

## **Glen H. Elder**

- Born 2/28/1934 in Lakewood, OH
- B.S. (1957) Penn State, M.A. (1958) Kent State, Ph.D (1961) University of North Carolina
- Married to Karen Elder



### **Major Employment:**

- Cornell University, 1979 – 1984, Professor
- University of North Carolina, 1984 – Present, Howard W. Odum Distinguished Professor of Sociology – Carolina Population Center
- University of North Carolina, 1986 – Present, Research Professor of Psychology

### **Major Areas of Work:**

- Psychology and Sociology with focus on life course studies

### **SRCD Affiliation**

- President from 1995-1997

## **SRCD Oral History Interview**

### **Glen H. Elder**

Interviewed by Urie Bronfenbrenner

June 6, 1993

Part 1 of 2

**Bronfenbrenner: Glen, as you look back to your early years, was there anything that happened or any circumstances that you think had some influence, some significance for your later life as a young person, as an adult, through your professional work.**

Elder: The life course paradigm assumes that the pathways one follows are shaped by events one experiences and the kinds of transitions one goes through and that is certainly true for my own life.

The first point I would make concerns my father's occupation - his work started off in the field of coaching and he was also a high school teacher. I think his occupational experience and skills shaped how he brought up his sons. We were a family of two boys; I was the eldest. My brother was three years younger. I was born in Lakewood, Ohio (in Cleveland) and my father taught high school as well as coached football at the high school level. Many of my memories across the years have to do with things that he said and did that had everything to do with coaching; how you would, for example, coach a team. On occasions when we were walking up a hill, he would say, why are you breathing hard, for example. A boy in good shape should not breathe hard. And I remember coming back from football practice in high school when I was banged-up badly. I had a Charlie-horse and grass under my fingernails and I was looking for some sympathy from my father but he said, you know son, the person who hits the hardest doesn't get hurt. That kind of psychology I think was very much a force in my life over the years. It involved a good deal of competition against others but primarily competition against the standard that he established in his own life.

Another important part of this, had to do with growing up in Cleveland because I was born in 1934 and knew nothing about the Great Depression but experienced the mobilization of military people and the production of war industry. For example, we had a bomber plant not very far from our house. So for a young boy growing up in Cleveland and in the suburbs during the war, I felt involved in this grand enterprise. It raised a lot of questions and issues in my mind that I still find challenging and interesting.

The third experience for me, the third event, would be my father's rural farm background. He grew up on a farm in the northeastern part of Ohio in what is called Western Reserve Country. His father had a farm of dairy cows and he was very attached to farming throughout his entire life. After moving into coaching he went back to medical school in the Great Depression and got his degree, passed the medical boards in the state of Ohio, started practicing

chiropractic medicine at that time which had connections to his experience in coaching. He continued to practice chiropractic medicine for many years up to about 1948 or 49.

Through that entire period of the 1940's, he remained attached to the idea or the dream of going back to the farm. And I can remember on Sunday, every so often, we would get in the car and he would drive through the countryside trying to find a farm. One spring day in 1949, that was May, he came home and said they had bought this dairy farm in northwestern Pennsylvania very close to Titusville and the next thing I knew, I was in the car on my way to the farm. My father dropped me off there because the crops had to get in, but I knew nothing, absolutely nothing, about farming. I hardly knew how to drive a tractor. But I had worked on a fruit farm outside of Cleveland and helped to pick some of the crops there such as strawberries, for example, and I helped to plant the pepper crop. So I knew something about types of equipment, but in a very superficial way. So this was an enormous transition for a city kid in Cleveland, all the way to a farm kid 11 miles from Titusville.

This major transition, I think, forced me to question assumptions I had made in the past about ways of living, why people do such and such. But I think it gave me a real appreciation for how the social transitions that people go through shape their lives, influence their values and have a long-term consequence for the direction lives take.

**Bronfenbrenner: You have mentioned two of the contexts, or three, in which you later really focused your work - most recently the farm study in Iowa. I hear you talking about farm life as an important experience - what a dramatic transition it highlights. Certainly you mentioned the war preparation and you mentioned the economic dislocation. I don't know whether you intended to make that connection, but I wanted to get on the record that these are three central foci in which you later did some of your most important scientific work. Am I correct?**

Elder: Yes, you are. The research questions we address, I do believe, come in part out of our own experience. Appointments at the University of California, graduate training at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and exposure to the Chicago School of Sociology through the people who worked with me meant being exposed to people who studied social change and were concerned with problems of a changing society. I brought to all of that the experience of growing up in a city, in a war mobilized community, and moving from the city to the farm. Thus, social change had to be a salient experience and also had to raise questions and puzzles as to the effect of social change in our lives.

I moved to the farm with my family in 1949, four years after the war, and that became an all-engrossing kind of experience because I was a city kid one minute and then I was immersed in farm life. In the city a kid has to search for things to do; on a farm, you are overwhelmed by things to do. That was a lesson that had powerful implications for how I thought about things. For example, when I started to do research on the Great Depression, the thing that was so salient as I looked at the material, was the over demanding nature of the situation for children - that kids had many things to do and families depended on them - especially older kids.

Later on, I got involved in the rural Iowa study, which started in 1989/88. This was a study that was directly connected to my work on the Great Depression. In Children of the Great Depression (1974), I talk about the transformation of family life under economic pressures and how that influenced the life course of children all the way into their later years. In the 1980's we had what is called the Farm Crisis, the largest economic downturn since the Great Depression, where the economy dropped by something like 45-50% between 1979 and 1982. That's a loss as great as anything we saw in most states in the Great Depression. But it was essentially a rural crisis, and the urban areas prospered. But this Iowa study, which got off the ground in 1988/89, was designed to resemble the Great Depression study. The ideas for it came from the early Depression study, and I collaborated in the Iowa project with Rand Conger at Iowa State University. He was the one who made the connection and brought me into this project as a collaborator.

**Bronfenbrenner: So it was not something you sought out?**

Elder: No, I didn't know about the Iowa Project until Conger contacted me. [Although I did begin exploring the possibility of doing a study of rural society during my stay at Cornell (1979- 84). I out a search for record data on selected countries.]

**Bronfenbrenner: It was something that he, knowing of your work, said, "I need to talk to Glen Elder."**

Elder: Yes, that's right he did. So, in 1986, he brought me to Iowa State in January along with Gerry Patterson and John Gottman. He was preparing a research grant, a five-year grant to do a study of something like 500 families, focusing on economic hardship in the north central region of the state. The people at the National Institute of Mental Health who were going to get this proposal felt that Conger and his team could not do it alone and that I had to get more involved, not just as a consultant but in a very major way. So that led me to a substantial involvement in the study as a principal investigator.

The parallel between the Iowa study and the Great Depression study was something that Conger tried to build, and I came in and helped to develop this in terms of the larger social-change implications.

**Bronfenbrenner: Clearly, at the heart of this scientific story, there is one thing that we missed that maybe cannot be filled in because one never knows. Surely there were lots of kids, cause I go back even farther than you, who had some of these experiences. I too went from the city to a rural area. But not everybody then became a researcher about it. Can you put your finger on anything that led you to want to study it, whereas other people lived through the same experience and ended up being engineers or being insurance salesmen or whatever. But you developed this interest in human development as it takes place in the kinds of transitions that you have described. Do you have any clue as you look back at where that grabbed you?**

Elder: I grew up in a family where my father was in medicine for most of the years, and actually that's where I was headed. I thought I would follow him when I was in Cleveland. And then we moved to the farm and everything changed. At that time, I became so engrossed in farming that my parents had difficulty getting me to think about college. They said, just go two years to college, and I actually entered in agriculture and the biological sciences and over four years moved all the way across through philosophy into the social sciences. So it was, I guess, a process of finding one's niche and realizing that the topics that really challenged me and interested me were people or the human sciences rather than the physical sciences or biological sciences.

**Bronfenbrenner: Were there people along the way whom you think contributed to that movement from wanting to be a doctor to agriculture and then over to people? What did it? Was it books? Do you have any idea, or was it because it happened to you rather than finding that you ...?**

Elder: I personally think that the influences I experienced, the life-shaping ones, had a lot to do with growing up in a period where major things were happening to people and the big puzzles in my mind were not those of physical science or engineering but, for example, what is happening in Eastern Europe when we had these newsreel accounts of people being lined up and shot. I have vivid memories of this period of great suffering and dislocation and I think that philosophy, taking a number of courses in philosophy, opened my eyes to the possibility of posing questions that one could investigate. Because in the physical and biological sciences at that time, science was taught as if it were a closed book. Basically the frontiers were not something people were exposed to. You were exposed to what was assembled in the books.

It was so different to go through exciting courses in philosophy where the big questions, human questions arise. I remember one on Aristotle that was taught by a University of Chicago professor who had just come to the University. I was just enormously stimulated and had a wonderful class of top-notch students on the campus. It is probably the most vivid course in my undergraduate career, because I discovered that one could pose these major questions. Most of them were unknown in terms of their solution, but they were issues that everyone had to grapple with. And it just opened up a mode of inquiry that led me into the social sciences.

But I really had very little in the way of social science in undergraduate school. I had two courses in psychology that were taught at the graduate level and both were taught by a psychometrician, Douglas Jackson. One was on behavior pathology, and the book was written by Norman Cameron - a first-rate scholar and a very fine book. And the other book was Solomon Asch on social psychology, another outstanding scholar. And when I think back on those courses, Doug Jackson wasn't a scintillating lecturer, in fact he was a painfully shy person, but the thing that I remember were those extraordinary books. They were life-shaping books. The wisdom of teaching came through in the books that he selected.

**Bronfenbrenner: We are beginning to get into the origins of your interest in development, and you mentioned books. Were there some live minds that get into the picture? That is, live minds that capture you directly or does that happen later; perhaps earlier?**

Elder: For some reason, biographies have always interested me. Always. And maybe it came from my mother who was a great reader. She worked on a Master's degree in English and taught at the high school level. She read to us frequently and her great love was the historical biography.

This influence comes pretty close to what I am doing. She was the reader; my father was not. My father in a sense chose some of the big environments that shaped my life. My mother basically created the environment within the family and I think my love for history and lives and the interplay between the two might have come from her to a large extent.

**Bronfenbrenner: The father influences the context and the mother influences what you do in it. Fascinating.**

Elder: My mother's family is also a factor. As you live in a nuclear family, you discover the larger family. My mother's family reminds me of the Forsyte saga - one generation after another. And it is the family system that I became acquainted with every summer because we would go to a family island on the St. Lawrence River. My grandmother, my mother's mother, had this island right off of Clayton, NY. We were three miles across the river from Clayton. The island, called Boscobel, was purchased in the 19th century and so it was quite manageable. My grandfather was a minister for forty years at the National Memorial Baptist Church in Washington, DC, a familiar family history in social science - coming out of a ministerial or pastoral family. They had this summer place and we would assemble every summer. As children, we could stay there beyond the stay of parents and got to see the generations there assemble. I remember going to the boat house and seeing the artifacts of another age in some ways - the old victrolas for example and things that had been stored there for thirty years or more. The house was very much like a home you might see in Japan with a pagoda style roof and open porches all around. In the evenings we would assemble on the porch and my grandparents would tell stories. And so we became very familiar with my mother's family. That's another influence that could have a lot to do with why I find the study of biography and lives so fascinating and especially in their times. But I knew very little about my father's family. He was an only child and never spoke about his grandparents. I only knew his father and mother. We only later discovered more about his family doing some geneological work. The rich historical background was through my mother and her love for biography.

**Bronfenbrenner: Glen, was there anyone else besides, obviously, your parents who was in the role of a kind of parent figure or a mentor or someone who was taking an interest in you.**

Elder: I can't really think of anyone up through the secondary school years that proved to be formative except maybe my math teacher who was really quite a fine person but had no major influence on my life. My going to Penn State had everything to do with the fact that we had just moved to a farm because if we had lived still in Cleveland, I'd probably would have gone to Ohio Wesleyan, my father's college. Penn state represents the premier ag school in the region and so I went to Penn state for agricultural studies. The Dean of the School of Agriculture was quite influential in many ways because he was understanding of what I was going through in changing majors and moving all the way over to social science. I would go to him occasionally because I thought I would go into veterinary medicine for a while, and I moved out of that and then thought I would go into history but I eventually made my way over to psychology and had two psych courses in my senior year along with one very low-level introductory course in sociology. I literally had no sociology to speak of as an undergraduate - just history and philosophy courses with those two psych courses. The Dean allowed me to graduate in general agriculture.

**Bronfenbrenner: How did you get to know him? It is unusual that you would get to know the dean.**

Elder: I think the way I got to know him is that I was looking for some work during the year and he had an advertisement out for someone to work on his farm. He had a farm outside of State College.

**Bronfenbrenner: By now you are no longer a city kid.**

Elder: That's right. So, I helped him harvest some crops and he was on the farm at the time, so I got to know him a little bit. He became a kind of a father figure as I talked to him about my future. And he was willing to allow me to graduate in the most general curriculum possible without asking me to stay on additional years.

**Bronfenbrenner: to get your [basics].**

Elder: That's right. He didn't force me to do this. He helped me to think through where I was going, which was formative in terms of where I was headed. At the end of my undergraduate career, I didn't have a clear sense of where I would go, except that I did think that student work at the University level would be an interesting thing to do. I was very active on the Penn State campus as a student leader and president of the student Y and I was also president of a service fraternity on the campus. We had some people in at the very end of the year, my senior year, who were basically talking about service and they were part of Alpha Phi Omega, the service fraternity. The Dean of Men from Kent State University was one of the people who came to speak to us at the end of the year at our big dinner, and I got to know him. He later invited me to come and explore the possibilities of working with him on his staff at Kent State.

**Bronfenbrenner: Working with young people.**

Elder: Typically in a dormitory. And so I went to Kent State early in June and met with him, and decided to actually take him up on the offer. He happened to be a sociologist trained at the University of Washington, a student of Charles Bowerman who was the person I studied under for the doctorate at UNC-Chapel Hill.

**Bronfenbrenner: So the training now begins. Now your future is determined.**

Elder: Yes. But it reminds me of what Al Bandura talks about in terms of chance encounters in the life course. This was simply a chance encounter because he could have been someone with a chemistry Ph.D.

**Bronfenbrenner: He was meeting a need.**

Elder: That's right.

**Bronfenbrenner: Perhaps of his as well.**

Elder: The job was basically a transition into the field of sociology because Glen Nygreen, the dean of Kent State University, required all of his associate deans, the student deans or people on the staff, to enroll in sociology or psychology or something in graduate school. So all of us were enrolled.

**Bronfenbrenner: Had to have academic training.**

Elder: I had not thought about enrolling at all but...

**Bronfenbrenner: ...it came with the territory.**

Elder: That's right. So we were in sociology that year.

**Bronfenbrenner: Was it because he was a sociologist?**

Elder: I think it had much more to do with the fact that he was a sociologist and most of the people on the staff were in sociology so it was natural for me to go into that field. This represented my first introduction to sociology in a systematic way. I knew very little about it. Indeed, I knew more about psychology but I spent a full year there and worked toward a Masters degree (which I completed) and then moved from there to the University of North Carolina. Glen Nygreen was a former student of Charles Bowerman who was then Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of North Carolina. Bowerman had just launched a very large study of parent-peer influences in the lives of teenagers and he was looking for a research assistant. However, I explored a number of places for graduate school at the doctoral level, including Michigan. I actually went to the University of Michigan to see Ted Newcomb. Newcomb was too busy to see me and so I was interviewed by another person who had none of Ted's empathy and charisma.

I decided to go to the University of North Carolina and work with Charles Bowerman. He was important in all kinds of ways - a wonderfully supportive and yet a demanding mentor. He earned his doctorate at the University of Chicago where he established a close friendship with John Clausen, another important mentor in my life.

And so without knowing it, my going to the University of North Carolina, introduced me to the Chicago School of Sociology. I spent four years at UNC, three on a doctorate and a fourth on a NIMH Postdoctoral Fellowship.

**Bronfenbrenner: And that had no influence on you whatsoever?**

Elder: Not at all. You don't realize these larger influences that are expressed through people's minds.

**Bronfenbrenner: We meet a person, talk, and that's the way it goes...**

Elder: And I really had no idea that so many significant people in my life had gone to the University of Chicago.

**Bronfenbrenner: You were walking into a network and didn't know it.**

Elder: I didn't know it and I was profoundly influenced by the experience. So I completed my dissertation on the Bowerman project (on socialization and family structure) and John Clausen who had just taken a position at the University of California as Director of the Institute of Human Development flew down to Chapel Hill to interview me. I had taken a post-doc, a one-year post-doc, and was basically finishing up this post-doc when John interviewed me and offered me a job as a research associate or associate research professor in the Institute of Human Development and assistant professor of sociology at the University of California. I had a joint appointment: half-time in research and half-time teaching, which proved to me a most fortunate situation. John wanted me to work in the Oakland Growth Study archives because at that time the Institute of Human Development had just moved from one of the brown shingled houses on College Ave., the old Institute of Child Welfare. Tolman Hall was full of the boxes that had not been opened and filed.

**Bronfenbrenner: John hired you to make some order out of the cases?**

Elder: Right. John was trying to make some sense out of this and the big responsibility I had was to review all of the files, all of the contents of the Oakland Growth Study and set up a scheme for coding the uncoded data. John was always very interested in the in-depth interviews we had on people. I can remember going into his office for a meeting and I would be looking at data and John would be reading off cases. It was always a bit of a strain to match the empirical data coming out of a sample with the cases that always offered points of departure, differences and so on that he found fascinating.

**Bronfenbrenner: Just to catch up so we're not missing something, were there any historical events, political events, you know what I mean, that had been occurring that we haven't mentioned. You mentioned some in your childhood...that had something to do with what's going to be going on from now on as you move into your academic and research roles. Is there anything there that we need to pick up? I'm not trying to create something...I just don't want to miss it.**

Elder: I think the only other one is that in the course of simply carrying out my research mission at the Institute, I was constantly confronted with the changes, the rapid changes, that were going on in people's minds and families in the Oakland Growth study people. They were born in 1920/21, grew up in the Great Depression, and the study, the Oakland Growth study begins about 1930/31. Entries in the file started 31/32/33. I had come to this project from Charles Bowerman's huge cross-sectional survey of more than twenty-thousand cases in North Carolina and Ohio.

**Bronfenbrenner: Adolescents.**

Elder: That's right - adolescents - and I had absolutely no understanding of how to think about people over a long span of time or how to deal with the changes because most of our concepts were not temporal, they were static. So what do you do with social class when people are changing their class constantly?

**Bronfenbrenner: We shouldn't allow it.**

Elder: My exposure to the Great Depression occurred through the records of the Study members.

**Bronfenbrenner: Through reading case records in order to be able to categorize them. You had to read them, and so you met history there.**

Elder: That's right. I met the Great Depression that way, not by direct personal experience. The only personal memory I have of the Great Depression was when somebody came to the back door at the end of the 1930's asking for some food. That's it. I learned about my parents' Depression experience after Children of the Great Depression was published in 1974.

**Bronfenbrenner: I think that catches us up and we are back in your world now. Have there been significant, how shall I say, peers during all this process - peers as friends, peers as colleagues, fellow students. Cause you've now gotten your Ph.D. and you're on the job. Are there any persons of the same age who play a role in what your future then becomes? Or have we really covered all the characters who have entered your life at this point?**

Elder: One of the things that is a central theme in my professional life is the search for explanation, for an understanding of the process by which outcomes occur. I think that is as close to a developmental characteristic of who I am in some ways because I can remember my mother telling me that Spock said reason with your child and she started to do that and made a lawyer out of me. I kept asking questions. I think that this search for explanation developed quite a kinship between Mel Kohn (who has focused on the explanation of social class effects) and myself. Through John Clausen I got to know Mel's work at the National Institute of Mental Health. I got to know Mel after I knew John and then I began to read Mel's work and appreciate his focus on process and explanation. I think the search for understanding how structures make a difference in people's lives developed a close relationship between us. It was not something there initially, but it came out of our research styles. We both looked at the world in similar ways although Mel is more static in his orientation. I can't think of any other peer who really had a strong influence....

**Bronfenbrenner: What are the interests in human development that enter the scene - scholarly interests and research interests? Here you are working with John, does something begin to emerge that's now your thing?**

Elder: I think I have to go back to my dissertation on Bowerman's parent-peer project. Most of the people I interacted with at that time were very much invested in the study of socialization, a research paradigm that influenced everything at the time. And a striking feature of this is that, although people talked about changing worlds and changing families, we did not have a way of thinking about and doing these kinds of studies. We didn't have a way of studying family change.

**Bronfenbrenner: And help for you.**

Elder: And help for me. And so in my dissertation I have a chapter on the changing American family but I had no way to actually study this. And one of the most striking features of this is that I never even thought about when the parents were born in this study - never placed them in history at all. I never really thought about where they were in their lives.

**Bronfenbrenner: So it wasn't until you met Elder that you began to....**

Elder: [Laughing] That's right. So it was exposure to life records at the University of California - those enormously rich life records and archives that began the formation process.

**Bronfenbrenner: Did John Clausen and his thinking play a role here, or were the records talking to you even more than John?**

Elder: Well, John wanted me to collaborate with him on a study of the careers of men in this project. But we never managed to do this.

**Bronfenbrenner: It never happened.**

Elder: It never did history. . . But I think that John's appreciation for life history ....

**Bronfenbrenner: That's what I was wondering. Did that catch on there?**

Elder: I think it certainly played a role, because he taught that way, and all the data were there. At least the possibilities were there to do it.

**Bronfenbrenner: And you saw him as you earlier described just captured by it. While you were trying to do the job he gave you, here he was ....**

Elder: He was reading these interviews and very much enmeshed in the task of making sense of people's lives.

**Bronfenbrenner: Doing this out loud in some ways?**

Elder: Well, he would read the case and then he would often draw upon these case examples to illustrate something for me. It was always very difficult for me to mesh the quantitative with the idiosyncratic. I mean, he had [laughing].

**Bronfenbrenner: So you solved that problem rather quickly.**

Elder: We worked in our own way. We did different things. But I do want to say something about some people who really helped to educate me in this style. Harold Wilensky, a sociologist, came to the University of California shortly after I arrived in 1962 and he was very involved at that time in a study called The Labor-Leisure Project. It was based on a Detroit population and Wilensky was interested in what he called the life cycles of people - work, family, leisure - these three and how they interlocked over time.

**Bronfenbrenner: Life course.**

Elder: It is very much that. Hal loaned me his code book one weekend, I remember, and I became fascinated with it because the code book is really a theoretical statement. It's filled with theoretical distinctions and conceptualizations. That was enormously liberating for me because it opened up a range of things that I could do looking at people's lives. So that was very useful. Wilensky is a product of the Chicago School.

**Bronfenbrenner: Here you go again. Sounds like a plot to me.**

Elder: I also knew Herbert Blumer - another Chicago School person. He was at the University of California. I just had loads of people there who were primarily influenced by that school.

**Bronfenbrenner: So you were overpowered.**

Elder: Right.

**Bronfenbrenner: Let's in a sense talk about the life course of your interests. Were there shifts here, were there reformulations?**

Elder: You could say that the model of the life course that I was exposed to at the very beginning in the work of Bowerman and others was kinship-based. It focused on the generations and their stages in life with concepts such as life cycle, lineage, life stage and so on. The missing element is age. In a generation or a kinship formulation of the life course, we add a strange timeless quality to a study. We have the generations and their interactions but they are not embedded at any point in time or history.

**Bronfenbrenner: Any history, either of the person or the environment, is not there.**

Elder: We don't know where people are in their lives. And so if you look at work today in an intergenerational framework, like Bengston's Three-Generation Study, for example, there is no attention to where people are in their lives. So the big innovation for me was to discover the rich meanings of age. I did this through an article written by Norman Ryder in 1965 but I was also exposed to this before. For some reason I was fascinated with age. I remember reading Ralph Linton's work and at the time and Bernice Neugarten. She had started writing on this topic. In fact, her first articles were in the late 1950's.

**Bronfenbrenner: And Linton is age grading?**



Elder: Age grading - yes.

**Bronfenbrenner: What a fine anthropologist he is.**

Elder: And of course Ralph Linton was part of the culture and personality school of the 1930's. It included people like Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict....

**Bronfenbrenner: And so you were getting exposed to that?**

**Elder: That's right. And I think Neugarten gave me an appreciation for the connection between age grading and the psychology of people's lives - the social psychology. I began to think about issues of timing and whether people were early or late in their lives. These were articles that Bernice wrote at the end of the 1950's.**

**Bronfenbrenner: So you're not talking with her; you're reading.**

Elder: Yes. I really did not meet Bernice until about 1967 at the Institute of Human Development.

**Bronfenbrenner: This would establish the point that books were a conversation. You talk about them almost as if you were talking about...**

Elder: ...a friend...

**Bronfenbrenner: A friend and having a conversation. It's fascinating how they are speaking to you.**

Elder: So age really was the big increment for me in the emergence of a life course paradigm. What we have is the integration of age with kinship-based, relationship models. Generation and cohort, lineage and relationships are the conceptual elements.

**Bronfenbrenner: At what point did you become conscious of the fact that you've got a proto-model in you're thinking, heh, I've got a scheme that I find congenial and exciting? Can you trace this? Like the kid says, gee I can talk.**

Elder: I don't think I had it at the end of my work on Children of the Great Depression.

**Bronfenbrenner: Even then?**

Elder: I don't think so. You won't see any statement in there on the life course perspective...

**Bronfenbrenner: I got it out of there...**

Elder: Yes, I think you can.

**Bronfenbrenner: Because the way you were setting things up, it was like saying, no I never learned to read but I see this picture?**

Elder: I guess I was so busy working on the problem at hand that I did not generalize it; that is, my task was to devise a way of assessing the effects of Depression hardship. The life course perspective emerged as that way, but it was only later that I thought of it as such.

**Bronfenbrenner: You were thinking about it rather than... So you just concluded that it is in books that you are meeting all of these important ideas and influences.**

Elder: Yes. And I think that, as I look back on it, it's through interaction with others that one begins to clarify theoretical positions. Having laid out a life course perspective or model or paradigm in Children of the Great

Depression, it was only when historians and developmentalists asked me to explain matters that the perspective became that in my mind. For example, how is the life course different from the life cycle? Questions suggested by Children of the Great Depression, where the whole focus is really on tracing social change into people's lives. Historians wanted me to move back and show how the influences on people shape society. I hadn't really thought about that. And so, I had these interactions with people over time. I began to clarify issues.

**Bronfenbrenner: Are these situations in which people are not asking particular people but rather the generalized others...?**

Elder: I think the most important development was the working group that Tamara Hareven, a social historian, who was then at Clark University, organized and ran for several years. This was funded by the National Science Foundation to bring mathematics to history. She had a working group that included people like John Modell, Howard Chudacoff, Maris Vinovskis, Louise Tilley, etc.

**Bronfenbrenner: Here they come. And how did you happen to get into it? Do you know?**

Elder: Tamara had just read Children of the Great Depression. It had just come out and she, I learned later, was much taken by the life course perspective, in contrast to the family cycle, as a way of studying families and people in historical time.

**Bronfenbrenner: What year was that?**

Elder: '75. She invited me to fly up to Boston in February and I met with John Modell and Tamara and Howard Chudacoff and several other people - Chuck Tilly. Out of this came a plan for a full year of workshops and a full week at Williams College. This was the summer of '76 - 1976. This year represented a major connection to history for me and the life course.

**Bronfenbrenner: Glen, we need to go back to when you realized that you were going to be writing Children of the Great Depression.**

Elder: This was a very fascinating development because it occurred after I had discovered the changes going on in the Oakland families during the Depression from reading their files, analyzing and looking at the data. I realized that I had to come up with a way of studying this change.

**Bronfenbrenner: Was it at John's insistence?**

Elder: No.

**Bronfenbrenner: It was your own self-imposed insistence?**

Elder: It was mine. I will always remember the summer of '65. I had spent two and a half years coding. At the very end of this I started to develop ways of studying social change from thinking about change in families and in children's lives. I put together a 100-page manuscript of which one chapter featured children and the household economy.

**Bronfenbrenner: For who was this volume prepared?**

Elder: This was simply something that I did. I was groping toward a monograph and actually thinking about something like it.

**Bronfenbrenner: You were thinking about it or saying this is something I would like...**

Elder: to do. . . . Right.

**Bronfenbrenner: It was your own idea.**

Elder: Yes. It was. John didn't know I was doing this.

**Bronfenbrenner: So this is really your baby, and you don't know where it came from - you just began doing it!**

Elder: Well, this is what happened. After realizing I had to study social change, I went back to some of the classic works of the 30's like Angell's study, for example - Bob Angell, right. And I read Bakke's work on twenty-four families that had survived the Great Depression - working class families. I began to think of ways of incorporating some of those measures and getting a handle on the socioeconomic changes. So, this was the first effort to do this. I had a chapter on children in the household economy, I had one on marriage, and I had one on parenting, as I remember. But this was a very small effort.

I brought it into John's office and John read it. I remember this because he was working on a chapter for the first volume of Advances in Child Development. He had a chapter in there on family structure and socialization, and he read what I had written up and he actually cites it in his chapter on the effect of children's roles on their sense of self and responsibility.

**Bronfenbrenner: Elder's unpublished manuscript.**

Elder: That's right. So that's where it started. John didn't know I would really do anything with this. And so he was surprised when he later discovered that I was continuing to pursue these issues.

**Bronfenbrenner: What did you think you were writing this for?**

Elder: I don't know. I can't recall.

**Bronfenbrenner: You didn't formulate it for him?**

Elder: No. I think John had seen this hundred-page manuscript as a paper. It started out as a small paper. So when I came in with a hundred pages, he was kind of surprised by that because he really didn't think I would take it beyond a single article or something like that.

**Bronfenbrenner: But there it is.**

Elder: There it was.

**Bronfenbrenner: Already on its way.**

Elder: But I produced a draft on Children of the Great Depression in 1966 and then put it aside because I still had not gotten down a framework that I wanted and I came back to it in two years....

**Bronfenbrenner: Could you indicate a time interval here?**

Elder: In 1967, 66-67, I had a full manuscript.

**Bronfenbrenner: Are you now saying, I have a book I'm looking for a publisher?**

Elder: Yes I did. But it was clear to me that I hadn't reached the point where I had something. The University of California Press reviewed it, but decided not to offer a contract (circa, 1967).

**Bronfenbrenner: When did it become clear to you that you were writing a book?**

Elder: Well, in '66. I really did.

**Bronfenbrenner: Well, now we have the scene set.**

Elder: In 1967 I had made the transition from Berkeley back to Chapel Hill and I put it away for about a year and a half or two. But I continued to do analyses that were relevant to the book that had to be done for it.

**Bronfenbrenner: So you were not working on it?**

Elder: No, these were papers that came out on mobility - dealing with the effects of family background on careers and mobility and personality change, a topic similar to my original assignment at Berkeley.

**Bronfenbrenner: I was going to ask when the psychology comes into the picture.**

Elder: It comes in at this point.

**Bronfenbrenner: How come all of a sudden? It wasn't always there. Here's a sociologist doing what sociologists were not doing at that time - talking about psychological outcomes and personality.**

Elder: I think these topics were always of interest to me. Going all the way back to Chapel Hill in graduate school, I was assigned a carrel on the third floor of Wilson Library, which was psychology. And my carrel was right next to the Society for Research in Child Development Monographs and Child Development issues. I was fascinated with socialization and I wandered through all the volumes on these shelves. I actually wrote up some of my thoughts on these self-directed readings.

**Bronfenbrenner: Again, it wasn't John Clausen psychologizing, which he was already doing at that time, that is encouraging its older roots.**

Elder: No. Because I actually had a minor in psychology at Chapel Hill and I took a graduate course with George Welsh on personality. I also had an advanced course on learning theory at this time too, and one with John Chibout in social psychology.

**Bronfenbrenner: Now, what shifts had occurred in your work and what are the instigators of those shifts?**

Elder: I think one of the major developments is much like reading the same book at different times in one's life. I get more and more out of the same book. That same process has occurred in working on the life course perspective and its applications. For example, in re-reading Children of the Great Depression, I have discovered ideas that I didn't think were there - they could be thought of as latent or primitive ideas and models. I have since elaborated those I believe to be promising.

**Bronfenbrenner: Was it the process of still working on the Berkeley materials that is doing this?**

Elder: No, because I had completed this work.

**Bronfenbrenner: You didn't have the files with you when you returned to Chapel Hill?**

Elder: No, I didn't. But I had all of the data files actually.

**Bronfenbrenner: You had them in Chapel Hill?**

Elder: Yes I do - copies that I made. These are all on magnetic tape or disks. That's actually how I did Children. I had all of the material on tape. With the quantitative data on tape, I could analyze them for Children of the Great Depression. This book is a study of a single cohort and many people saw it as a cohort study. However, in my mind, it was really a study of social change in the lives of children and adults.

**Bronfenbrenner: Retrospectively at this point.**

Elder: That's right. As I look at it now. Clearly social change was what I was interested in although I used a cohort perspective to provide a handle on this. The question everyone asked was how unique were these experiences. Would another cohort of children go through the same kind of experience? And so I proceeded to go back to Berkeley in 1972-73 for a full year and picked up the Berkeley Guidance study and Growth study members as subjects. I worked up all of their materials for a two-cohort study of children of Berkeley and Oakland.

**Bronfenbrenner: ... longitudinal study...**

Elder: Yes, a longitudinal study that compared kids born in 1920, 21, 22 and then at the other end, the Berkeley group of 1928-29.

**Bronfenbrenner: There's something very important here that we missed and that is, as I always tell the story of this to my students, I say, now it was there in those files. That study was lying there and along you come and you get the idea of looking at children in the Great Depression as a sort of fundamental theoretically critical break. That idea of using the Depression as the criterion of saying you go here, how does that happen? One morning you just get up...**

Elder: It's both getting the idea and having the motivation and the incentive to pursue it.

**Bronfenbrenner: I understand, but that takes on a really big piece of work.**

Elder: And I think the incentive for doing this came out of my own fascination with change. I just found studying this stuff fascinating. But I must confess that I found the Depression wrought changes impossible to ignore in a study of the Oakland cohort. Change was the norm, not stability.

**Bronfenbrenner: You were asking yourself, what is the critical change going on here, and when you looked at that, this is where you saw the Great Depression. Central events. It was the interest in change which you talked about, how it hit you, and the selection of the Great Depression, came out of looking at that material and saying which change, and there it was.**

Elder: That's right. That's exactly right. And I saw the incentive really coming out of my own life and the idea of trying to make sense out of these changing families and people and realizing that the large change was the Great Depression. And then I began to...

**Bronfenbrenner: Am I correct that up to this point you have not had a course in history which raises this question. It isn't as though you were exposed to history as a discipline...**

Elder: Just as an undergraduate, but not otherwise.

**Bronfenbrenner: And it was the voices speaking to you say, this is what's happening in my life. And everyone else was hearing other things. For you, this was what the tape was saying.**

Elder: Yes, I think so. But you know, if you look at the material in the archive, someone else had the idea of measuring change, though not the idea of linking it to development. These people were getting measures of socioeconomic status and income and all of that for 1929-1933. I put the two together, the measurements and the ideas or theory.

**Bronfenbrenner: You're seeing the pattern, they were collecting the elements of that.**

Elder: That's right.

**Bronfenbrenner: Now, have we done justice to this yet? Are there other things that you read or other perspectives that represent significant additions, subtractions to the integration of your thinking?**

Elder: Well I think I have become increasingly more sophisticated on the developmental side and I've tried to incorporate that. The big effort, the big push initially was to understand how the social life course was organized and how it was influenced by the changes....

**Bronfenbrenner: How the paths influenced lives.**

Elder: That's right, how the path, the social paths made a difference. Then I wanted to incorporate the developmental pathways...

**Bronfenbrenner: Well, I can remember our discussions here when you would be talking about developmental trajectories. And how do you do that? Is it reading or what is elaborating that psychological side?**

Elder: Some of the stimulus came from you and others; colleagues in psychology who drew me into deeper considerations of ontogenetic development. I think also it is partly seeing the parallels between the concepts we use on social pathways like timing. There are timing mechanisms in the developmental biology sense too. We can think of timing mechanisms of the organism during adolescence for example. I thought about that during my stay (1962-67) at Berkeley, and was intrigued by the social and psychological effects of pubertal timing.

**Bronfenbrenner: Did the data talk to you about this as it did before, or is this coming from somewhere else? Yesterday or whenever it was, I said that you introduced the psychologizing here and it's already present in Children.**

Elder: It's a gradual process of elaboration and thinking back over work that one has done and seeing distinctions that were not explicit but were implicit in the work, and I had begun to do that. And so, you could think of Children (1974) as the product of two cycles. The first cycle sought to get the framework down and the study completed. And then the second cycle, which really eventuated in the book, was where I began to bring the developmental processes in, and had thought through how that would be done.

**Bronfenbrenner: A comment here which I think is relevant to the fact that this is after all SRCD. We are talking about the kinds of questions you have made a major contribution to in laying out the role of history and of life course events and of timing, yet, when you are asked, how did your ideas evolve, you say, in effect, it's what I was seeing in the records, it was happening inside my head. I am deliberately making a stronger dichotomy than you were actually expressing. So what's happening here? Here you're saying there's supposed to be these events out here, these timing things, and yet when you're asked about your own innovative ideas in which you put together a different kind of paradigm, it is coming from essentially a solo flight. Is that fair?**

Elder: I think it's doing the reading in an age characterized by a lot of issues that are beginning to come together. I brought my unique life experiences to this portrait and saw different things from those perceived by others. However, it was surely not a solo flight. I was standing on the shoulders of a great many giants in the field, including the one asking me these hard questions.

**Bronfenbrenner: That's what gave you the notion of social change. So what's giving you the notion now of putting in as variables the kinds of things that are there with your psychological concept? The personality as you yourself said; where is that influence because sociologists had not been doing such work up till then. (But many sociologists were thinking about personality - e.g., Bill Sewell, John Clausen, etc. - editorial comment by Elder).**

Elder: If you go right back to the earliest point, even to the dissertation, you will find that I had personality in the research.

**Bronfenbrenner: And there you are saying that's because you had...**

Elder: ...an interest in socialization and personality.

**Bronfenbrenner: And you had the psychology.**

Elder: At that time. I think so.

**Bronfenbrenner: So the concepts of psychology have been introduced to you, and having done the job of laying out the concept of pathway, you are now going to the psychological literature and saying I'm going to put this in here and see what happens to young people who have been walking this pathway.**

Elder: I think so. But keep in mind what is different here. I came out of the 1960's with a strong investment in the contextual, temporal, and processual aspects of human development and lives. Thus, I thought about this literature and human lives in a different way over time, in contexts, and via mechanisms, etc.

**Bronfenbrenner: Have we covered the major shifts? So, it's really been a further elaboration, further expansion, further differentiation...**

Elder: It has. For example, I have moved from studies of Depression hardship in the 1930's to a contemporary economic crisis in rural America and to state-mobilization for war.

**Bronfenbrenner: You're now looking for analogs of a replication not of the study but of the basic concepts and paths.**

Elder: Yes. If the model works, then it ought to work everywhere. By extending the range of application, we will also elaborate the life course as a ical perspective. Conceptual distinctions will be added and some will be refined.

**Bronfenbrenner: And that's very imaginative, you're recognizing these events as they come. There's another place where this ought to hold even though it came from over here, it ought to apply over there.**

**Now we have a question and we can decide whether we want to do it before and after break. Please reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your theoretical and research contributions and also the impact of your work and its current status. It's a big challenge.**

Elder: I would simply say that the life course is a theoretical orientation - a framework - and not a theory. And my guess is it's always going to be that. That it's going to be an organizing research framework with multiple theories. One could say that one of the limitations is that it hasn't at this stage developed into a coherent theory.

**Bronfenbrenner: Theory in the sense of...**

Elder: Sets of propositions; explanatory theory.

**Bronfenbrenner: But it is a perspective from which one sees things differently.**

Elder: Yes it is. It leads us to see things differently, pose different questions, design different studies, come up with different interpretations.

**Bronfenbrenner: So it is a conceptual framework not a systematic theory. Are you suggesting that that's a weakness? I didn't hear that but this is where it is, in evolution, and you can't hit Zeus over the head and come up with a formal theory. You have to go through this developmental phase.**

Elder: We have come a long way in the time we have been working on this but I think some people would say that the weakness is really that it hasn't progressed farther. But that's always a weakness.

**Bronfenbrenner: So we say, what is it that's been accomplished and what are its weaknesses.**

Elder: Another concern that people have is this. They claim that the approach does not do justice to the family because it represents the family as individuals rather than as a whole. The issue here is the assumption that the life course paradigm only applies to individuals. It does not address the collective nature of family or group life. I would argue that it is very useful in studying the family because it enables us to study the family as a dynamic involving process rather than as a system. After all, studies of relationships represent one of the key historical strands of life course research.

**Bronfenbrenner: As a dynamic.**

Elder: Yes. So you can study relationships form and dissolve and re-form and so on.

**Bronfenbrenner: Is there a sense in which you are studying the development of the family as a dynamic system?**

Elder: That is one of the great challenges we have, and it is very hard to do. We can look at relationships form and dissolve and we can look at the formation of the family, which is something one can usually get a handle on - the marriage and then a child is born and then the changes in relationship that emerge from that.

**Bronfenbrenner: What you are saying is that it provides a framework in which one can begin to say how the family is reorganized almost in the sense of canalization and the epigenesis of the family - there would be a title...**

Elder: Another problem we face is coming up with satisfactory ways of representing the complexity of lives and development so that we can understand what is going on. Life history data tend to overwhelm investigators, but we need to remind ourselves that not all distinctions are worth making.

**Bronfenbrenner: And the problem is we are always distorting it to simplify it in a way in which our minds can handle it. Knowing that it is more complex than our minds can handle.**

Elder: Yes.

**Bronfenbrenner: I think we've hit a good stopping point.**

Interviewed by Urie Bronfenbrenner  
October 25, 1998  
Part 2 of 2

**Bronfenbrenner: We left off our exploration of the evolution of your ideas at the point when you, as I recall, had been asked by the people who had already initiated, or were about to initiate the Iowa study, if you would act as a consultant to them. This was not your initiative, but as I read that material it was clear that it seemed to be happening just at the moment when you were ready and interested in doing something like that. Am I correct in that?**

Elder: Yes, in fact, when I was at Cornell I attended a conference on farm families, because I had thought about actually initiating the next stage focusing on this part of the population. I talked to some people on campus about making use of records that were available here, so this sort of preliminary thinking had gone on.

**Bronfenbrenner: Here was something that was ready to happen that you were looking for. Could you link this happy coming together to what it was in your own development that made this something that you, consciously or unconsciously, were now ready to do? Could you build that bridge a bit?**

Elder: I think in Children of the Great Depression I talk about how adversity leads to pro-social characteristics in the lives of children when they are placed in situations that lead to adaptations and efforts that move them to another level. That is they discover what's really possible in their lives. I had written Children of the Great Depression after spending some time as a teenager on a farm. You can see in some of the chapters in Children of the Great Depression, comparisons between growing up in the Great Depression and growing up on a farm. I suggest that there are some things that we need to look at. A farm family could be thought of as the middle class farm family that lost much and had to recover from the loss. Children were involved in this enterprise, and I had personally observed the struggle day to day to make ends meet and I could see the parallel. This change had a developmental thrust to it in which I was very much interested.

**Bronfenbrenner: Will this happen to all children in this situation, or are there any prerequisites for this kind of challenging and potentially depressing event that give rise to psychological growth? For me, what was so exciting about that study, as was true for the Great Depression, is that for a good many children this was the impetus to growth of competence. Did you have any thoughts then or now, about what circumstances have that effect on children?**



Elder: I think individual characteristics of children predispose them or give them a greater chance to make something out of adversity, such as, for example, the success in doing well in school. I think also the disciplines learned within the family enable children to do well in school. Competence requires an environment outside of the child and it also requires something that is within the child as well.

**Bronfenbrenner: You started to say what those qualities were and you mentioned competence.**

Elder: Competence, but then there is also motivation and discipline.

**Bronfenbrenner: Now when you use the word discipline, I don't know which discipline you mean.**

Elder: I'm really thinking of the ability to utilize the resources one has to make the best of circumstances. You can think of it as kids who use whatever they have to the fullest advantage, compared to not using ones talents at all. Families enable children in many cases to rely upon their own resources and to make the best of them, to push the boundary, to push the envelope in a sense of what they can do. This reflects in part my own experience with a father as a football coach and a mother as a basketball coach. They always talked about extending oneself. Moving beyond where you are and using whatever you have to the fullest. That was a central theme for them.

**Bronfenbrenner: Vigotsky never talked about what parents have to do to get a child that will do this. He simply talked about what the child needs. At some point the child should be challenged just beyond the edge of what he is already doing, but there is no indication of who is doing that. What I hear and what you are saying is the something the parents do. Am I correctly bringing out a point that you had?**

Elder: That's right. That was a central theme that my parents would talk about in all kinds of ways. It would come out in maxims and they would identify people who displayed such a model. They moved me from the suburbs of Cleveland to a farm, which was the ultimate challenge, because everyone there thought we would fail. Here we were, city people, and I could here rumors circulating that these city people would be back in Cleveland the next year.

**Bronfenbrenner: How old were you at that time?**

Elder: I was in the ninth grade at that time.

**Bronfenbrenner: About fifteen?**

Elder: Yes. That experience generated or reinforced my competitive instincts. I vowed never to fail in this enterprise, no matter what. My brother and I agreed that we would not let this happen.

**Bronfenbrenner: Here you're saying that it's almost more a psychological theory in a sense then a social structural theory, because you're saying that there is something that has to be happening to people in this instance. The happenings are created actively by the actions of important people in one's life, beginning with parents plus an outside environment, which says that there is a challenge and that there is a response to a challenge which has to be there, or else.**

Elder: I think of Toynibee's challenge-response theory, and in some ways my parents set up a whole series of things that would challenge us.

**Bronfenbrenner: Find your own challenge.**

Elder: That's right.

**Bronfenbrenner: Why I'm bringing it out especially is because, as I say, I think it is one of your more important contributions that you are putting into the classical sociological model in which you were trained. This is a new dynamic element that gives force to movement across sociological space. Is that fair?**

Elder: Yes.

**Bronfenbrenner: In my more limited acquaintance with sociology as a psychologist, I've been struck by the absence of any forces other than that which conforms to the existing situation, and this strikes me as a new note in the concept of what sociology is about.**

Elder: The role of human agency, a core principle of life course theory.

**Bronfenbrenner: Human agency, thank you for reminding me. But would you say the human agency is perhaps the most new and different of those in the armory of traditional sociology? Is that a fair inference?**

Elder: Human agency is a long-standing perspective in symbolic interaction and in the study of the life course and biographies, in general.

**Bronfenbrenner: Let's mention the other principles so we can get them on the record.**

Elder: We have the principle of historical time and place; the principle of timing in lives (of events and roles), and the principle of linked lives, interdependence.

**Bronfenbrenner: You know, as I think about it, each principle is sort of a new note to traditional sociology. It has some roots in it, but no one has said, "Here it is."**

Elder: Not in a succinct, systematic way.

**Bronfenbrenner: Systematic in saying that these are the four major things that characterize and drive this life course model.**

Elder: The human agency theme has been around for years in life history work. The notion that people make choices and select options.

**Bronfenbrenner: When you say life history work you mean --?**

Elder: The Chicago tradition. (Very hard to hear - both people were talking at the same time)

**Bronfenbrenner: Chicago tradition. You're just paying due respect of where you got it.**

Elder: That's right.

**Bronfenbrenner: Do you want to comment now on the other principles so we'll have them all on tape?**

Elder: The historical time and place principle was reinforced by the emergence of history to write a history from the bottom up, about the people rather than about the kings and queens. That started around 1960-61, just about the time I wrapped up my dissertation. My interest in history had everything to do with my mother's fascination with historical biography. Geography and spatial arrangements were very important, and that, of course, is where the ecology of human development comes in.

**Bronfenbrenner: Give some examples if you would.**

Elder: Consider children growing up in farm families for example, in isolated farm families, in small villages, in the suburbs and in the inner city. We are talking about different spatial ecologies and all of that is missed when we refer only to historical time. We are talking about the changes in people's lives in different places. I compared children growing up in the textile industry of the Great Depression, with children growing up in Oakland and Berkeley, also in the Great Depression. I compared those two populations and brought out some of the differences, institutional differences, cultural differences, that were characteristic of those two places.

**Bronfenbrenner: Am I correct that in the history of sociology as a science this is one of the first places where the point has been made that the context isn't just something like social class, an induction based on certain criteria that are put together? To what extent is this the first systematic explicit statement of that, and to what extent are you drawing on earlier antecedents of it in terms of mentors that you'd had or books or whatever? My impression is that you were pretty much the first one to put it all together and said here's the pattern and there's a different pattern in this context than the pattern in that context.**

Elder: No, I can't claim originality here. In sociology we have a rich community studies tradition, for example, Middletown I, Middletown II, and III. There were several volumes. Then we have had studies of Deep South communities, but they were always studies of a single place.

**Bronfenbrenner: They were also more anthropological.**

Elder: They were anthropological and they were not comparative. They did not explore the configuration here and here. I think that's the difference.

**Bronfenbrenner: The configuration. I wanted to pin that down because I think that is one of the innovative contributions of life course theory. You've just identified its distinctive property.**

Elder: I think one way I got into this is through the comparison of cohorts, birth cohorts. I wanted to go beyond simply comparing populations or people born at certain times to ask, "What were they born into? What was the cultural environment?" It was not simply a social class.

**Bronfenbrenner: That's very important. Where would you say in your work are the primary places, if someone wanted to read it? What should they read first? What else, and so on?**

Elder: Well, I think Children of the Great Depression would be one, and then Children in Time and Place. It brings out some of these issues. A couple of chapters make a very nice comparison of different places at the very same time and shows what we mean by growing up in a community. It's not simply growing up in a neighborhood, but neighborhoods are embedded in communities, and so the opportunities available to children are very different depending on whether you are a product of Manchester, New Hampshire or Berkeley, California. Then a new work that we just completed is titled Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America, a University of Chicago Press book. This does the very same thing, that is, it makes explicit that one is dealing with a social configuration that constrains and opens up opportunities. One has to go beyond simply social class or education to investigate socioeconomic ecologies.

**Bronfenbrenner: So if people wanted to read something you mentioned these two.**

Elder: Then I think maybe the shorthand way to get a sense of this would be to look at the handbook chapter entitled, "The Life Course and Human Development" in the Handbook of Child Psychology published in 1998.

**Bronfenbrenner: So that people who want to learn more about it can find them there, that's convenient. These are the places where you put these various principles together.**

Elder: Right, and also in my SRCD presidential address that was published in Child Development in 1988 entitled, "The Life Course as Developmental Theory".

**Bronfenbrenner: I'm glad you remembered that because I was trying to remember the title. It seemed to me that that was one of the places where your theoretical model was most succinctly presented and at the same time comprehensively because you hit all of the bases.**

Elder: Yes, probably so. The principle of linked lives refers to a process that's been with us for a long time. It refers to the kind of interdependence we have in families, for example, but no one really identified it this way as an analytical tool for understanding how historical experiences are mediated through families, and children learn how significant they are because they are connected to other people. They are accountable for their actions to other people and they gain a sense of significance because other people count on them.

**Bronfenbrenner:** In my mind this is one of the most important of your principles. You keep referring to this as an old story. It is an old story but there is something very different about it in that it says that these linkages occur across the generations. You get essentially a system of linked lives that is operating through time and it's not just a sequel across generations, it's a simultaneous system. I think that's what's new, because, of course, the notion of passing it on is familiar, both in terms of genetics and in terms of parent to child, and then the child becomes a parent, but here we are saying there are linked lives right now and they include "others" besides those who are family related. Am I correct in that linked lives refers also to teachers, basketball coaches, all of that? These are people whose lives are linked with yours, and it's also true again, that these continue to occur after childhood and adolescence. They are the vehicles of developmental continuity and change throughout the life course. Do I have it right?

Elder: Yes.

**Bronfenbrenner:** Because it is so easy to think of this as something that is happening in childhood, all these people are linked into your childhood, but this is an ongoing dynamic.

Elder: Right. Consider some of the work that we have been doing on the meaning of children's work. When a child realizes that in delivering papers all of the customers on his or her route depend on him or her to deliver those papers on time, it gives the child a sense of significance, the child matters. He has to get out there even though the weather is lousy.

**Bronfenbrenner:** At some time, and I think this may be not yet the time for it, we should get into something which we don't want to lose. Assuming that you still have an active scientific life ahead of you, what do you see as the priorities there, the agenda there, what would you like to be able to do? How does it relate to your past work, but more importantly, how does it relate to the study of human development through the life course in the future that you would like to see others join you in?

Elder: I think as one moves along, we realize that we have more challenges than we can possibly do in one lifetime, so I think of ways to pass this challenge on to the next generation, suggesting this is a great topic to get into. One of the things that very few of us are doing is studying the implications of our changing environment, our changing world for children and for the next generation and for adults as well. It seems to me we need to think of child development more broadly in terms of human development. Both children and adults are linked together, and so the notion of studying adult development over here and studying children over there doesn't make any sense. We need to understand how changes in children influence adults and visa versa. So my number one issue would be to get more students plus post-docs and colleagues interested in studying the ways our changing environment, our changing culture and social structure in society is changing the lives of kids. This includes technology as well as the kind of work I did where I studied children growing up on farms, in part-time farming operations, in displaced farm families, and in families that are headed by adults who grew up on farms, plus families that had no connection to agriculture in the lives of parents. These developmental niches represent a way of understanding how rural transformation is occurring today and how it matters for children, but we should also be studying how our urban ecology is changing and the inner city. We need to think more broadly than simply poverty. Poverty is important, but we need to think of our social institutions and the lack of civic and social ties that bind people.

**Bronfenbrenner:** The ties that bind.

Elder: That's right, churches and civic organizations and schools and work places.

We just stopped doing it. But now it's being rediscovered in terms of its power in the inner city and countryside. Another ignored center is rural America. When I got into this project in the Midwest, I discovered that here we have less than 2% of our families on farms and yet no one had done a major study on this sector of the population. We still don't understand the effect of migration on children, and yet it's one of the most central features of American life, if you compare us to Great Britain or France, or whatever it is what makes us so very different.

**Bronfenbrenner: What hope do you see for either the same basic institutions becoming revitalized, or failing that, that new institutional forms will arise to perform the analogous necessary functions if we are going to be able to bring up future generations effectively? What do you see there? Are we going to revitalize or are we going to find new forms, or both, or what?**

Elder: Hopefully we are going to learn from what is not working today. For example, research tells us that the more one uses the Internet the more it creates personal problems in life because it takes us away from social interaction, from connections with people. It's an isolating device. Well, television can be the same sort of thing for kids. If we go back forty to fifty years when kids were not watching television a lot, they were doing a lot of things with their peers. It seems to me that we've learned that there are costs involved with innovations that have come along.

A good example of this is industrial farming. These farm operations are concentrating animals in a very small space. Now for many years farmers have raised hogs without any problem at all, but not ten thousand in a single multi-layer confinement. Now that we have them concentrated in this way, we realize that we are poisoning the soil, the air, and the water. We cannot let technology take over and destroy what is good. I think the same thing is true on coming up with social devices and institutions that will work in our time. We have to put limits on how technology influences our lives and realize that it has some very good influences, but they also come at a social cost.

**Bronfenbrenner: Before we forget, in the first part of the interviews that we have already done you mentioned the people and the writings and work that influenced you most importantly and clearly. Are there new voices now that have been influencing you in the contemporary period? In this later period that we are discussing this afternoon, are there any names to be added to the list?**

Elder: Are we talking about 1960 on?

**Bronfenbrenner: I think it was 1989.**

Elder: Oh, 1989.

**Bronfenbrenner: You can go back.**

Elder: Let me just interact a bit with our conversation this morning because when you were talking about your career I realized that Gestalt theory always appealed to me. I can't explain it, it simply did. I always had a very critical view of behaviorism and the characterization it provided of the individual as sort of a pawn of social structure, as a consequence of social structure rather than an agent. In addition, people like Chomsky were arguing for the role of the organism and bringing the active organism back into psychology. I've always had an agency view of the individual.

**Bronfenbrenner: Yes, you have, and I would underscore this is one of the things that is particularly prominent in the American tradition. Gestalt is not part of the American tradition.**

Elder: No, it isn't. The literature on Gestalt studies featured a strong emphasis on problem solving, and to me that was the connection with the agency theme. Since 1989, I've been trying to think of new influences. Life course thinking has moved beyond our ability to study the life course and now we see a greater capacity to study it. Theory is now being matched by methodology and techniques of analysis.

**Bronfenbrenner: So it's another stage of the scientific process in which the task before us is no longer the theoretical model, but rather the problems of implementation and communication. Is that what you were trying to say?**

Elder: Yes, I think so, and I think there is influential feed back. The more we are able to do this sort of thing the more we are able to elaborate the theory in different ways and advance it.

**Bronfenbrenner: What you are saying is that we now need to apply the new theoretical ideas that we have in empirical studies and that will give us the basis for the next round of theoretical development and so on. We need to get the benefit of these new formulations.**

Elder: Yes, I agree with that.

**Bronfenbrenner: What I like, just to underscore it, is that developmental science is also a developmental process, which undergoes cycles of theoretical development, which has been tested against application and we learn from it. Only then can we say what theoretical problems we have to address.**

Elder: Let me give you one example. For years we've wanted to study developmental changes in a changing environment. It's only been in the last five years or so that we've really been able to do this sort of thing using latent growth curves and hierarchical linear modeling. We end up looking at a developmental trajectory that changes in response to a changing environment.

**Bronfenbrenner: And that's a different theoretical orientation...**

Elder: It is. It's something that we've always talked about but we never could do it until recently.

**Bronfenbrenner: Glen, I'm struck by the fact that SRCD, in this later period that we have been discussing, has provided a very important platform for the kinds of both theoretical and research priorities that have emerged in this period of your productive scientific work. Could you say a word about that?**

Elder: Children of the Great Depression was published in '74, and from that point on I became increasingly more oriented toward developmental issues in my work. That personal change made the Society for Research in Child Development more relevant to me. The first meeting that I participated in was the meeting in Denver in 1975. I remember sitting down with Bert Brim and bemoaning the fact that SRCD was very heavily oriented around cognition and infancy. This made it very distant from where I was, although there were quite a few sessions on aging. But 1975 was the beginning of my involvement. SRCD did have an open door and welcoming arms approach to people from different fields.

I've always been interested in developmental issues going back to graduate school when I was located in a third floor carrel of Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. That's the floor that psychology was on, and I had a carrel right next to the shelf with all the SRCD volumes on it. One summer I began perusing almost all of that material starting from the early classics, the early monographs. I was interested in socialization at that time and the early monographs and child development issues had a lot to say about socialization. My area was cross-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary at the beginning, and I knew about the Society for Research in Child Development from graduate school, but it was only in '75 that I really started to become an inside advocate for making it much more open to cultural, social and historical issues.

In the last years of the '80s for example, SRCD had moved tremendously toward a much more open biennial meeting with participants from anthropology, sociology, even economics. We've reached a point now with the possibility of having an economist on governing council. This would have been unheard of compared to the SRCD of the '70s. So it has changed, and I think it's become for me one of the most exciting professional organizations. The biennial meeting is about as exciting and rewarding a meeting as any that one could go to. I have made numerous collegial friendships in the field. SRCD gives me a chance to interact across disciplinary boundaries in a way that is not possible in other disciplines.

**Bronfenbrenner: The challenge is putting it all together. You were speaking of the importance of the Society for Research in Child Development, and, of course, you as a sociologist became president of that society which has been much more influenced by psychology. Could you speak about the role from your perspective of having been a president of that organization?**

Elder: I became president-elect in 1993, and I finished up six years later in 1999. The first two years are president elect, the next two years are president, and the last two years past president. Each phase has responsibilities. In 1995 SRCD met at Indianapolis and this was my exposure to all of the responsibilities. I think it's important to realize (as I didn't at that time) that SRCD has grown so much in recent years. At that very moment in time there was a large effort underway to centralize activities at Ann Arbor, including the journal, and to create a much more professional organization with a manager. Child Development would be handled through the main office and we would manage all of the responsibilities of membership also through the main office there. The technological capabilities of the office were very undeveloped. We had not moved into a fully computerized office. Keep in mind also that in the

1980s we had Dorothy Eichorn as executive officer and one person working with her. So we had this organization growing rapidly and the work piling up, and the main office staffed by people who were not equipped to handle it.

When I got together in Indianapolis (1995, April) with my past president, Bill Hartup, things had begun to come apart because the secretary, who was much like a manager for an office, had decided to retire and resigned. That was Laura Skidmore. We got the word at the meeting that she was going to leave, and, of course, I was moving into this role and I had this view of “chicken little with the sky falling.” Bill Hartup was an enormously steadying influence in all of this, and especially for me as someone who was moving into a new setting that was being created. For example, Mark Bornstein, editor of Child Development, proposed to transform Child Development by creating a very different kind of journal; much anxiety in the field of child development centered on this change. We didn’t know how it would work. I stepped into a set of responsibilities that were growing by the minute it seemed, and the secretary had resigned, but we needed a manager.

From April 1995, through the summer and into the fall, I flew up to Ann Arbor every so often to try to help create this new organization. Having been vice-president of the American Sociological Association, I asked the executive officer there, Felice Levine, if she would help us and she agreed to do this. She flew up to Ann Arbor in July 1995 and gave us valuable advice. John Hagen, executive officer, was deeply involved in this effort to put together a new organization with a manager. We hired Pat Settimi in August 1995, and she literally saved my life with her management insights and expertise.

I had been a student of social change all my life, but it’s another thing to live it, and I didn’t know how this was going to turn out. I could see the whole thing coming down on my shoulders. So this was a very demanding period of time, but we found the right people. Pat came in and began to bring order to the organization. During this period of time we discovered that Laura Skidmore had mishandled funds and we had something like an \$80,000 deficit at the beginning, which was scaled back to \$30,000.

**Bronfenbrenner: Do you want this in the record?**

Elder: It has to be saved. It has to be on the record but it needs to be considered private.

**Bronfenbrenner: I just want that in the record. You want it typed out?**

Elder: I think it has to be, but not publicized.

**Bronfenbrenner: That’s fine.**

Elder: What happened out of this was that the mishandling of funds was discovered by the University of Michigan and she was fired from her job. All kinds of court legal action took place during this year.

**Bronfenbrenner: It was a great year!**

Elder: It was a great year, but I think the important thing to keep in mind is that some wonderful people were involved in SRCD at that time, very talented. I again point to Bill Hartup as being an excellent manager. He was very fine. John Hagen was very steady, very stable. I would look at John when I felt the sky was falling, and he was just sitting there unperturbed, and it gave me some comfort. This was a period of consolidation and organization building up to the end of my second year. Just before I gave my presidential address I thought we had created a new organization with new personnel based on people who worked well together in a brand new office facility. I left the office feeling that I was turning over something that was really going to work well for SRCD.

**Bronfenbrenner: You mentioned that for you SRCD sort of embodied the concept of studying human development. We are now no longer just psychologists and this or that and the other. This gives us a new take off point for the next generation of work in studying the forces shaping the development of human beings. What do you see as the message for the future?**

Elder: When I was elected I thought it was quite surprising because it was the first time the organization had turned to somebody outside of the medical sciences or psychology. We have never had an anthropologist, a sociologist, a historian, or an economist. Some might say that, well, “He’s really a psychologist.” If so, I’m a very different kind

of psychologist, but I think that what this turning point may symbolize is SRCD's openness to greater diversity. That was one of the themes that I tried to advocate during my term as president.

It seems to me that we are now taking history and historical time much more seriously than we ever have before. It's not just simply that our studies must be sensitive to this; we need to think about the literature as well. Findings in the 50's may not apply across historical time. They apply to studies that were carried out in the 1950's. Sensitivity to history makes us aware of the fact that as our society changes we become different kinds of people, and that developmental process has different elements in it as we change as a society, we need to be aware of that.

I concluded my addendum to the 25th anniversary edition of Children of the Great Depression by asking whether we have become different people now that we have 98% of our population living off farms. At the beginning, we were largely an agrarian society, and now we're largely an urban society. So what kind of people are we now? Are we different because of that change? I think many of the findings that we've obtained suggest that developmental processes and outcomes have changed as a result of the changes in the society. We need to be sensitive to that. Secondly, we've made great advances in studying people over time in context, in meaningful configurational environments that involve multiple institutions. We have the opportunity to take the advances that we have made and push them even further. We have the statistical expertise to do this, we have the sense of problem to do it, and we have the theories to do it as well. So the challenge today is to incorporate all of these innovations into our research and build upon what we have learned. Thirdly, we've moved passed the time when it makes sense to study children apart from adults or adults apart from children. The two live in the same world and they influence each other and we need to look at this dynamic over time.