The last quarter of the 20th century was a time of dramatic social and historical change in the United States. Have these changes influenced how mothers and fathers "parent" their children? The lack of longitudinal data makes it difficult to know whether there have been changes in parenting over the last few decades.

Examination of the parenting process has often been truncated in the literature by conceptualizing parenting as the raising of children to young adulthood. This paper extends the usual conception of parenthood by examining the involvement of middle-aged and elderly mothers and fathers with adult children in the later stages of the life course.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the parental involvement of middle-aged and elderly mothers and fathers. In doing so, we examine the contribution of two theoretical perspectives--the life course perspective and the solidarity-conflict model. Based on the life course perspective, we argue that parenthood must be placed in historical context to assess change in involvement. Guided by the solidarity-conflict model of intergenerational relations, we contend that multiple dimensions of parental involvement must be examined in order to get a full picture of parenting.

To investigate these theoretical perspectives, we empirically examine parental involvement with biological/adoptive adult children using data from Longitudinal Study of Generations (Bengtson, 1975, 1996), based at the University of Southern California. This unique data set allows us to employ two design strategies to investigate fathering: (1) generation-sequential, and (2) longitudinal. The generation-sequential design allows us to control for age effects by comparing parents who are at the same stage of life during different historical periods, i.e., we compare middle-aged mothers and fathers in 1971 to middle-aged mothers and fathers in 1997, and elderly mothers and fathers in 1971 to elderly mothers and fathers in 1997. The longitudinal design enables us to follow one cohort of mothers and fathers over 26 years, from the time they are middle-aged (mean age 45) in 1971 to the time they are elderly (mean age 70) in 1997. Thus, we examine parenting for middle-aged and elderly mothers and fathers across socio-historical time, and middle-age mothers and fathers across biographical time. (For the mean age of the two cohorts of mothers and fathers in 1971 and 1997, please see Table 1).

The dependent variables included scales that measured affectual, consensual, associational, normative, functional, and structural solidarity, as well as parental satisfaction, at both time periods.

As predicted by the life-course perspective's principle of *time and place*, the results from the generation sequential design revealed a number of cohort differences in parenting for middle-aged mothers and fathers. Although middle-aged mothers and fathers in 1997 did not report a significantly higher level of affectual solidarity for their adult children than middle-aged mothers and fathers in 1971, they did report significantly higher levels of associational solidarity and parental satisfaction. Conversely, middle-aged mothers and fathers in 1997 were significantly less likely than their 1971 counterparts to provide adult children with functional solidarity as indicated by their level of financial assistance or help with household chores. The cohort difference in financial assistance is likely due to socio-historical differences in economic context. During a time of corporate downsizing, middle-aged parents in 1997 faced greater economic uncertainty than middle-aged parents in 1971, and consequently, they had less discretionary funds to share with adult

children. Nevertheless, at both time points, the majority (71% or higher) of middle-age parents provided this type of instrumental support to adult children.

The cohort differences in household chores may also be reflective of socio-historical changes. The reason middle-aged parents in 1997 were a third less likely than their 1971 counterparts to provide adult children with help on household chores may be because of the reduction that has taken place in co-residence between parents and adult children (Crimmins, Saito, & Ingengeri, 1997). If fathers and children do not co-reside, parents have less of an opportunity to assist children in this way. Another possible explanation for the difference is the change in the amount of work adults do around the home. Due to busier lives, adult children in the 1990's may have been more likely than those in the 1970's to outsource household chores to gardeners, cleaning crews, and repair shops, resulting in less need for help by fathers.

Turning to elderly parents, results from the generation sequential design revealed there was no significant change in elderly parents' financial support of adult children between the two time periods: corporate downsizing did not affect elderly parents because they were already retired. However, elderly parents in 1997 reported significantly lower levels of affectual solidarity and less help with household chores than elderly parents in 1971. Although the lower levels of affectual solidarity are difficult to understand, it is likely that the reasons for lower levels of help with household chores are the same as for middle-aged parents. On the other hand, elderly parents in 1997 reported a greater amount of in-person and phone contact with adult children than their 1971 counterparts. These findings suggest another type of socio-historical difference: elderly parents in 1997 enjoyed better health than elderly parents in 1971 (Crimmins, Saito, & Ingengeri, 1997), providing them with greater mobility and conversational ability.

A possible socio-historical explanation of the cohort differences between parents in 1971 and 1997 is changing technology. The transformation of the airline industry between these two time periods was dramatic and could have easily contributed to greater in-person contact between middle-aged and elderly parents and their adult children. Similarly, the advent of the cell phone could also be responsible for cohort differences in phone contact..

These findings point to the contribution of the life-course perspective by showing that parenting is contextually constructed. The socio-historical context in which parenting takes place influences the types and levels of involvement middle-aged and older mothers and fathers have with adult children. No other study has been in a position to provide this kind of comparison. Only with a generation sequential design is it possible to examine socio-historical influences indicating the relevance of the principle of time and place to the study of fatherhood.

The results of the long-term longitudinal design revealed stability in parent's affectual and consensual solidarity for adult children over time: mothers and fathers continue to report high levels of affectual solidarity and moderate levels of consensual solidarity and in-person contact as they go from middle-age to old-age and their adult children go from young adult to middle-age. Moreover, mothers and fathers report a significant increase from 1971 to 1997 in the amount of phone and mail contact, and parental satisfaction. Thus, paternal involvement remains strong across the life course of both parents and children, and actually increases on some dimensions, supporting the principles of life-span development and linked lives.

Because our study consists of primarily middle-class Anglo-American parents, it is imperative that future studies explore the dimensions of parenthood across various social locations, examining the impact of ethnicity and social class on paternal involvement. Compared to middle-class Anglo-American parents, mothers and fathers in other ethnic groups and social classes are likely to be less influenced by socio-historical changes in multi-generational living arrangements, outsourcing of household chores, corporate downsizing, increased technology, and improved health.

Table 1. Mean and SD of Mothers' and Father's Age in 1971 and 1997.

	1971			1997		
Generation	Mean	SD	*n*	Mean	SD	*n*
Mothers						
G1	65.27	6.56	248	87.13	3.81	38
G2	42.27	4.68	379	68.07	4.94	288
G3	19.24	2.69	442	45.49	3.04	232
Fathers						
G1	67.97	6.15	264	87.80	2.04	10
G2	45.41	5.33	322	70.10	4.98	171
G3	19.38	3.70	385	46.61	4.59	150