devoted to discussions of how the childless have and are problems.

The Stigma of Childlessness

There is a stigma attached to nonparenthood (Lisle, 1996; May, 1995), though it was more powerful a few decades ago. Stereotypes suggest that those who remain childless in marriage are avoiding social responsibility and are being self-indulgent. The stereotypic view of parenthood is that it brings social recognition and a sense of responsibility. It signals, according to traditional norms, that people have settled down, as mature and responsible members of the community (Akerlof, 1998). In a study conducted by Hoffman and Manis (1979), becoming a parent was commonly picked as the event signifying adult status, more than marriage or acquiring a job.

Parenthood is also the standard by which society traditionally has defined adult gender identity (Veevers, 1973). To become a mother is a true sign of

womanhood, just like becoming a father is proof of manhood. It is worth noting, though, that motherhood appears to be a more important constituent of femininity than fatherhood is of masculinity (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Russo, 1976; Veevers, 1980). Traditional conceptions of *womanhood* carry the implication that women who remain childless are somehow untrue to their destinies (Gordon, 1977; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Ireland, 1993). In Polit's (1978) study of social perceptions, women of deviant fertility choices were stigmatized more than their male counterparts. Voluntarily childless women were disliked most and seen to be least well-adjusted socially. These findings were not replicated, however, in a more recent Australian study carried out by Callan (1985). Here, no differences in the favorability ratings of childless men and women were found.

Of course, it is important to note the historical lenses of authors. Many of these studies were published in the 1970s when the perceptions of the childless were more negative than they are today. Attitude surveys conducted since the 1960s show an increased acceptance of childlessness. For example, parenthood is no longer seen as a requirement of marriage. In 1962, 84% of mothers in the Study of American Families agreed that "almost all married couples who can, ought to have children" (Thornton & Freedman, 1982). By 1980, only 43% of the mothers supported that view, and this fraction has remained quite stable into the 1990s (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Approximately 50% of Americans surveyed in the context of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 1988 and 1994 did not believe that childless individuals lead empty lives (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Repeated attitude surveys carried out in the Netherlands also show a declining rejection of voluntary childlessness (Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands [SCP], 1984, 1996). Whereas 68% of respondents in 1965 considered it unacceptable "if couples remain childless voluntarily," this percentage had dropped to 29% by 1970, to 15% by 1975, 8% by 1980, and in the most recent survey (carried out in 1995) only 4% considered voluntary childlessness unacceptable. The pattern in the Dutch data is consistent with Thornton's (1989) observation that "changes in family attitudes and values were particularly dramatic and pervasive during the 1960s and 1970s" (p. 873).

Although large shifts toward accepting childlessness have been witnessed in the past decades, younger and older age groups are not equally accepting of childlessness. Analyses of the 1988 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) data for Great Britain, the Irish Republic, the United States, and former West Germany show that older respondents had the least favorable attitudes toward childless marriages (see Table 1). The older the respondents,

Table 1
Percentage Agreeing With the Statement “A Marriage Without Children Is Not Fully Complete”

	Men Born			Women Born		
	pre-1930	1930-1949	1950-1970	pre-1930	1930-1949	1950-1970
Britain	73	54	35	63	40	29
Irish Republic	55	59	45	54	48	39
United States	64	46	34	56	46	34
West Germany	54	45	24	51	40	25

Source: Scott, Braun, and Alwin (1993, p. 30). The data are from the questionnaire module on Family and Changing Gender Roles, which was part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 1988.

the more likely they were to agree that “a marriage without children is not fully complete” (Scott, Braun, & Alwin, 1993). More than half of those older than age 60 endorsed this statement.

As Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) pointed out in their analysis of four decades of trends in family attitudes, there is a difference between being accepting of childlessness and wanting it for one’s own life. The declining rejection of childlessness fits in with the expansion of the range of acceptable family behavior (premarital sex, unmarried cohabitation, mothers’ employment outside the home, etc.). At the same time, the authors’ attitude data show that marriage and parenthood continue to be highly valued. Although people have become more accepting of a diversity of behaviors, they still want marriage and parenthood for themselves. Childlessness has come to reap fewer negative sanctions over the years; however, it is not a life option that many consider seriously.

Childlessness and Social Integration

The childless are assumed to be at a disadvantage precisely because they have no children. Such concerns are based on the premise that family roles provide connectedness to society, through different types of social integration: webs of interaction and network support, roles, norms, and social control.

Such integration can be explored on different levels of social contexts: a macro-societal level, a meso level of communities and civil society, and a micro level of stable primary ties. Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1896/1951) provided classic descriptions of how marriage and parenthood provide social integration and shield against anomie. Such integrative functions were

emphasized in 20th-century structure–functionalist perspectives on families, for example, in a decade-long discussion of “the universality of the family” (Reiss, 1965). Central in this universality debate was the premise that all societies have an investment in parenthood because it is the key to the protection and socialization of children, who in turn ensure the future continuity of a social system. Thus, societies are more likely to regulate parenthood than sexual relations and marriage; however, the regulation takes highly variable forms.

Parenthood is a critical basis of social control. All societies have concerns about how parents behave and will use sanctions to ensure conformity with key requirements of parenting. In Western society, parental behavior is subject to formal regulation by law (Liss, 1987; Mason, Fine, & Carnochan, 2001; Millar & Warman, 1996). Parents must not only provide their children with the essentials of daily living such as food, clothing and shelter but must also provide socialization for future adult lives. Failure to provide adequate care or supervision may lead to criminal prosecution for neglect and—ultimately—loss of the parent role.

Parenthood is a relevant characteristic in the distribution of public resources, goods, and services. In many societies, parents receive financial and service benefits not available to nonparents, such as child support, tax relief, and subsidized medical plans. Lone parents are often eligible for extra benefits and subsidies. So common is the societal support of parenting that in some nations, single, childless persons have found it necessary to form associations as a means to ensure basic entitlements, such as adequate housing. Examples are the *Centrum Individu en Samenleving* (CISA) in the Netherlands, Unmarried America, the American Association for Single People (AASP) in the United States, and the *Ensliges Landsforbund* in Norway.

It has also been pointed out that parents are more likely to be the targets of informal social control than is the case for nonparents (Akerlof, 1998; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Umberson, 1987). There are pressures to be models for children and to not cause them social embarrassment. “Socially responsible” behavior is not without benefits to parents. Providing healthy meals for growing children gives parents better nutrition, and the presence of offspring may limit abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances. The ways in which marriage and parenthood encourage healthy behaviors are considered by Kendig, Dykstra, van Gaalen, and Melkas (2007).

On a meso level of social life, children facilitate adults’ integration into neighborhoods and community, serving as bridges to local networks and voluntary associations (Furstenberg, 2005). Parents often make new acquaintanceships through their children—in the neighborhood, through playmates,

via school. Adults with children are also more likely to invest in community improvement because it increases life chances for their children. Having children makes people more concerned about their living environment, neighborhood safety, the availability of youth facilities, and the quality of schools.

Because parenthood provides social integration, authors have expressed concern about the growing number of adults who are without regular ties to children. An example is an article by Eggebeen and Uhlenberg (1985), who started with observing men's declining involvement in the parental role as the result of divorce, the postponement of marriage, and nonmarital child-bearing. According to these authors, people tend to be less interested in issues that do not directly affect themselves, and therefore men's decreased involvement in the upbringing of children is likely to lead to a weakened support base for children's issues such as day care, school upgrading, recreational programs, community health, and parental leaves. More important, the shrinking involvement with young children leaves a growing number of men who are not integrated and regulated by the bonds of parenthood. They present a threat of anomie and potentially disruptive deviance. Similar arguments have more recently been presented by Akerlof (1998).

The notion of children as bridges to the wider society can also be found in gerontological literature. It has been pointed out that adult children serve as advocates and interpreters for their parents in dealing with bureaucracies and social services (Choi, 1994; Shanas & Sussman, 1977, 1981). Furthermore, it has been argued that children and grandchildren constitute "cohort bridges," by mediating rapid social change to aging individuals (Hagestad, 1981; Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005).

In literature on micro levels of social context, it is nearly a truism that the parent-child axis is the pivot of social support in old age. Volume on volume of research in gerontology and family studies has illustrated this point. Because another voluminous literature has demonstrated a strong link between social support, health, and well-being, it is natural to deduce that the childless are vulnerable—a group at risk for social isolation, loneliness, depression, ill health, and increased mortality. A major goal of this collection of articles is to ask if, and under what conditions, such concerns are warranted.

Late 20th Century: From Childlessness to Childfreeness

In sharp contrast to the extensive discussion of parenthood as the portal to social integration and support, authors have increasingly argued that it can

also constitute vulnerability. Social change in the last decades of the 20th century focused increasing attention on the costs of parenthood and the benefits of life without children. As part of this development, a new language of parenthood and nonparenthood emerged, emphasizing individual choice and decisions.

A New Psychology of Choice?

In the early 1970s, people started to point out that our view of adults without children as “less” than parents was reflected in our language. The term *childfree* was suggested, emphasizing the growing importance of a life without children as a conscious individual choice. The National Organization of Non-Parents (NON), formed in California in 1972, is a central example. Its aim was to promote “childfree” marriage and to make nonparenthood a true option for married couples. Because the term *childless* carried negative connotations, the new term *childfree* was preferred (Cooper, Cumber, & Hartner, 1978). At about the same time, it became common to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary childlessness. This made much more sense in this era than in earlier periods, as we discuss below. The timing is significant. Women who came of age in the late 1960s and the early 1970s were the first cohorts who had access to modern contraceptive technology that made fertility a clear matter of choice. In many societies, this was also an era in which abortion laws were liberalized.

Several authors have emphasized how dramatic the new element of choice was in the lives of women. Ireland (1993), who used the phrase “a new psychology of choice,” argued that it necessitates a reconsideration of theories on women’s development. Her book bears the title *Reconceiving Women*. The new fertility control coincided with an increasing societal emphasis on gender equality and widened access to higher education. The general cultural climate was one of growing individualism—a new emphasis on self-actualization through the “choice biography” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 1996; Giddens, 1991). This was in contrast to the conventional “normal biography,” which was primarily created by societal scripts. With the separation of sex and reproduction, new life options were opened up. People could be sexually active and childless, an option that in earlier times was unavailable or risky. Since the late 1960s, there has been a weakening of the bond between marriage and childbearing (Bachu, 1999; Dykstra, 2004; Kiernan, 1999). Childbearing outside of marriage has become more of an option; the same holds for partnerships without children.

When parenthood was cast as a choice, it became an experience that was compared to other life options (Hakim, 2000). One aspect of the psychology

of choice is that when a decision has been made to have children, becoming a parent is seen as a right or entitlement. Consequently, the last decades of the 20th century witnessed active use of new reproductive technology to aid couples who had made the decision but could not conceive. In many societies, national health plans and insurance policies reinforced the notion of reproduction as not only an option but also a right.

The current emphasis on “choice” and being the “captain of one’s biography” is a dramatic change from the normative climate in which the cohorts who are the focus of this collection of articles grew up. The older adults discussed here grew up in the first decades of the 20th century. When they were young adults, people had strong pronatalist views, and there were limited options for fertility control. They were raised with a more fatalistic view of life: Events “happened” to them or were determined by economic, family, or health circumstances (Hareven, 1977), their “station in life.” Among those who married, having children was the normal, expectable route to follow. Few would have considered becoming parents while single because of strong stigma. Until the late 20th century, terms such as *illegitimate* or *bastard* for nonmarital births were in common use, as were even more derogatory words found in local dialects. For a large part of their lives, there was little acceptance of homosexuality, let alone having children in a same-sex relationship.

These examples underscore that we should be careful not to look at childless older adults through contemporary lenses. Their lives should be put in the context of history. A modern distinction such as voluntary versus involuntary childlessness makes little sense in a study of older adults without children.

The Costs of Parenthood

Especially in feminist critiques of pronatalist values, the costs of motherhood have received considerable attention. Feminists challenged the social division of labor that assigns women primary responsibility for child rearing and home maintenance and men the main responsibility for income generation (Bridenthal, 1979; Folbre, 1983; Presser, 1997; United Nations, 1999). They identified a number of negative aspects of role patterns in which women serve their husbands and care for children: economic dependency, social isolation, diffuse and unpredictable demands on time, and psychological costs. As Acker (1988) argued, the care work women do at home requires managerial skills, such as planning, continual monitoring, and a high degree of initiative and autonomy; however, these efforts give no return in terms of control over economic resources. Several authors pointed out that

the gender-based division of labor may block or reduce some basic social rights of citizenship for women (Hagestad, 2000; Hernes, 1987; Orloff, 1993; Sørensen, 1991) and make them “second-class citizens,” for example with regard to pension rights (Ginn & Arber, 2000).

Parent–child relations can bring what we call interdependency costs. Children do not always bring joy in life. They are an important source of worries, and parents often incur pain from what happens to their children or from what children do (Koropecj-Cox, 2002; Pillemer & Suito, 1991; Umberson, 1992; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). Their achievements may not meet parental expectations, their marriages may end in divorce, they may become seriously ill, develop addictions, or reject their parents’ values.

Umberson and Gove (1989) suggested that the rise in voluntary childlessness is in part a response to the personal and social restrictions and the financial costs that children impose. Houseknecht (1982), whose analysis focuses on voluntarily childless women, described different rewards for not having children. The first is the avoidance of the economic costs of child rearing, meaning that more financial resources are available for other pursuits. The second is decreased opportunity costs in the world of work and increased economic rewards derived from career commitment. The third is the increase in social rewards, such as approval, that accompany career commitment.

Beyond the Childless as “the Other”

As we have seen, presumptions about the disadvantaged position of the childless have structured the kinds of questions that have been asked in earlier research. There has been a strong tendency to view the lives of childless older adults through a lens of deficiency, seeing them as lacking life course structuring, “normal” development, family life, and mechanisms of social integration. People with children are the reference point; the childless become “others”—the residual category. As so often happens with dichotomies (Scott, 1988), they lead to oversimplification and homogenization. The emphasis on what separates them from parents clouds the variability among them (Connidis & McMullin, 1996). The childless are regarded as one group, a group with an assumed shared mode of existence. We lose sight of diversity within our “other” category and may overlook evidence of social embeddedness and individual resiliency.

Overlooked Embeddedness

Studies of different stages of adulthood have illustrated that parents are not the only family members with strong and continuous responsibility for children. Historians have given rich accounts of what Hareven (1977) called

the “accordion function” of households, an expansion and contraction with adults and children moving between households in accordance with changing family needs and external conditions. Alter (1991) described historical research demonstrating that adolescents were often sent away from home to live and work as servants in another household. This circulation of adolescents redressed imbalances in labor supply across stages of family development and households with different resources. In some cases, the move became a permanent one. Such arrangements were common enough that everyday language had a term for them. In parts of Norway, it was referred to as “taking in.” Japan, a nation with low official rates of childlessness, has had an extensive tradition of adoption, typically of adolescents or young adults (Kurosu, 1998; Matsuo, 2003). Blythe’s (1966) introduction to a new edition of Jane Austen’s novel *Emma* provides a concrete example of the way in which household imbalances were redressed in Great Britain two centuries ago: “In due time the Austens had six sons, but the Knights [Mr Knight was a distant relative and close friend of Jane Austen’s father], to their grief, remained childless. So Mr Austen gave the Knights one of his sons. It seemed no more dramatic and no less pragmatic than that” (p. 11).

In her study of poor African American families around 1970, Stack (1974) described the practice of “child swapping.” In the communities where she did her fieldwork, child rearing was a shared responsibility. Often, children were raised in households other than that containing the biological mother. These households tended to be related through the mother’s family (often a sister). Child swapping fits in with the survival strategy of pooling resources. Family members gave what they could and took what they needed. Although “child swapping” in 19th-century England was formalized through adoption and the African American community of the late 20th century had strong subcultural norms regulating the sharing of responsibilities and resources across households, many family ties of the childless may be overlooked precisely because they lack societal definitions and are not linked to clearly recognized roles.

Qualitative studies have described parentlike involvements of childless individuals with the children of siblings, neighbors, and close friends. In a time of low fertility, it is interesting to note that Norwegian women have resurrected a term that long was out of use. Rather than speaking of nieces and nephews, they refer to “my aunt-children.” Often, relationships to such children are characterized by regular contact and extensive support. Most of our Western languages lack ready-made labels for these relationships (Carsten, 2004). In scientific texts, the terms *quasi* or *constructed* parenthood have been used (Johnson & Barer, 1995; Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, &

Luborsky, 1991). It says something about the power of parenthood as a life organizer that the childless themselves tend to use nuclear family terminology to describe these bonds: The younger person is “like a son” or “like a daughter.” A critical factor is relationship history, a long-term reciprocity investment (Schröder-Butterfill, 2004; Wentowski, 1981) by a person who has no biological children but who is quite systematically building bonds of reciprocity with a member of a younger generation. In more concrete terms, such efforts can involve periods of coresidence, extensive child care, financial support, the down payment on a house, and so on. Rubinstein et al. (1991) emphasized the considerable individual effort that goes into creating and maintaining norms of obligation and commitment, as well as feelings of affection and caring, in quasi-parenting relationships. In their view, a long-term reciprocity investment involves the negotiation of a shared identity, a systematic effort to build a sense of we-ness.

Several studies have pointed to the individual benefits derived from quasi parenthood (Allen, 1989; Rubinstein et al., 1991): the pleasure of spending time together, the pride in seeing youngsters grow up, the sense of making a difference in their lives. Subsequent articles will provide numerous illustrations of how reciprocity investments pay off in old age. We show that many childless older adults had a life with strong and durable family ties: to parents, siblings, cousins, nieces, and nephews. Many have been deeply involved in family care. Indeed, care provision in their family of orientation may be the main reason why they did not establish their own family of procreation (see the article by Hagestad and Call, 2007, on pathways to childlessness). A sizable proportion of women who are now in their 70s and 80s never married because at younger ages they remained in the parental home to care for their elderly parents (Allen, 1989; Brody, 1990; Connidis & McMullin, 1996; Holden, 2005; Wenger, 2001). Given the absence of community and health services, as well as the organization of the family in their early years (Hareven, 1977), these women did what was expected of them. The result was that they never married and never had children. Thus, the main reason why they ended up childless was involvement in strong intergenerational ties.

Allen's (1989) analysis of the life histories of never-married older women uncovers the substantial contributions many of these women have made to their families throughout the course of their lives. In her view, their involvements served the goal of family survival and continuity. Apart from caring for elderly parents, many of the women she interviewed had extensive involvements with the offspring of married siblings, enduring bonds that lasted until old age. Allen emphasized the supportive roles these women fulfilled. Their

child care activities provided relief from their siblings' day-to-day responsibilities. She spoke of the "auxiliary family-keeping role reserved for never-married women" (p. 132).

A Vanguard of Women?

It is important to note that though the psychology of choice became common in cohorts born after 1950, the early 20th century saw a small vanguard of women making conscious decisions to not be mothers or to limit their parenthood responsibilities. The "new spinsters" at that turn of the century obviously subscribed to this view (Freeman & Klaus, 1984). They were well-educated urban women who saw spinsterhood as a rational choice, preferring to remain single rather than to enter into what they perceived as the oppressive relations of marriage. For many, spinsterhood was a form of revolt, a rejection of marriage, and a preference for social and economic independence. Consistent with earlier analyses (e.g., Dixon, 1978), Freeman and Klaus (1984) reported that the increasing availability at the time of jobs in light industry, services, and businesses in urban areas enabled them to forgo marriage and parenthood.

Contrary to popular belief, there is evidence that a select number of married women in the older cohorts also deliberately refrained from having children. From historical studies, we know that fertility was purposefully limited by 19th- and early-20th-century cohorts (Anderson, 1998; Himes, 1936/1970; Livi-Bacci, 1977; Szreter, 1996), though contraceptives were not readily available. The well-to-do, the better educated, and residents of cities were most likely to practice birth control, though a certain degree of fertility reduction was also evident in other groups of the population. Sexual abstinence and coitus interruptus were practiced. In addition, condoms, diaphragms and vaginal douches were used, and in unfortunate cases women resorted to abortion (Gordon, 1977). As is shown in Hagestad and Call's (2007) contribution to this issue, there were relatively high childlessness rates for married women with uninterrupted occupational careers, a group of women who were well educated. It appears that for these women, given their educational qualifications, the pursuit of a career may have gained precedence over motherhood. Childlessness, then, is most likely not a situation that simply "happened" to them but rather one in which they played a purposive role.

Pioneering Life Course Architects?

A number of the childless older adults in our material went off the beaten track. Although they did not hold today's ideology of being the architects of

their own lives, many of them actively constructed alternate paths under circumstances they had not planned or wished for. Lisle (1996) described this as having “learned to exist outside convention” (p. 240). Many of them, especially women, were what we today would call *agentic*. Findings from a study of U.S. older women receiving institutional care serve as an illustration (Rubin-Terrado, 1994). This study shows that the childless to a greater extent had taken charge of their own situation, actively choosing between options for care and housing, whereas mothers often remained passive, waiting for others to make decisions. Although parents in many respects had a path laid out for them, the childless had to blaze their own trail. Even today, those who have children are in a status that is supported institutionally, and their conduct follows socially shared guidelines. To some degree, the rhythms, structure and control in their lives are given. The circumstances of the childless are very different. There are no ready-made scripts. They have to “compose” their lives—to adopt a phrase from Bateson (1989).

Victors and Victims

For many of the individuals in our material, life as a childless—often also single—adult has been a “sink or swim” experience. Some of them have mobilized personal and social resources to create satisfying lives, embedded in social support networks; others have ended up as losers in multiple life arenas. This diversity needs to be recognized and given more attention. The first task is to scrutinize the different life circumstances surrounding the status of childless. Second, we need to take a diachronic view of their lives, asking how they ended up in this status in the first place.

Who Are the Childless? Recognizing Diversity

A cursory literature search will show that parental status is typically treated as a dichotomy; researchers compare people with and without children. Closer attention to references using the key word *childless* will soon reveal that this label covers a diverse set of life circumstances. Distinguishing among individuals who could be sorted under the generic label involves three components: defining what we mean by *child*, distinguishing life circumstances surrounding parental status, and delineating pathways into these contrasting life circumstances.

What Is a Child?

Children can be biological offspring, adoptive children, stepchildren, or foster children. In this two-part special issue, the childless are those who

have no living biological or adoptive children. Those with only step- or foster children are considered childless. We are using the unicity of the tie as the defining feature. There is only one parent or only one set of parents. Admittedly, this is not necessarily the case when adoptive children are considered; however, usually, there is no or only very limited contact with the biological parents. Adoptive children tend to be seen and treated as “own” children. Stepchildren and foster children often have two sets of parents: the biological parents and the adults to whose household they belong(ed). As regards stepchildren, there is of course a difference between those from marriages ending in divorce (both biological parents alive) and those acquired from a marriage ending in widowhood (one of the biological parents deceased). Divorce is relatively rare among the cohorts we are investigating, so relatively few older adults will have acquired stepchildren from a marriage that ended in divorce. The stepchildren are more likely to come from a marriage that ended in widowhood (childbirth was a common cause of female mortality during the first decades of the 20th century).

Some researchers, especially in demography, will link parental status to household structure and the chronological age of offspring. As a result, researchers who rely on census data run up against distinct problems as witnessed, for example in an article on the links between childlessness and mortality (Kobrin & Hendershot, 1977). This article turns out to be about individuals who have no children younger than age 18 living in the home. A similar problem is encountered in reports based on survey research, where *parenthood* is often defined as having children living at home (e.g., Arber & Cooper, 2000; Evandrou & Glaser, 2004; McLanahan & Adams, 1987; Simon, 2002), so that empty nesters and childless individuals are grouped together. A few years ago, one of us was a discussant in a session during a national meeting of family researchers. The focus was on parenthood; however, one of the papers repeatedly referred to “former mothers.” The discussant was puzzled that so many women had lost their children. It turned out that the paper’s young author was referring to empty-nest mothers! Middle-aged parents in the audience had difficulties concealing smiles! As we shall see in the article by Dykstra and Wagner (2007), the older population does include true former parents, a troubled group.

Recruitment Into the Childless State

As soon as we think a bit beyond the surface and ponder how to define and delineate parental status, we find a striking diversity in present life circumstances among those with no children. Most older adults who are currently childless never had children. However, a small group have outlived their children. Many of these former parents spent most of their adulthood being

parents. Their life strategies and identities most likely are those of mothers and fathers. Although both groups are characterized by being in a childless state, their circumstances are starkly different. For the first, childlessness has always been a part of their lives. For the second, childlessness involves a turn of events they did not anticipate. Parents do not expect to outlive their children. It is those who never had children who violate social expectations. Those who have lost their children by death do not meet social disapproval. Theirs is a situation of private misfortune. A number of them will have experienced two major losses: that of their spouse and that of the children.

As was discussed earlier, in the cohorts examined here, parenthood outside of marriage was not an option. Many of the childless never married (see the article by Koropeckyj-Cox and Call, 2007 [this issue], for a breakdown of childlessness by marital status in selected countries). Among individuals who married, but never had children, we need to distinguish between those who are currently married versus those whose marriage ended in widowhood or divorce. As noted above, the vast majority of the formerly married individuals in our material had the marriage severed by death. Of those who married but remained childless, some will have been beyond childbearing age when they married. Yet others could have lost their spouses before they had children and never remarried.

Let us briefly comment on the distinction between *voluntary* and *involuntary childlessness*. Attempts to operationalize *voluntary childlessness* illustrate the ambiguity of the concepts. Beckman and Houser (1982), for example, do not only use the category “did not want children” but also the categories “too busy to have children” and “other competing interests.” In effect, only childlessness attributable to medical–biological causes is an unequivocal case of involuntary childlessness. Studies carried out during the past 20 years documenting the effects of infertility have concentrated on men and women in their mid-20s to early 40s (e.g., van Balen, 1991; Pfeffer & Woollett, 1983). These data have limited relevance for the older adults we are investigating. Fertility treatments are much more advanced and widely available now. More generally, in our samples of older adults, it makes little sense to inquire into events related to infertility. Perceptions and evaluations are likely to have undergone many changes since the original events. For this reason, we will not be looking at the experiences of infertility per se but rather its relationship with late-life outcomes.

Childlessness and Life Context

In examining effects of childlessness on life in old age, two considerations are given special weight here. The first is the necessity of separating effects

of parental and marital status. A discussion of this conundrum inevitably leads to a consideration of gender. The second central issue is that of pathways into the childless status. Because of contrasts in role patterns and interdependence and because of biological differences, the pathways of men and women need to be considered separately. As we see in the article by Hagestad and Call (2007) women encounter stronger time pressures and missed opportunity deadlines.

The literature on the socially integrative functions of parenthood early recognized the challenge of separating the effects of marriage and parenthood. Already in Durkheim's (1896/1951) study of suicide, this was a potential problem of interpretation. In 20th-century discussions of the link between marital status and well-being, this issue has repeatedly been revisited (Gove, 1984; Gove, Style, & Hughes, 1990; Mastekaasa, 1992; Simon, 2002); however, studies of childlessness have, for the most part, ignored it. Two researchers recently stated, "To our knowledge, prior research has not examined the simultaneous contextualizing influences of sex and marital status on the effects of childlessness for elderly persons psychological well-being" (Zhang & Hayward, 2001, p. S313). Unfortunately, these authors also failed to disentangle the effects of marriage and parenthood on older adults' well-being.

Discussions of marriage and social integration have also focused attention on the differential meanings of marriage for men and women. An influential contributor to this discussion was Jessie Bernard's (1982) classic distinction between "his" and "her" marriage and her strong suggestion that his was better. Bernard also described the differential selection into marriage, arguing that women tend to marry "upward," that is, find marriage partners with a social status greater than their own, whereas men tend to marry "downward." As a result, those who remain unmarried and childless tend to be high-resource females and low-resource males. Never-married women, because they are well educated and socially skilled, are more likely to end up in high-status and high-pay positions than are their male counterparts. It is unclear whether men also derive economic benefits from remaining childless.

Taking into account whether childlessness occurred in or outside of marriage is important in broader considerations of quality of life among old people without children. Three factors are of significance here: stigma, expectations, and strategies. Those who never married and remained childless will not have met the kind of social disapproval that the married nonparents will most likely have been subject to. In our societies, people who are married or in stable heterosexual relationships are expected to have children and it is "normal" for them to want to do so. The social pressures toward

having children if one has married have persisted during the course of the century—with an upsurge in the postwar period with its unprecedented “passion for parenthood” (May, 1995, p. 131). In fact, parenthood has often been construed as the meaning and purpose of being married (Veevers, 1973). Within this view, parenthood is an integral part of marriage. This brings us to differences in life course expectations.

Having children is not part of the social script of the lives of those who do not marry. Given that parenthood is strongly linked to marriage, the never-married are unlikely to have anticipated having children. Among those who have not married, childlessness is not a breach of life course expectations. On the other hand, being married, but not having children, is a life path most current older adults will not have expected. Among them, childlessness is the nonoccurrence of an expected status change, or, as described by Connidis and McMullin (1993), “a transition from expecting parenthood to accepting childlessness” (p. 630).

Finally, the ever married and never married are likely to have employed different strategies throughout the course of their lives. The married will have had a spouse to turn to, whereas the never married have had to manage more on their own. Nevertheless, those who have always been single are long accustomed to their independence and will have developed the skills and resources required to meet their life demands on their own (Dykstra, 1995). The never married enter the later years with well-established patterns of fending for themselves, whereas the married are more likely to have had a life centered on the spouse (Johnson & Catalano, 1981). This means that the formerly married, most of whom are widowed, will have had a difficult process of adjusting to single life, with or without children.

Overview of Special Issue

Analytical Framework

Most work up to now has treated childlessness as a static state. In our view, a better grasp of the ways in which childlessness matters in late life is gained if one views it as embedded in life pathways. Our approach takes a dynamic, diachronic view and calls for an analysis of the interlinkages—concurrently and retrospectively—between parental status and engagements in other life domains. Such a perspective inspires us to look at how people came to be recruited into the childless state. It makes us sensitive to the distinctions between childlessness in and outside of marriage: between never having had children and outliving them. This will help illuminate the ways

in which resources, needs, and behavioral patterns of childless older adults are shaped by earlier experiences, many of them affected by historical circumstances. In the cohorts examined here, we need to consider effects of two world wars and a depression. Postponement of parenthood because of such factors as economic insecurity or war increases the risk of infertility. Depending on how they came to childlessness, people will have developed different life strategies, which in turn have consequences for how they function in old age.

Guided by a life course approach (see Hagestad and Call, 2007), the contributors to this special issue are survey researchers with an interest in aging, families, and social networks. Data from seven countries are used: Australia, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Each article is based on comparable survey data from as many of the participating countries as possible.

The data sets differ with regard to detail and differentiation of the criteria for identifying the childless. A number only have information on those who are currently without living children and can make no distinction between those who never had children and those who have outlived their children. Furthermore, not all data sets distinguish types of children, that is to say, natural children versus adoptive, step-, and foster children. Where relevant, authors will provide explicit descriptions of the childless in their analyses.

A basic tenet of our approach is that to understand the lives of the childless it helps to compare them to parents. Most of the analyses that follow will include five combinations of parental and marital status: childless—never married, currently or formerly married—and parents—married or formerly married. The never married include those who never cohabited with a partner. The formerly married are the divorced and the widowed living without a partner at the time of the interview. The married are those living with a spouse or a partner of the opposite or same sex. (Note, however, that in our data sets the numbers of older adults with homosexual relationships are very small.) Whenever possible, attention is paid to older adults who have outlived their children, who may be currently or formerly married.

Gender and marital history differences are under the lens throughout the collection of articles. All analyses are conducted separately for men and women, and where relevant, the articles consider the five types of parental and/or marital status. The inclusion of data on childlessness among men makes our analyses relatively unique. As Bulcroft and Teachman (2003) stated in a recent review chapter, there is a dearth of findings on childlessness among men. Most research has focused on women, which is typical of research on childbearing and parenthood (Forste, 2002; Greene & Biddlecom, 2000).

Key Issues Addressed

The special issue has two major foci. First, we provide rich, comparative descriptions of the childless, across time and space. How common is childlessness in given settings? Who are the childless? What are the dominant pathways into an old age without children? How are their life pathways different from those of parents? Do we find sharp contrasts by historical epoch or national settings? Are the paths of women and men different? Do we find similar gender contrasts across societies? These questions are addressed in the first set of articles. In Rowland's (2007 [this issue]) contribution, for example, changes in the rates of childlessness over time are explored. Hagestad and Call's (2007) contribution describes life pathways leading to childlessness, whereas the article written by Koropecj-Cox and Call (2007) focuses on differences between parents and childless in demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

A second component focuses on links between parental status and outcomes in various life domains: integration in community and support networks (the article by Wenger, Dykstra, Melkas, & Knipscheer, 2007); physical and mental health (the article by Kendig et al., 2007); and financial well-being, network size, and life satisfaction (the article by Dykstra & Wagner, 2007). Do the main five groups differ with regard to such outcomes? What parental status/pathway groups do the best? The worst? Does being childless cut across all spheres of life and in similar ways, or do the implications differ according to the outcome being studied? Previous discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of childlessness give reason to believe that the consequences are not necessarily uniform across life domains. In some, life without children can have particular advantages, in others it can have disadvantages, and in yet others, no effects at all. By taking a wide array of life outcomes into consideration, we hope to identify when childlessness matters and when it does not.

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