

# Towards a conceptual framework for families and households

*Acheampong Yaw Amoateng*

### Introduction

In this chapter we put the entire work in a broader conceptual framework by looking at selected theoretical perspectives, propositions and approaches that the social science disciplines represented in this study have used to elucidate family and household structures and processes. Specifically, the chapter provides an overview of selected theoretical perspectives that family and other scholars in these and other related social science disciplines have employed to organise the growing and disparate empirical data on families and households in South Africa. Since a family is an example of social institutions, we begin the chapter with a brief look at the term *social institution*, by employing the 'organismic' analogy, which has been prominent in sociology. In this analogy, society or a social system is viewed as any other organism with different parts performing different functions to ensure the survival of the whole organism. In the case of a social system, these different parts are called social institutions. Classic examples of social institutions are: political institutions like the government, courts and parliament; financial institutions like banks and credit bureaus; and cultural institutions like schools and churches. To this effect, a social institution has been defined as:

An interrelated system of social roles and norms organized about the satisfaction of an important social need or function...the social roles and norms comprising the social institution define proper and expected behavior oriented to the fulfillment of the particular social need such as the provision of food and other material goods. (Theodorson & Theodorson 1969: 206–207)

To understand a social theory in general, and family theory in particular, two issues with regard to the above definition of a social institution are significant. First, it means that the individual interacts with other individuals in a variety of institutions. Second, the definition suggests that every social institution has two dimensions, namely, the ideational/normative and behavioural dimensions with regard to the roles and actions that lead to the fulfilment of particular social needs. A norm is 'a patterned or commonly held behaviour expectation or learned response held in common by members of a group' (Bates 1956: 314). Thus, norms are the basic structural building blocks for all groups, including the family group (Rodgers & White 1993). In other words, as the concrete actors within these social institutions, these groups of individuals or the social collective are tied to one another by virtue of shared traditions. A pioneering work that illustrated the distinction between the ideal and statistical norms with regard to the family as a social institution is that of Paul Glick

at the United States Bureau of the Census. As far back as 1947, Glick had used the United States population census to compare life cycle stages of families in 1890 and those in 1940, by estimating median ages of couples at first marriage, birth and marriage of the last child, and death of each spouse. In employing the family life cycle concept to study family trends, Glick had divided the history of the family into six main stages – formation, extension, completed extension, contraction, completed contraction and dissolution. These stages corresponded to seven family events – marriage, birth of the first and last child, departure of the first and last child from home, death of first spouse, and death of surviving spouse.

In anthropology, a similar notion, the ‘domestic life cycle’, was used to draw attention to the changing nature of households over the life course. In this scheme, the main stages were expansion, dispersion and replacement (see, for example, Goody 1958; Fortes 1970). The distinction between professed family ideology and actual family behaviours as illustrated by notions of family and domestic life cycles also found expression in Laslett’s work when he formulated what he *perceived* as the essential elements of the West European family (1977: 13–20). Elements of the western European family identified included the popularity of nuclear/simple family households in conjunction with a relatively late age at marriage; relatively late age at childbearing with minimal age differences between husband and wife with a relatively high proportion of wives older than their husbands; and the presence of a significant proportion of life cycle servants in the households of, especially, the rich. Writing with the two dimensions of the family institution in mind, Goode has noted a distinction between the ideology of the conjugal family and the conjugal family itself, arguing that it is possible for the former to take root without the latter being in place; norms are the bases for predicting future family change (Goode 1970/1963: xiii). According to Goode, it is possible, in principle, for a society or a group within it to ascribe to the values associated with the conjugal family system, namely individual choice in marriage, egalitarian marital relationships and so on, and yet live in domestic situations that are very different from the conjugal family itself.

Russell (2002) employs the distinction between family ideology and family behaviours to distinguish the kinship system of societies of northern Europe on the one hand, and those of Southern Africa on the other. With regards to the west European family system, she notes two outstanding characteristics. First, the family household experiences a predictable developmental cycle from *establishment* (the couple), through *consolidation and expansion* (the bearing of children) to *fission* (adult children leave home to acquire independent means of subsistence while they search for a mate). At this juncture *decline* sets in. The original household diminishes, until ultimately only a single person is left (who may remarry or be reincorporated into an offspring’s home). Second, marriage is only as durable as the mutual satisfaction of the contracting couple, especially the mutual sexual satisfaction. If being *in love* is the sign for marriage to take place, *not being in love* is the sign for marriage to end. In contrast to black South Africans, whose patrilineal kinship system is based on a unilateral descent, Russell (2002) notes certain unique features of the family system.

First, descent is through the father and the idea of a patrilineally-linked descent group informs people's householding behaviour, determining who may and may not live together, marry, bear children together, expect reciprocity. Second, marriages, which are ideally between mature men and younger women, are arrangements between kin groups within different lineages; bride wealth from one is exchanged for a bride from another. Third, since polygyny is the ideal form of marriage, it is always legitimate for men to be courting potential new wives; women bear children for their husband's lineage, so it is important that they live with his kin, in order that the children can be brought up properly.

Several family scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with this 'ideal typical' western and African family pattern as identified by Russell. Generally, these scholars have argued that while the cyclical assumption carried with it the comfort of a predictable and regular pattern to family histories, the empirical evidence pointed to families that varied widely in the paths they took, a problem which compelled the human development theorists to adopt the term 'life course' to deal with the experience of individuals. With regard to the depiction of the western family system, Rodgers and White (1993) have argued that such a view of the family was most certainly pro-marriage, pro-natal, pro-nuclear family, tended toward a class and ethnic bias and failed to recognise divorce, premature deaths of children and adults, remarriage, stepfamilies, or unemployment and other work life variations. And, feminist scholars in both economics and anthropology have criticised this view of the family by generating and presenting first systematic empirical evidence not only of economic conflict and inequality within the household (Barrett 1980; Harris 1981; Mackintosh 1979; Whitehead 1981), but also of gender differences in the allocation of time, resources, and power within the household.

Specifically, feminist scholars have called into question the universality and stability of the conjugal unit. They argue that even in those regions and among social groups where marriage is near universal, women may spend a considerable portion of their lives without a spouse in residence. They found, for example, that from the 1970s to the 1980s, the proportion of households headed by women rose from 11.5 per cent to 17.3 per cent in Morocco, 12.5 per cent to 21.6 per cent in Thailand, 20.7 per cent to 26.1 per cent in the Dominican Republic, and 14.7 per cent to 19.5 per cent in Peru (Reported by K Ono, United Nations, cited in Bruce, Lloyd & Leonard 1995). In South Africa, it is a well established fact that as a result of the higher rates of participation in the migrant labour system by African men, desertion and lower rates of marriage, the conjugal unit amongst Africans is unstable. According to estimates derived from the 2001 census, nationally 16 per cent of husbands live apart from their wives. And, of this, over one-fifth of African husbands live apart from their wives compared with 6 per cent, 6 per cent and 4 per cent of coloured, Indian, and white husbands respectively. Vogel (2003) has observed large differences between nations in the European Union with regard to demographic behaviour such as the size of families, the timing of the move from the parental home, the timing and spacing of partnerships, the timing of fertility, dissolution of partnerships and the elderly living in extended families. According to him, these differences reflect not only *family*

*traditions* (social practice), but also variation in the current opportunity structure offered by the other welfare institutions. For example, he found that young adults move out of the parental home much later in the South and Ireland and much earlier in the Nordic countries, as compared to the intermediate central European countries. Moreover, he found that the proportion of unemployed adults included in parental households varied between some 13 per cent in Norway and 78 per cent in Italy.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Adegboyega (1994) has observed that the typical African family pattern of early and universal marriage is not observed in most southern African countries because of the migratory labour system. According to him, the need to participate in this economic activity takes mainly black men in the marriageable ages away from the marriage market, leading to such family patterns as late marriage and low incidence of marriage in the region. And, writing about southern African societies, Russell (2002) has noted the ambivalence of the social change that has taken place in these societies with regard to the rules of family formation. Specifically, she argues that despite the verbal commitment of urban black people to the nuclear family ideology, the descent-based consanguinal system of the African family has adapted well to the harsh demands of modern-urban industrial conditions leading to an array of householding arrangements, a fact which was supported by Seekings, Graaf and Joubert (1990) who found in a survey of Cape Town that what constituted a 'household' included people not sleeping under the same roof.

### **A review of family and household theories**

In this section we outline some of the main theoretical orientations of families and households. If society is an interrelated set of institutions and institutions are systems of roles and norms that regulate social interaction, we can define a theory broadly as a set of propositions that purport to explain a social phenomenon. Writing from the demographic point of view, Burch (1995: 86) defines a theory as 'general statements about social, economic, cultural, and demographic interrelations, or about the behavioural underpinnings of demographic events'. A similar definition is provided by Ryder (1992: 162) from the point of view of formal demography: '...the deductive study of the necessary relationships between quantities serving to describe the state of a population and those serving to describe changes in that state, over time, in abstraction from their association with other phenomena'. The importance of these definitions of a theory lies in the fact that the characteristics which a family and household system may assume at any particular point in time are determined by political, demographic, economic, ecological and cultural factors (Adegboyega 1994; Laslett 1979; Wall 1995).

The arrival of the industrial-capitalist revolution marked a paradigm shift in family theorising from one dominated by traditional beliefs and philosophical speculations to one characterised by the use of the scientific method with its rigorous methodology (see, for example, Boss et al. 1993; Christensen 1964). The increased rationalisation of society led to the systematisation and formalisation of family theory, since the social group termed variously as the *family*, *household* or *domestic unit* continued

to be regarded as one of the basic constituent institutions of the capitalist world economy (Martin & Beittel 1987). The end product of this process of systematisation and formalisation was the rebirth of two prominent, sociological theoretical traditions that have been used to analyse family structure and process, namely, structure-functionalism and Marxist conflict theory. These two broad theoretical traditions have been the point of departure for several sub-theories, or what Merton (1967) referred to as 'middle-range' theories of the family and household to distinguish them from their parent theories which were *grand* in terms of their levels of abstraction.

### Structure-functionalism and the family

Even though several scholars in sociology and anthropology contributed to the development of functionalism as a theoretical perspective in the family field, the scholar who is regarded as the most 'modern' advocate of the structure-functionalist school of thought is the American sociologist, Talcott Parsons. In his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Parsons sought to weave together various strands of thought which viewed human action as goal-directed; as involving the selection of appropriate means among alternatives; as regulated by ideas; and as being circumscribed by physical-biological parameters.<sup>1</sup> But his real contribution to functionalism occurred after 1945 when he recognised the fact that actors do not exist in isolation from each other, but rather interact within social systems (Parsons 1951). This line of thought logically led to Parsons' contribution to family sociology during this period. For instance, he argued that the family is not an independent society but rather a subsystem of society, and that familial roles interpenetrate with roles in other societal structures. Moreover, Parsons viewed the nuclear family as a consequence of differentiation on the two axes of hierarchy/power and instrumental/expressive functions.

Expectedly, this evolutionary view of the family led to a popular generalisation in family sociology that, as a society industrialises and urbanises, the extended family withers away (see also Kephart 1966; Kirkpatrick 1963; United Nations Statistical Office 1959). Burch (1967) has noted that within societies this generalisation is taken to mean that extended families predominate in rural than in urban areas, while cross-culturally extended families are more prevalent in under-developed than in developed societies. Following Parsons, Goode (1970) wrote about the homogenising effects of industrial capitalism with regard to family patterns. Specifically, Goode's position was that the penetration of capitalist ethos around the world had led to the nucleation of the family in western and non-western societies alike.

Although structure-functionalism in general, and Parsons' contribution in particular, has been accused of conservative bias, the *systemic* view of society it emphasises, which also underscores Parsons' attempt at building a general theory of action, certainly represents one of the strengths of the theory since, as already mentioned, it forms the basis of several theories in sociology and other disciplines, especially psychology.<sup>2</sup>

1 This seemingly ambitious project led to a charge of 'grand theorising' by scholars like C Wright Mills (1959).

2 It is important to note that Parsons incorporated several intellectual traditions, notably, Freud's psychoanalytic theory. For instance, he argues in *The Social System* that the process of personality development is linked to the family structure, because the most essential feature of the oral dependency phase is the child's attachment to one or a class of social objects of which the mother is the prototype (Parsons 1951).

For example, by positing a functional relation between the family and other societal institutions, he underscores the fact that as they evolve, family and community structures adapt to the physical and social conditions of production. Several western scholars have used this systemic view of society to trace the source of recent family changes to the economic and political changes that are sweeping the world under the rubric of globalisation and democratisation (see for example, Castells 1997; Fukuyama 1999; Giddens 2000).

The egalitarian ethos in marital relationships and the gradual disappearance of the conventional nuclear family of a man, his wife and their dependent children, and the emergence of varied family forms throughout the world are traced to such economic and technological changes as the development and spread of modern communication technology. For example, changes such as mechanisation, electric power and access to higher education have all helped to reduce dependence on human muscle power and an expansion of employment opportunities for women and men alike, high labour mobility and relative increase in real wages. Moreover, these economic and political changes have in turn led to concomitant changes in the family in the form of higher rates of divorce, single-hood, childless marriages, postponement of marriage and childbearing – patterns which challenge the normative, patriarchal view of the family. However, not everybody agrees that this depiction of the family applies equally well in all parts of the world. For example, Turner (2002) has argued that the above depiction of the family does not apply in situations where, as a result of poverty, culture, migration, employment opportunities, wars and regional conflicts, the extended family is the preferred living arrangement.

This systemic view of the family has not lacked its proponents elsewhere in Africa. It has been observed that most herders and pastoral nomads tend to have patriarchal families and a tendency toward monogamy, while women's productive work tends to be limited to herding small animals, dairying, and food processing and preparation (see for example, Adegboyega 1994). Several scholars over the years have used the same approach to explain various family and household formation and dissolution patterns and other demographic phenomena in different cultures. For example, economic factors, specifically poverty, have been implicated in the formation of extended family households among African-Americans in the United States (see, for example, Stack 1974). Also, as Kammeyer and Ginn (1986) have observed, although political actions and events may at first glance seem far removed from demographic events, they often have profound effects on demographic behaviours, as, for example, governmental policies in the areas of housing and health can influence birth and death rates (Burch 1995; Oakley 1978).

In South Africa, a critical examination of family scholarship, at least until the early 1990s, reveals that the predominant theoretical approach posited a functional relationship between families and society, whereby families are seen as performing functions such as the socialisation of children, sexual and reproductive control, economic co-operation, social support, and so on, in ways that co-ordinate with broader social and political goals. Within this context, family theory and research

from the middle to the late twentieth century can be understood in terms of its ideological roots. For instance, the independent and isolated nuclear family commonly identified with western societies was idealised. Family theory and research sought to define as *a family* a social unit that comprised a husband, his wife, and their dependent children living in the same dwelling. In several ways, the evolutionist-functionalist model of the family was used to justify the apartheid status quo through its commitment to western ideas about family life.

Through the prism of this ideological lens, the African family was portrayed as a morally declining institution, which deviated from the nuclear family in terms of two key defining features – marriage and co-residence of members. As a result, research on black families tended to focus on ‘dysfunctional’ family patterns such as polygamy, extramarital sexual relations, illegitimacy, delayed marriage, teenage pregnancy, and female-headed households. One pervasive view in the family literature was the so-called ‘convergence’ thesis, which argues, rather paternalistically, that the family patterns of black people are converging towards those of their white counterparts as black people are increasingly being exposed to urban-industrial conditions through migration and employment in the modern sectors of the economy (Amoateng 1997; Pauw 1963; Preston-Whyte 1978; Steyn et al. 1987; Steyn 1993a, 1993b). It was in the same spirit of functional analysis that Maconachie (1989) observed that the increase in white women’s labour force participation rates was due to the declining security which marriage provided them.

Moreover, the relatively late age at first marriage and its resultant low marriage rates among Africans in southern Africa compared to their counterparts in other sub-Saharan countries have been attributed largely to their participation in the migratory labour system in the region (Adegboyega 1994; Bozzoli 1991).

### **The ‘liberal’ critique of structure-functionalist theory of the family**

Even though structure-functionalism, as theorised especially by Parsons, made an important contribution to the family studies literature, this mode of analysis came under sustained attack from the late 1950s onwards, on several grounds, by scholars to the left of the ideological spectrum (for example, Mills 1959).<sup>3</sup> Branding the functionalist model of family change as conservative, critique has been mounted on both theoretical and methodological grounds. Specifically, in terms of the family, critics charge that functionalism not only seeks to idealise the western isolated nuclear family vis-à-vis other family forms, but also within the family it justifies inequalities between the sexes as well between the generations. Besides the ideological problem of political conservatism, functionalism’s account of the evolution of the nuclear family system in western societies has been found wanting on historical grounds. Based on the analysis of parish records on births and deaths in several northern and western European countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, scholars from the Cambridge School of Historical Demography have contended that the nuclear family has always

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<sup>3</sup> Collins (1988) has argued that in his efforts to revive functionalism through his ‘Neo-functionalist project’, Jeffrey Alexander (1985) is interested in teasing out from Parsons hints of his early interest in conflict derived from Weber.

been the dominant domestic unit amongst westerners and that the so-called extended family, which according to the functionalists was the modal type in the past, is a myth (Laslett 1983; Laslett & Wall 1972). Moreover, some scholars have observed that in pre-industrial societies the extended family was more common in urban than in rural areas, while others have still argued that economic and demographic constraints ensured that in no society could the extended family become the modal type (for example, Hsu 1943; Sjoberg 1960).

A fundamental problem with the structure-functionalist view of the family is the very narrow operational definition of the term it adopted. Several scholars have tried to overcome this limited view of the family implied by functionalism. For example, defining family as an 'aggregate comprising of persons related to one another by blood or marriage', Burch (1967: 348) suggested two types of family, namely the *family of residence* and the *family of interaction*, a distinction which simultaneously overcomes the ethnocentrism implicit in the Parsonian view and highlights the multidimensional nature of the family as a social institution. But still, Burch realised that this definition of the family was problematic as he expressed in the following statement: 'But it does not include all persons so related, and sometimes includes persons who are treated as if they were so related, as in adoption or fictive kinship practices' (Burch 1967: 348).<sup>4</sup> In seeking to clarify these dimensions of the family with the terms *conjugal*, *consanguineal*, and *residential*, this is what Ryder had to say:

Residential distribution of personnel is implicit in the dual character of the family. Because it is a descent unit, it is exposed to the vagaries of demographic processes; because it is a residential unit, its cross-sectional composition must make economic sense day to day. (1992: 169)

In South Africa, the structure-functionalist paradigm of the family began to shift as the challenge to the apartheid state gathered momentum from the late 1970s onwards, reaching its apogee in the early 1990s. For analytical purposes, this period can be characterised as one of Marxist critique because of its underlying conflict orientation of family scholarship. Several writers have contested what is called the rhetoric of black family breakdown (Barrow 2001) and the portrayal of the black family as an illegitimate white family (Nobles 1979). Moreover, functionalist-inspired family scholars in South Africa have often fallen into the same trap as their European counterparts with their assertion that black family patterns are converging towards those of white families. Apart from the fact that the bulk of such studies of supposed 'family' patterns of black people were based on census or survey data on 'households', the value of the studies was circumscribed by the use of mainly urban samples (for a critique of these studies, see Ziehl 2001).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Burch acknowledges the fact that even this definition of the family does not entirely avoid the ambiguity that the functionalist view presents, since 'different nuclear families may live in separate dwellings that are very close, even adjacent, to one another' (1967: 348). In fact Burch was merely re-echoing Murdock's (1965: 2) description of the patrilocal extended family: 'Three generations, including the nuclear families of father and sons, live under a single roof or in a cluster of adjacent dwellings.'

<sup>5</sup> Burch (1995) has argued that empirical work in the area of household/family structure based on census data faces serious problems because of the lack of detail in such data on families. He recommends Todd's (1985) geographically broader and even more refined typology based largely on ethnographic data.

Other scholars used the same sources of data and found that African families were not evolving into an assumed universalistic nuclear form with modernisation in a linear and unproblematic way (Murray 1987; Russell 1994; Siqwana-Ndulo 1998; Ziehl 1994). Both structure-functionalism and conflict theory have contributed immensely to family studies through works by sociologists and anthropologists and demographers. Even though demography per se deals with a limited number of variables – fertility, mortality, and migration – because of the interrelationships between these central variables and the social, economic, political, cultural, and even ecological organisation of society, most of the existing theories in sociology and the other social sciences have been used to explain demographic phenomena.

For instance, Adegboyega (1994) examined family formation patterns among several sub-Saharan African countries and observed that among some pastoral groups in eastern Africa, like the Masai of Kenya, the family tends to be nucleated, while among the more sedentary agricultural groups in West Africa, the extended family system appears to be the norm. Moreover, Laslett (1979) observed that increases in fertility and nuptiality and decreases in mortality raise the possibility of the co-residence of parents and married children, while improvements in the standard of living may reduce the necessity of such co-residence and cultural changes may make it less desirable. And, it has been observed that the decline in mortality in the developed countries was the direct result of the improved standards of living that accompanied industrialisation, while the historic decline in fertility is generally attributed to a complex set of factors related to economic development and societal modernisation (McKeown 1976; UN 1973). Kuijsten (1995) has argued that since the middle of the 1960s there has been a third phase of the demographic transition which has occasioned several other changes in demographic behaviour that were not foreseen in the original model of demographic transition, and thus merit a separate concept called the ‘second demographic transition’.

Van de Kaa (1988) has identified three dimensions based on the consequences of the mutual influences of *structural factors* that flow from the completion of the post-industrial society and the welfare state such as increased standard of living, social security, functional differentiation, social and occupational mobility, education, and female labour force participation; *cultural factors* such as a decrease of social inequalities, an increase in personal freedom and in democracy, value pluralism, individualisation and secularisation (Becker 1990; Inglehart 1977); and *technological factors*, including the introduction of effective contraceptive methods, and improvements in the means of transport, communication, and health care.

Writing about the European experience with regard to the causes of the shifts in household size distributions, Höpflinger (1991) distinguishes three factors affecting several changes in family and household structures:

- basic demographic changes observed in almost all European countries in the field of declining fertility levels combined with higher life expectancies, resulting in substantial population ageing;
- the rapid and sometimes spectacular shifts in family formation; and
- the increasing number of family dissolutions and reconstitutions.

One conceptual development in demography that has impacted on family studies is demographic modeling or Population Studies Type II in Kammeyer and Ginn's (1986) schema. In this line of work, instead of using socio-economic variables to explain demographic patterns like family and household formation and dissolution through the central demographic processes, family demographers have modeled the interrelations between the basic processes of fertility, mortality and migration and the formation, change, and dissolution of various family and household units (Bongaarts 1983; Burch 1995; Burch & Matthews 1987; Coale & McNeil 1972; Krishnan & Kayani 1976; Rogers & Castro 1981). For instance, Wall (1983) has shown that some earlier changes in the composition of the household, especially the increase in the number of resident children in eighteenth-century Europe, were due to the fall in marriage rate and the consequent increase in fertility.

And Burch (1967), by using age-standardised measures of the propensity to form households, demonstrated that the measure *average household size* is largely a reflection of fertility rather than household complexity. He has observed that family demography has been a leading beneficiary of the increasing availability of event history data and of the development of multi-state demographic techniques for their analysis. Also, Goodman et al. (1974) estimated kin numbers in a stable population given assumed levels of fertility and mortality, noting a strong dependence of numbers of kin on fertility, for all categories of kin, except ascendants in the direct line. This set of techniques has come to be known as the 'life course perspective'. Because of sociologists' and especially family demographers' concern with change, in recent years there has been increased emphasis on the development of more process-oriented frameworks such as the life course perspective and its accompanying dynamic statistical methods (see for example, Elder 1978; Hogan 1978b; Tuma & Hannan 1984). In a similar effort to describe family and household theories, De Vos (1995) calls this type of study the *American* approach and traces it to the pioneering work of Glick (1947, 1957) on the family life cycle to the continuing work of Sweet and Bumpass (1987, 1989) with regard to the analysis of the United States census data and their involvement in longitudinal sample surveys that collect and facilitate the analysis of event history data.

Because change implies temporal patterning, the dimension of time and time-based concepts such as sequence, duration, and transition of family and household events have become central to the life course perspective. The life course is historical by its very nature as a result of its origins in the sociology of ageing, the concept of cohorts and from the life history traditions in sociology and social psychology (Elder 1978). Events and associated changes in status provide the elementary building blocks for a conceptualisation of the family life course. Of particular concern to the life course perspective are the timing and sequence of events that are considered central to the family and household (Elder 1978). The life course addresses the issue of how people plan and organise their roles over their lives and how they time their life transitions on both the familial and non-familial levels in areas such as entering and leaving school, joining or quitting the labour force, leaving the parental home, migration, marriage, and parenthood (see, for example, Hareven 1978). Even though timing

and occurrence are two aspects of the same process, timing is not a unitary concept, since different aspects of timing must be taken into account depending on the nature of the events in question. Age is the primary indicator of both the biological and social time of the individual life course. Socially defined roles are age graded and events are expected to occur within normatively specified age ranges (Heaton 1987).

Thus, the age at which events such as leaving the parental home, marriage, birth, divorce, migration and so on occur is the most commonly analysed aspect of timing, since the timing of the occurrence of such events has profound implications for the individual's future trajectory. Moreover, the collective timing of these events helps to define the nature of the family as a social institution. The life course perspective enables one to look at the duration both within and between events. Within event domains, duration within a given status such as marriage is an important characteristic of the family. For instance, a marriage lasting a couple of years is very different from one lasting 30 or 40 years. Moreover, a one-year birth interval defines a very different family or household structure than a four-year birth interval. Across events domains, duration between marriage and first birth has important implications for the parenthood role and for early financial demands placed on parents. Ordering and sequencing are closely related to duration between events. In some cases events tend to occur simultaneously. For example, as Heaton (1987) has observed, marriage, formation of a new household, and initiation of sexual activity defined the creation of the normative (ideal) nuclear family in the United States for several decades. Thus, events such as cohabitation, unwed motherhood, and premarital sex describe sequences which do not conform to a normative pattern. Age, duration, and sequence are concepts that apply primarily to individuals and the individual thus is the primary unit of analysis. However, the term family indicates a collectivity. To this effect, synchronisation is the term used to describe the correspondence of time paths for individual family members. In cases such as marriage, divorce and marital birth, the event is experienced by husband and wife simultaneously and synchronisation is not problematic. Thus, the life course perspective provides a theoretical orientation for our understanding of the link between family time, individual time and historical time. Its influence on family history has been most powerful in three major areas: synchronisation of individual transitions and collective family changes; the interaction of both individual and collective family transitions with historical conditions; and the impact of earlier life transitions on later ones.

## Conclusion

Our aim in this chapter has been to outline the theoretical framework for the examination of families and households in post-apartheid South Africa. The essence of the chapter is that family studies as an academic discipline is relatively young and therefore has had to borrow heavily from such established disciplines as sociology, anthropology, history, economics, and demography. In line with this multidisciplinary nature of family studies, we have reviewed the major theoretical orientations from each of these fields to help us make sense of not only family and household structure, but also family and household process. Among such theoretical orientations

we have reviewed are the family life and domestic life cycle concepts popularised in sociology, demography and anthropology to draw attention to the reality of family and household change over time. These theoretical orientations, together with those of conflict theories and the life course perspectives, were necessary to complement the essentially static view of families and households under the functionalist theories of families and households. Through the prisms of these theories, and especially by showing the fact that the family as a social institution has both an ideational and a concrete dimension, we have shown the strengths and weaknesses of the various characterisations of the so-called western and African family systems. The analyses of the empirical data that follow in the subsequent chapters of this study will be informed by one or more these theoretical orientations that we have outlined in this chapter.

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