excerpts from:

Pioneers of Social Research: Recording Quantitative Researchers

by Nick Allum and Paul Thompson

Glen H. Elder

Interviewed by Paul Thompson
in Chapel Hill, North Carolina
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Thomson: It's the 8th July, 2001, and we're in Glen Elder's house in Chapel Hill. So, can we start right at the beginning? When and where were you born?

Elder: In Cleveland, actually in the suburb of Lakewood, Ohio. [Born] in 1934, February 28th.

Thomson: And can we start by talking about your family background?

Elder: My father grew up in Johnston County, in Ohio, that's not very far from Lake Erie, in farming country, and his father was a farmer. That family line runs all the way back to Scotland, so that's one connection to Great Britain. And then my mother's side, my mother was born in Buffalo; she was the daughter of a [Northern Baptist] minister, a long line of [preachers], actually, going back to 1825.

Thomson: And which Church is that?

Elder: This would be the American Baptist, or the Northern Baptist, and her father was a Minister in Washington, DC, for 30 years, in the National Memorial Church there in Washington. I remember visiting my grandparents, this
must have been... I was born in '34, this must have been '41, and standing in the nave of the of the church, and watching my grandfather someone in the front of the church - one of those impressive churches with a large steeple. I think it could hold something like 1,500-2,000 people. And so my mother and father really came from different parts of the social structure, in some ways.

Thompson: So, you were talking about your grandparents.

Elder: Yes.

Thompson: Would you say any of them was an important influence on you?

Elder: I think my mother's side of the family was... We would always, in the summer time, go up to an island in the Thousand Islands, right off of New York State, and that would be our summer vacation. [Boscobel Island] was owned by my grandparents and that family, and so I would see them every summer, for quite a while.

And I never really had that experience with my other grandfather and grandmother. So I did not know them nearly as well, I [mainly] remember them from photographs. When I was growing up, my father's parents had moved to Florida and had purchased an orange grove, they were doing that at the time. But that was the only time that I can remember going there visiting them.

But with my mother's side of the family, it's kind of a classic tie between mothers and their families, much closer and... and typically vacations organized around that family, rather than around the father's family. My father came from a smaller family, he was the only child, and my mother came from a family with two sisters and a brother. So all of those people played a significant role in my life. They've all lived into their nineties. My mother lived to be 94, and my two aunts were 92/93, and my uncle is the youngest and he is 90.

He was a graduate of Harvard University, got his Ph.D. in Economics, and worked for the Office of Price Administration during the War, under Galbraith. He had quite a career in government, and then became very much involved in the international film industry, and has been retired for some time now. But we feel very close to them, and they actually visited us in March this year [when Karen was ill].

Thompson: What did he do in the film industry?

Elder: I think he played the role of a Vice-President, but well, I don't know, first-hand, what he did. He was always traveling, but I'm not sure about the details though, in terms of what the Organization did, with regard to film industry, connections between different countries and so on.

Thompson: And did you meet Galbraith?

Elder: Never, never met him, no.

Thompson: But you heard about him, though?

Elder: Oh yes. I purchased a book that he wrote, several of them, actually, and in the book is mentioned, it's really his autobiography, and he refers to Griffith Johnson, who is my uncle, as an associate during the War, and so on. But Galbraith is a wonderful writer, and I've always been trying to write like him! (LAUGHS)

Thompson: Oh, really!

Elder: Yes!
Thompson: So is there any particular way in which some of those older relatives influenced you, do you think?

Elder: Well, I think, very definitely my mother’s side of the family influenced me in terms of an appreciation for history, reading. My one aunt was married to a corporation lawyer, and was quite wealthy during all of the time I knew him. My grandparents always had a maid in their house, during [my childhood] ... a very different period! And [he had] a very large church. And so it was kind of like the Forsyth Saga in some ways – many generations, very distinguished people going back many years – and they were always, my aunts were great readers, and my mother was a very very active reader, and she always read historical biographies. She really loved that, and I think that through her I’ve gained some appreciation for history besides simple living in a time that required you to pay attention to historical changes taking place. But they were a family of many generations that appreciated art, culture, and it was all around them. For example, I would go up to the Thousand Islands, and I would see furniture from Asia, and I always wondered where that furniture came from! He was an executive for Standard Oil, and around 1900 had a long trip to Asia, and brought back furniture that is still in the family. My mother talk a lot about her family, [and consequently] I would know a lot about her family. We have [volumes] of documents on the family.

It was harder to pick up this information on my father, because he was the only child, and he never really spoke much about his family... There were people in his life that I never fully understood, were they... a true cousin, for example, or just a friend? My grandfather’s [father’s father] died around 1941, so I was only six or seven years old at that time, and my father’s mother died around ’47, ’46/7, and so I didn’t see them very much. They lived a fairly short life, in terms of overlapping with me.

Because of all the interactions that I had with my mother’s family, I really always knew a great deal about them, and I think they influenced me. Well, a good example of this is that there was always a sense that somebody would follow in the footsteps of my grandfather, in the Ministry. I never felt that I was coerced in that direction, but my brother became a Minister. And I think it was probably, in part, because he was the youngest of two, and it was a way, it was a pressure to become a significant member of the family, [which] probably weighed more heavily on him than it did me.

I think the things that really influenced me were the places where I lived, and the changes that took place, after living in Cleveland, moving out to the suburbs of Cleveland, and then through the War Years, [and then the move to a Pennsylvania farm]. The War Years were enormously vivid because the whole community was mobilized and one the Naval Training Bases was just round the corner- the Great Lakes Training Base- and we would have these people over for Christmas. I just remember living the War as a little kid in Cleveland, and you would have these “Scrap Drives”, and there was no way that a young person could grow up and not understand that they were part of something very much larger than themselves. And then, of course, all of the film during the time, you’d see all of this grotesque wartime behavior, where people in black were being lined up and shot. There were black and white shots. [This] exposed me to the impact of [“evil”] forces greater than ourselves that were influencing our lives and making a difference in how we lived.

My father, having grown up on a farm, never got it out of his system. He became [eventually a farmer, after a period of teaching and practicing chiropractic medicine]. He went to college, graduated from the Ohio Wesleyan, in the southern part of Ohio. My mother went to Wells [College in upstate New York, and then to] Denison. She switched to Denison because it’s a co-ed school, and she’d had enough of single sex schools, and all of the constraints that were associated with that. She was much more the rebel in the family, my mother was. And those two met in Cleveland, and they both were school teachers, and both were coaches. My father taught mathematics, and he also coached football. My mother coached women’s basketball, at a time which was very early, I think, in terms of that sort of role. It was an influence that lasted her over her entire lifetime. She thoroughly enjoyed all the athletics we were involved in, and she enjoyed athletics, period, until she died, basically. It was something that she loved. And I think, being brought up by coaches, as I talk about this, I never really thought about it, but there was just a lot of coaching going on in the family! (LAUGHS)

I was thinking of the coach of Green Bay... oh, Vincent Lombardi. A wonderful biography was written on Vince Lombardi who coached the Green Bay Packers, a pro team. As I read the book, I could see my father on page after page, and I underlined passages in it, and gave [the book] to my brother, and he read it, and he couldn’t believe it either! I mean, the same kind of philosophy, and all of that. But notions like, we would be walking up the hill, at some point, and he would turn around and say, “What are you breathing hard for?” You know, if you’re well trained and in good condition, you wouldn’t breathe hard. And I would come back from football, banged up and so on, and he would always say, “Well, you know, the person who hits the hardest doesn’t get hurt.” A lot of aphorisms like that, that are really registered in my mind and have a lot to do with conditioning us to not only work hard, but do the very best you could, under the circumstances, that there are no excuses for not doing that! And so I think coaching was incredibly significant. And I’d never thought about it until my later years, that I’d actually been brought up by two coaches in the family!
Then my father decided to go to Medical School, and this is right in the Great Depression, and he couldn't afford just giving up his job and enrolling in the Ohio States Medical School, so he went to school in the evening, and studied for the Ohio Boards, and passed them, and was able to practice what is called "chiropractic medicine", which sort of connects with his athletic orientation. And he practiced that for quite a while.

But his love always, his heart was always in farming, and I knew that because on Sunday afternoons, frequently we would all pile into the car, and he would drive through the countryside or he would ask me to go with him on a trip to see a patient or something, and ostensibly that was that, but he would want to show me where he grew up, some of the farms that he really liked in the area, and so on. So I guess it was just a matter of time before he would commit himself buy a farm, and he did in '49, in May. And we had absolutely no preparation for this. They just came in and said, "Well, we've bought a farm, and we've got to get the crops in".

And so I was in Cleveland one minute, then on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania the next!

And I think that was the greatest social transformation that forced me to think about change, because you're looking at yourself from a different angle. And also it prepared me for being really fascinated by the changes that are taking place in rural society. We were there in '49, I was at the end of my ninth grade, going into the tenth, and so I had three years, before going to college.

[This change] strongly influenced where I went to college, because I was so fascinated with the life of farming, as a city kid. I thought, "This would be a lot of fun to do," you know. So they had to persuade me to go to college two years, and I enrolled in agriculture, the dairy husbandry aspect, at Penn State [Pennsylvania State University]. Actually, my exposure to farming oriented me to the State University in the first place, because I might have really a different place. So [the change] taught me at a very formative time. I started off in dairy husbandry, then thought I would go into veterinary medicine, which had a closer connection to what my father did.

But then I took some philosophy, and I had a semester of three courses of philosophy, and that sort of created a transition from organic chemistry and the Agricultural Sciences to the Social Sciences. And I started taking courses in psychology, they would often be graduate/undergraduate combinations, like Social Psychology, or Behavioral Pathology, or something like that. I only had one Sociology course as an undergraduate, and that was with Jessie Bernard, at the very end of her career. I'll always remember Jessie Bernard, in this course on social problems... She would parade around the back of the room and come up behind you! You never knew where she was, but you always felt very insecure about the fact that she was talking to you in the back!

**Thompson:** I'm thinking maybe we're running on a little fast. Can we go back a little bit?

**Elder:** Sure. Sure.

**Thompson:** Just about your parents. Would you say you were close to them?

**Elder:** Oh yes. I think very close to them, but they were not expressive people. Like, my father ... my mother would say, "Why don't you praise your sons? You know, they would do anything for that praise." But he had real trouble, although I knew that he was enormously proud of what I did. I think that when we moved to the farm, it put us in a little competition, because we both had ideas about how the farm should be run. And yet it was my father's territory, and I was going off to school, but we were probably strong-minded, just like he was. I mean, he own ideas about how to do things. But he made the farm really, "Glen Hill Farms", and he put "Sons" down [as well]. So he always had this notion that it would be a father/son kind of thing. And we did a lot of things together.

And I was always very fond of my mother. She lived in Chapel Hill for something like twenty-seven years before she died. We brought her down from Pennsylvania. But neither of them had the capacity to express emotion very well. My wife was very good at that, and she became very close to my mother. They became a mother/daughter pair, and they were both able, near the end of my mother's life, to express the love that they had for each other, openly. But my mother...it's very hard for me to think of times when she could do this verbally. She could do it in writing, but she had trouble saying it verbally. But it's a generational thing.

**Thompson:** And what about when you did something they disapproved of?

**Elder:** I think they felt that I was impossible to discipline, because I always took it personally. (LAUGHS) I can't remember many times when there really was discipline. And those [few] occasions do not most stand out. But I can remember when my mother told me that I'd been going to school for a long time, "Don't you think it's time to stop?" (LAUGHS) But (LAUGHS) I think that disapproval was not a big issue at all ... I think that they did not have a clear set of goals for me to achieve, in terms of a vocation. The way I ended up where I did [in sociology], is kind of remarkable, in some ways. Because when I completed my years at Penn State, I didn't know for sure where I was going. I just decided to work on the staff at Kent State [University], which is just south of Cleveland. I thought
I'd do that for a couple of years, to get a better sense of what I wanted to do. The only thing I can remember, early on, wanting to do, was maybe work for the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN, but I think that was purely associated with some international travel, student travel that I'd had during college. But the way sociology came into my life...

Thompson: Sorry, we're jumping forward again! Now, you mentioned earlier about the importance of places, and you said there were two places in Cleveland, but you didn't say anything about them.

Elder: Okay. Sure. We lived in, I was born in Lakewood, Cleveland, and spent several years in Lakewood, as a very young child. And then my father moved to Berea, which is fifteen miles from Cleveland Square, and so it's a suburb, it was a town of 6,000, with a college. Baldwin Wallace College was there. That was a good place to grow up as a kid. It was small enough so I really felt a part of it. But then we moved from there, at fifth grade for me, to Olmsted Falls, which was only three miles away, to a house that my mother [chose], this was my mother's choice, because all the other houses were sort of places to stay, but not something that she loved. And this was a house that she loved, and it was a house built in 1855, the beams in the house were hand-hewn, and she really loved that, that style, and fell in love with the house. So I think that was the reason we moved to Olmsted Falls. I [left there for a Pennsylvania dairy farm at the end of ninth grade].

Thompson: What about the schools?

Elder: Well, [when] I was in Berea, I was simply there in grade school, and so my experience is limited to just a few teachers that I remember having — spinsters, teachers, sisters who taught school, and were very good at what they did, and I can remember the plays, several plays that we were in. That was the time that Berea had a major fire that virtually destroyed the downtown district [in 1943]. This was also the War period. To there is a bomber plant right on the outskirts of town, and people worked there, and we had all these Naval boys there, and [kids] really felt the War. You felt sort of organized to do various things — "Scrap Drives", going around and collecting paper, newspaper. And then we moved.

Thompson: And did you have friends in the school?

Elder: Yes, and they were sort of part of this. We had a kind of a peer group that we would often play a lot of athletics together. We would work together to collect scrap, and would comb the parking lots and everything else, to get this. I can remember Cub Scouts, and being part of a Cub pack that played a role in getting newspaper, and competing against some of the other packs in the area, and seeing how much we could collect. So scrap drives, newspaper drives, all of that was exciting. War, I think, for kids, is always a very exciting thing.

I can remember coming home for lunch and the radio would be on, and this was after Pearl Harbour, and the news was just continuously bad. Everyone in the room was listening to the bad news. And many of the films in the local cinema were oriented to the War, and to patriotism. Parades were going on, underscoring this. So that period was marked by the War, growing up as a young child in the War, and doing things that could be useful during the War.

When we moved to Olmsted Falls, the War was [nearly] over, and it was pretty much a post-war period of basketball, baseball and football. And I was in middle school and then moving into high school when my father bought the farm.

[This event] pulled me out urban Ohio on to a dairy farm that was ten miles away from the school I would attend in north-western Pennsylvania. Dad asked me to go there and help get the corn crop in, but I really didn't know very much about a tractor; let alone how to get a corn crop in! And I can remember, my father hired a man to do some work around the house. I was left there all by myself for a couple of weeks probably, and they would come on the weekend. I would go and ask [this man] whether it was a good idea to cut the hay or not to cut the hay!

(LAUGHS) It was a real shock, and a real transformation in my life, because I had no playmates there. [In late May and early June] my parents would come on the weekend, and [my father] would gradually [buy cows], get stock that I would have to care for, but I really knew very little about how to do this, and I had to milk cows and all of that!

(LAUGHS)

Thompson: Taught yourself to milk these.

Elder: Yes! Yes! We had milking machines and all that stuff. So I had a crash course of learning how to farm, and the wonderful thing about this story is that I don't think my father thought very much about the dislocation in our lives, right before college. My brother is three years younger than I, and I don't think he really paid much attention
to that. It really threw me off, at a diagonal. I think I would have gone to Medical School, following my father. And I might have decided that wasn't what I wanted to do. [I think I] would have ended up in the Social Sciences eventually.

But it was an amazing chapter because we had the farm for about fourteen years. My father bought it in '49 and he died in '63. And every summer, when I was in college, I would go back and work on the farm. And once, '54 I think, he had some cardiac problem that disabled and I withdrew from college for the semester, and I had to do it again for another semester, so I lost a full year. But I was, basically, running the farm all by myself, with [guidance from] my father my mother. My brother was in [high school] at that time.

**Thompson:** How did he take all these moves?

**Elder:** My brother?

**Thompson:** Mmm.

**Elder:** Since he was younger, I think [the moves] might have [made more difference in his life, though I don't know for sure.]

The farm transition was a big transition, because it pulled us out of our peer friendship networks, put us on a farm, where the most important thing is family and you do everything with your family. You don't have nearly the tight relationship you had with your peer group before. [But] it created a wonderful family experience for all of us, and my mother said that no part of her life was as rewarding as this, even though she was a city girl. She was President of the Fine Arts Club of Beren and [very involved in other community groups], and here she was, the wife of a farmer! And she learned how to ski, and she skied during the winter time. She also got a horse, and she loved that horse, and would ride it all over the place. So she made a life for herself and really loved it, and loved the closeness of the family during the period of time.

**Thompson:** And what about the school?

**Elder:** The school there, I moved in to the tenth grade. It's tough to really break into the peer groups [at that age], except that I was so [heavily] involved in athletics. I played on the first team of football, and then I was also, to some extent, involved in basketball, and track and baseball. So we did all these things. And [athletics] kind of integrated us [into the Titusville schools and student life]. My brother did the same. But because we moved that much, it didn't uproot much as some people who would be rooted to their schools. And so going to college, the big separation was really between my family and college, rather than from the community.

**Thompson:** And again, no very special teachers?

**Elder:** There was a very special... In Olmsted Falls there was a [demanding] teacher of Latin, and I think my studies of Latin helped me a lot - in English!

**Thompson:** In English?

**Elder:** In English, yeah, because it really told me something of the derivation of words (LAUGHS). She was a very demanding teacher, taught me a lot about standards. And then in Titusville, that's the school we moved to in Pennsylvania, I'll always remember my math teacher, who was very good, and he really gave me a love for math, that I never had before. So beyond those two... .

I can think of coaches that are larger than life, you know, like the football coach at Titusville, who was an ex-Marine, six foot four or five, red hair. His name was Red Lyle, and he would walk through the locker room and, I mean, he was sort of like the Jolly Green Giant, he was so huge, so big! (LAUGHS) And you knew that if you didn't shape up, he could really throw you against the wall! It was kind of a boot camp, but Lyle was [actually] a very loveable guy though, and it was a lot of fun to play football for him. There were other coaches there, but Lyle was the most important one for me. Being in athletics so much, coaches do become a very significant figure. And, I think, in terms of; what do you get out of it? You get the ability to cooperate; you get a sense of your significance to others. If you don't come through, other people are going to suffer.
It's kind of the philosophy that comes out of farming too, as a kid. That if you don't do this work, then your father is going to have to do it, or it's not going to get done, or the animals are not going to get fed. And I think it was one of my most important lessons, from a number of different experiences, because it gave me a sense of significance. And the kids, my three sons, I don't know whether I have this on my forehead or not, but it came out, over and over again, in their lives.

I was down in the back of our house with our children, and our youngest boy, that's Jeffrey, was only six-years-old, and he was digging the garden, and he looked up at me, and he said, "Dad, do you count on me?" And [Rod], one of my sons said, "Dad, did you hear that?" You know, the [older] brothers never expect their little brother to have anything significant to say. But I said, "Jeffrey, I sure do count on you." And he came right back, and said, "I work best, when you count on me." I ran upstairs, wrote that down, phoned his grandmother! But it's so consistent with what I had just finished writing about in *Children of the Great Depression*, that exact story.

**Thompson: Amazing, yes!**

**Elder: Yes. And then my oldest son came in one day, and he said, "Dad, you know what I like most about this paper route? I know that everyone everyone and down this street is waiting for me to deliver the papers," you know. He didn't say "It made me feel significant," but I think it's that being counted on that gives you a sense of significance. And the work experience the kids had, I think, contributed to that in a big way. And it also did it for me too. I think it gave me, also, an appreciation for how important it is to grow up with that sort of experience.**

**Thompson: And what about the experience of politics in your younger life?**

**Elder: Well, I grew up under Franklin Roosevelt, and it was an interesting thing, because I was very much a Roosevelt person, and my parents were Republicans, and that never changed. I can remember having debates with my peers about Roosevelt versus Dewey, for example. But I can remember the tremendous significance of Roosevelt, because I had polio as a young child, and I can remember getting up in the morning and trying to walk, and couldn't move, I couldn't move my legs.**

**Thompson: How old were you then?**

**Elder: I was in the third grade.**

**Thompson: And what does that mean? What age would that be?**

**Elder: Let's see, that would be ... about nine. This happened in Berea, and I'd come back from a day at Lake Erie. That's what they were saying, that there's something about water, and [the authorities] closed many of the lakes during the epidemics that we had. I can remember being kept at home for a little while, and then being sent to Cleveland Clinic, and I still remember the name of the doctor, Dr. Toomey, who was [something] of a pioneer in polio, I guess. I have this memory of being laid out on a table, and doctors putting a lot of shots in my back. My parents could never visit me in my ward... I had to open the window, and they would be three floors down, and that's [the way it] was for a whole month, six weeks. And the kids, I'll always remember the kids being strapped up with their legs and everything.

It's amazing that it didn't scar me, psychologically, because I don't have that [symptom] at all. But it did affect my nervous system for that year. It was my worst year in school, and it was just hard for me to achieve emotional balance, for some reason. ... But I came out of it able to walk. I never had a problem, I was able to play athletics, sports, and my father was enormously proud of this. It wasn't something to be proud of; it was something to be very grateful for! (LAUGHS) But he would always trot me out, show me to his patients, "My son had polio, and now he's up walking around." I was just very, very lucky, and I don't know why I was able to walk away from that. But that is one thing that really bonded me to Roosevelt. I really felt a kinship with his experience, and the hardship and all of that. From my vantage point, I really appreciated what he was doing, never really got into a debate with my parents because I was too young to do that, but where politics in the family came up was that [when] Eisenhower ran for President. I can remember being very conflicted, because I'd grown up under Eisenhower too! And Eisenhower was sort of the big figure in the War, and so it was very hard not to vote for [him], even though I admired greatly Adlai Stevenson, and became even more fond of him over time. But Kennedy, Kennedy's candidacy for the Presidency was the time when we, both Karen and I became very actively involved in the Democratic Party. [We] never talked about it with parents, because my mother was a Republican until she died, actually. She never changed.
Thompson: And what about religion?

Elder: Oh! Yes, we grew up - my mother was, of course, an American Baptist. The American Baptists are wholly unlike the Southern [Baptists], they're more like the Congregational [denomination] in some ways. And yet I always found myself badly embarrassed by having to say that I was a member of the American Baptist Church, because of what [Baptists] represented in the South, and all the associations. But it really came up when we came here [to Chapel Hill] for Graduate School. During college I was involved in the Student "Y", and became President of the organization. But I never [joined] a local church. Going all the way back to the farm, we belonged to a little Baptist Church, but it wasn't a big issue. It was all, really, my parent, they went, I would go.

Then, going to college, it was the "Y". In Graduate School [I helped in] the organization of a new church in town [a Congregational type of church], that was called the Binkley Baptist Church. The Minister was a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh, got his Bachelor of Divinity at Yale, and he was a spirit head [who eventually led the movement in the town for] desegregation and [also for other causes]. So it became very much an action-oriented Church, very liberal. But still, we always found ourselves "not at home" in that kind of environment, and [years later] we ended up, when I came back in '84, moving to the United Church of Christ, which is the Congregational Church, and that's what we belong to now.

My mother was always, though, a Baptist. My father was active in a trustee way. But religion was [more] central in my mother's life, a very important part. When she died, Jeffrey, who was quite the poet, sat down and wrote a poem, and gave it at her Memorial Service. It's called, "Centre Board Down". During the summer, at our summer place, she would always say, "Okay, let's drop the Centre Board," which is a nautical term for the [keel of the] sailboat! And the point of the poem was that, with Nana gone, the Centre Board's gone, and so we lost our steering mechanism in the family, and [the poem] focused on her significance. But she was very close to our three sons, and ... especially to Jeffrey, who got to know her very well. He was her [special grandson].

Thompson: Has it proved true that without her, the family has gone different ways?

Elder: Well, yes. I think, in a sense, she had two sons and we are very different people, and the only thing that really brought us together was the fact that my mother wanted us to be together for holidays. So when she died, we tended to go our own way, but I think, now, we're coming back together again. My brother's two children are very close to my three children, that happened anyway, and I think maybe it's partly because they've reached an age where this is very important. And so it's another generation that is sort of pulling us together.

Thompson: And your brother lives near here?

Elder: He lives about three or four miles from here.

Thompson: Is that fairly recent, then?

Elder: Well, he [moved to] Asia, South-East Asia, in '62, and he was there until the late eighties. That's a long time. His children grew up in Asia, they both went to Davidson [College], and they'd have a lot of trouble, they were in the Mission field, and they had a lot of 'trouble bridging cultures. I think that they've now managed to solve that problem, but it was not easy for them.

But those two have become very close to our three children, and they do things together like skiing, and camping together, so it's very nice to see that. [Karen was especially close to] my brother's daughter, [Beth], she - they were very close -- and Karen provided a listening board for her. And actually, at one point, invited her into our house because she couldn't stay with her parents. She had a manic depressive syndrome, a bipolar disease, and so they were going through a very difficult time in their house. So she stayed with us for a semester. Karen spent endless hours listening to her, getting her feelings out and all of that, and that [experience] imprinted Beth on Karen in a very deep way. So when [Karen] died, she felt really devastated by that, and it renewed her ties to this side of the family. She spends a lot of time over here. We have only one daughter across many generations, so she's being shared all around!

Thompson: Fascinating!

Elder: Yes, it is! Oh, it's really amazing, we have [three sons] and five grandsons. Jeffrey hasn't started yet, so our chances of having a daughter depend on Jeffrey coming through with one! Maybe that'll work!

But it is interesting that when my mother died, we were relieved not to have to spend these holidays together. We wanted to do other things, things with our own family, because the boys were everywhere. And so it was harder to be with her, and then also be with our children. Then when Karen died, it really marked the time when

Elder, G. by Thompson, P.
the cousins were all becoming very active, and assuming their role in the family, and so that has really cemented things a lot, because they have a lot more in common than I do with my brother, I think, although we have dinner occasionally together. But we're just very different people.

Thompson: What sort of "different" do you mean, then?

Elder: He... well, I think I always felt that he wanted to dictate how we should live. And I can remember him coming over to our Berkeley house, that was '63, and we were married in '58 -five years after we were married - and he was very critical about something, and Karen was so upset she ran upstairs crying. I'll always remember that. But it was almost as if he had a sense of how we should live, and there was always a dogmatism [in his views]. There was a lot of that coming back from his letters from the Mission field. That was something that we didn't want to have anything to do with! (LAUGHS) So the less we had to with that side of the family, the better. But the kids got along famously, and so it really ... Karen never got along with my brother's wife, I mean, they really were different people [as well. I think my brother's wife was always bothered by what she thought was the special closeness of Karen and my mother.]

Thompson: So, you were saying about how the polio could have been a life-shaping experience.

Elder: Yes. I think I felt like I'd been through a miracle, when I came out of it and could use my legs again, and could play, and all of that. Because when I went in, I couldn't even move my legs, and they had to carry me everywhere. And at that time, there was just no treatment for this [disease], and so a lot of people were in iron lungs, a lot of the young kids were. [Polio] just affected my legs, and I was sent to the hospital for a full five weeks, without any real contact with my parents, except I could see them outside, three floors down, and could shout to them. But none of that really had a negative effect on my life, except that I felt enormously grateful, that I had come through that and had the use of my legs again. And I think part of that was reinforced by how my parents felt too, because they were overjoyed by how [the treatment] worked. The experience of having all those shots in my back was probably the most powerful experience of the whole thing, because I was just a young child, and I remember the light, and putting all these shots in my back, without any explanation as to what [the doctors were] doing or anything. That was just a foreign kind of experience.

Thompson: That terrible pain?

Elder: Well, I can remember some of that, but they might have had me partially drugged so that I wouldn't experience that. But I can visualize the room that I was in. And then I remember doing all of this campaigning for the March of the Dimes and talking to people about the fact that I had come through it. And it's a good organization, So I really felt identified.

Thompson: Sorry, what was this Organization?

Elder: March of the Dimes it's called, and it was, I don't know when it began, or when it got that name, but people would contribute dimes to the support of polio research, and children would be the people out there trying to mobilize support for the Organization, and I can remember being at supermarkets, and I suppose we were Cub Scouts, young children like that. But it was a real scourge in childhood at that time. And then when we had children, and they discovered a pill that would solve this problem, and all of our children got immunized against polio. I remember what a tremendous transition that was, from something that could kill you, to something that would save children from going through it. That was '62/'63, because we had just come to Berkeley, and they were campaigning throughout the city, to make sure that all kids were immunized, getting their shots.

Thompson: And I think you used the phrase, you felt you were "blessed"?

Elder: Yes. I thought of it as a miracle, because so many - all I could see around me - were casualties. And I can remember somebody had given me a radio to listen to, in the ward, and sometimes I would fall asleep at night with the radio on, and the night nurse would get very very upset. And every time that would happen, she would wheel me out into the hallway and leave me out there. And, you know, something like that could spook a little child, but it really never did. I just thought of her as a very mean old nurse, you know! (LAUGHS) ... I know that hospitalization can be a very adverse experience and have negative consequences for kids - the separation experience. But it did not do that for me. So that, plus the War, they were very big ones. And then the move to the farm was another huge one.

Elder, G. by Thompson, P.
Thompson: But I'm wondering whether this sense of having been blessed, did that carry with you for a long time?

Elder: Well, I think there was probably my mother's primary contribution that one should live a life of gratitude, being grateful for what you have, rather than resentful for what you don't have. This was very much a Christian perspective on the world, and I think it was a [valuable] perspective, because it enabled me to deal with her passing. [I could] realize that I have nothing to complain about here, that I have a lot to be grateful for. That is a whole philosophy of aging. Instead of being so upset about what you can't do any more, [one should be] grateful for what you've been able to do, and what you still can do. It's a totally different - your glass is half full rather than half empty! (LAUGHS) So I think it was my mother and the kind of philosophy she had.

Thompson: So shall we move on to college now, 1953-?? What sort of place was it?

Elder: Well, Penn State was a very insular place, because it's right in the middle of the State of Pennsylvania, in a small town, State College. No matter where you started, you had a lot of driving to do to get there! (LAUGHS) And it was very hard to get out of there. So if you didn't have a car, you were there for a long time. Sometimes you could get out by taking a ride with somebody. Other kids would advertise, were driving to Philadelphia, "I need three or four riders" or something, "to share the car". But I never had a car during college. Karen never had a car. So it was a very rich campus experience, and [totally] unlike a commuter college. Everything that you enjoyed was there, and it was your life. And I think what made it especially rewarding is, I got very involved in student organizations. I was President of a few of them, and although I belonged to a Service Fraternity, I wasn't really very central to it. I worked there, I put myself through college by working on tables and working in the kitchen and so on, but the thing that I remember was how my involvement in all of these organizations, impressed the University on me, that I really became identified with it, and wherever I walked on the campus, I had experiences that were memorable. Karen also was very involved, and she was called "Hat Societies", at that time, like "Skull and Bones". I was a "Skull and Bones" guy. Karen was a "Scrolls" hat girl! (LAUGHS) And I think that she felt, also, that her involvement on the campus made the campus hers.

Thompson: How did you actually meet, then?

Elder: We met... this is a great story. The kids love me to tell the story! I thought it was such a great story when it happened, that I wanted to tell somebody on one of these radio shows, you know! This was... for a social scientist to do what I did... I was President of a service fraternity on campus, called "Alpha Phi Omega", and we had all kinds of service projects, including working as sort of staff for registration, and every time registration would occur, we would have to man tables and do this and that.

But there was one place in registration that was really key. It was the person who checked all the cards to make sure that the people who were going to registration had what they needed to have. And in my, the beginning of my senior year, I got that job, and I remember making a note of all the great girls that went by my stand. And I had a little card, or some kind of booklet, I remember, and I would put stars, one star, two stars, three stars and so on! (LAUGHS) And I had Karen down, I had put three stars on... She doesn't... she was always worried about that I told this! (LAUGHS) And when I called her, she thought I said, "Glen Miller", and I was really putting her on! You know, it's funny, when you met somebody, and you have this [chemistry]. She had a wonderful sense of humor, and I kept teasing her and we were laughing and all of a sudden, all of her cards fell on the floor, and so there we were, scrambling around, trying to get her cards back together! And I remember, to this day, what she had on.

And after registration, I called her and asked her for a date, just to meet at the Student Union. And she had just gotten out of a relationship, and didn't want to get involved in another one. But I wasn't ready to be denied, and so she said, "Well, just meet me. I have to go to this meeting of a student magazine, and we could have a quick cup of coffee, and then I'll run off". And that was the beginning of it.

And I never dated another person! And I knew, I told her that I knew, right from Day One, that that was it! I was very sure of it. It's funny! I mean, the kids find it hard to believe that I did that. [At Penn State], we have this leadership encampment experience, before the University begins, and everyone involved in major things goes to that. I'd fixed up with a girl at this encampment, and she was in the same dormitory as Karen, and as soon as I met Karen, I just didn't want to date anybody else. And throughout my last year of college, and through Karen's two years, she was a junior, this woman just made life miserable for her! (LAUGHS)
Thompson: But you were how old when you met?

Elder: Yeah, well, let's see, it was in '57, so I would have graduated in '56. So, having taken a year off and worked on the farm, was a really smart thing to do, because it enabled me to meet Karen! And ... I was born in '34, so ... 23. And then went off to Graduate School at Kent.

Thompson: Just before we go on, would it be worth talking about Karen's family [the Bixlers]?

Elder: Yes. Yes. And I wanted to talk a little bit about how this relationship developed. During that fall semester, I was President of this Service Fraternity, and during the Hungarian Revolution, the organization took on the responsibility of mobilizing support through the contribution of clothes of all kinds. And I can remember, to this day, a lot of us went out, throughout the State, over Thanksgiving, and we persuaded towns to get involved in this. And I did the same at Titusville, and they came down with this huge truckload of clothes and everything! So we had this enormous mountain of clothes, right at the gate of Penn State, on College Avenue. And the Friends Organization in town, fortunately, helped us deal with all of these clothes, because you have to prepare them to ship them, and all of that. And they were wonderful. But the whole business of getting involved in mobilizing the campus was quite an experience. And during that time, like, often you do in a relationship, we had some kind of dispute, and to this day I can't remember what it was about, but it was at the Student Union. But she went home, and then I went home, over Thanksgiving...

The plan was that I would go to her house for Christmas, that it would be typical after Christmas, and that was the time that I gave her my Fraternity Pin, and met her parents. Her father had a career in export and import for Congoleum [a linoleum company] up to 1957, and had the Latin American market. And at that time, it was just almost at the time when he had, he would lose that job and not be able to get the same kind of job again. He had a dispute with Congoleum about shipping their worst products to Latin America - you know, defective this and defective that! He was a principled guy. He got his undergraduate degree at Penn, and he was a graduate of Wharton [Business School. Paul Bixler was] a very well-spoken person, very well-read, a sort of intellectual in the family, and a great favorite of my children, in part because he was a very opinionated guy who had grown up in Latin America with his Mission parents. His father was a Presbyterian Minister. He had gone to Exeter, and had this international experience in a multi-racial society, so he had real biases that our kids could not stomach. And every time Grandpa would come, the kids would corner him, get him in the corner and start bugging him about these biases! And he just loved this! I mean, he would kind of egg this on, sort of encourage it. And I'll always remember the sessions that they would have, because he wanted to see them really work through the logic of this. So he was quite a teacher, and really a fine person.

The mother, Karen's mum, was a graduate of Beaver College, and came out of a much more difficult family environment, in terms of economics. Karen never had a good relationship with her. There was never a loving relationship between her mother and Karen. I think that maybe Karen was seen as in competition with her, or she saw Karen as someone who was receiving too much attention from her husband. I don't know. It's really hard for me to figure out why, why that was such a terrible relationship. It was a terrible one. It made Karen's life so miserable that she had to almost live outside the home with friends, or in the yard. And that's one reason, I think, gardening became a sort of a secret garden for her -- a place where she could go and be away from her screaming mom who didn’t care for her, and would never say anything loving to her. It's always astonished me how loving Karen became, coming out of a family where her mother rejected her from Day One, even rejected her just before she died, even though her daughter was caring for her. It's just amazing!

But her father was, I think, the saving factor in the family, and dearly loved his daughter, and they had a lot in common. So I think that was important. But when Karen was young, the father was not there very often, he was often in Latin America, and at that time, he didn't fly. If you go down to Latin America, you're down there for six months! (LAUGHS) So she was pretty much exposed to her mother, and I think that's why she developed her love for the out of doors, gardening. Her father loved gardening, so that was maybe another factor too.

Karen came out of a German [and Dutch] tradition. [Her father's] family goes back to the Palatinate region of Germany, and one part of the family has roots in Deventer up in the Netherlands, and we did some visiting of these different places. But Karen really had certain traits that we often associate with growing up Germany. That is, she was a very careful, thorough person, who loved neatness. And when we [visited] Heidelberg, we would drive around the countryside, she would be so impressed with how neat the courtyards were in [residential areas]. And she told me that she felt at home going to Germany and seeing how people lived, because those are the things that [were part of her], I guess.

Well, this shows up in the family, I think, in her parenting style, because she believed very firmly, in a work list for the kids, and every week the kids had a work list. And in her Memorial Service, Jeffrey talked about the work list, and it really [established] a sense of discipline, that everyone has something to contribute and
responsibility to make a family work, and everyone, every week, will have these things to do. And the kids all grew up that way. They’re now bringing up their children that way! Karen always has had a great love for the Amish [people], the Amish region of Pennsylvania, the craft work that they’re known for, and the Pennsylvania Dutch country.

Thompson: That was near [Penn State]?

Elder: Yes, it was. Yes. ... [When] I gave Karen my Fraternity Pin that Christmas, they were living in Philadelphia. The next winter, next Christmas, we were engaged, and in August we were married. So it was about a year and a half or so. [Karen was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and the Bixlers also lived in a community near Pittsburgh.]

I was invited by Penn State University, [to become an] "Alumni Fellow", [in 1988. Penn State] has about four or five of them at a time, and Raymond Fowler, who was a graduate of Penn State, Psychology, and is the Executive Officer of the American Psychological Association, happened to be in our group. But this was 1988, and we were invited to come for homecoming, which was in the middle of October, and Karen came with me. We had this lovely experience sharing, going over the campus together, and re-living the experiences that we had. And it was just great. It was a wonderful weekend, [very special]. We were there about four days. And I think that one of the things that’s really bound us to the campus, as other graduates, is the fact that we not only found each other there, but we were very involved in the campus, and those two things really were central. [Also there were a number of] Faculty who [became] important to us.

Thompson: Who, for instance?

Elder: Well, I think, typically, as an undergraduate, [that one would nominate] younger people. But I remember Sidney Siegel, who was a psychologist, very well-known for his work in non-parametric statistics. Siegel had quite a powerful mind, and I was so impressed with a paper I did, I got up the courage to pass it on to him, to ask for his advice, or recommendations, or whatever. He was not my teacher, but, somehow I did meet him that way.

And I think another person who was really significant, was an Assistant Professor in Philosophy, who’d just come from the University of Chicago. He taught Aristotle and Plato, and we happened to have a fine class of bright people around, I thought: it was such a live-wire class!

And the class wasn’t made [only] by him, but he was really a key part of it, and that whole experience was very memorable. I remember it well. I remember a Dean of Agriculture, who I went in to see, because I had this smorgasbord of a curriculum. I had a little bit of this, and a little fit of that, and I didn’t know what to call it, or how to ... I’d started in Agriculture, and I was now over in the Social Sciences. And he said, “Well, why don’t we call it ‘General Agriculture’?” And he was willing to let me just go through [on this basis]. And Jessie Bernard was a memorable person on the campus. But sociology [faculty] were not really prominent in my life, because I’d just got there at the end of my [college career]. I can remember some of the people on the campus who were sort of non-faculty, like the Chaplain, for example, Luther Harshberger, who basically gave the sermon at chapel, and many times we would go to that. He was also in charge of the “Y” [YMCA], and then he was replaced [Hal Leiper], and I worked with [Hal] who replaced him. The “Y” was a very important experience, and the Milton Eisenhower Chapel [building] was where the “Y” was located. I always remember going with Karen to the chapel [library] to study, ostensibly to study. We had a lot of books there, and we were going to study. And all we did was spend our time looking at each other! (LAUGHS) It was just so funny! Yes, [I remember the brown sweater she had on].

Thompson: What about friends, apart from Karen? Were there different groups? Or any friends that have remained from then?

Elder: Well, I joined an Ag Fraternity, and by doing that, I [made] sure that I wouldn’t ever run into any of these people again [since I ended up in the social sciences]. If you have a curriculum like I did, both in Agriculture and in Social Sciences, the Alumni Office doesn’t know where to put you! The Ag School sort of has you as an alumnus, and also the Arts and Science people do too.
Thompson: Why did you have such a mixed curriculum?

Elder: Well, I think I did, because [of the move to a farm], I thought, initially, agriculture. I was just fascinated with agriculture, because we’d just moved, and I thought, "Maybe there would be a career here", and so I started there. [But I soon] realized that my real love for topics, and so on, centered in the Social Sciences. I had read Riesman’s, *The Lonely Crowd*, which was really big at that time.

Thompson: So you’d picked that up?

Elder: Yes. Yes, I remember writing an essay on it, and I was much taken by a lot of the ideas.

I think the thing that shifted me towards sociology, was that I was never really interested in what people thought, apart from where they were and why they thought the way they did. [So that didn’t keep me in psychology.] When I got into these psych. Courses in my senior year, I did well in the courses, and had some excellent teachers who really knew some of the top writers. I was impressed with the judgment they had in picking out good people. But I realized that what really interested me was not either pathology, or personal efficacy, or self-esteem by itself, it really was the connection between that [psychology] and the larger social forces that were pushing people around. People were changing their lives because of them.

I think [this perspective] had a lot to do with [our own] moves, which made me think about how I’d changed. I know that a lot of sociologists have been in transition from one culture to another - either across classes, or across culture, or religious cultures, or societies. Going through that experience forces you to look back on yourself in a critical way; you gain insights that you would never have otherwise. And I think it really made me look at Cleveland in a totally different way, having lived in the countryside, and having come to the country from an urban environment. I looked at that very differently than anyone else there.

I also think of the War years as profoundly influential. [They left] puzzles in my head that I could not address, as to why certain things were happening as they were. But I remember it sort of leading me to certain classes, like on international relations, or whatever. But the puzzles as to the Holocaust, and how that could have occurred, and all of the large events that dominated our lives that we had little control over, but we really weren’t sort of pushed towards understanding how these life forces could come about. How could, for example, the Germans be transformed into a Jew-hating people, supposedly?

These were the things that really interested me a lot, and it crossed levels, it crossed sociology, psychology, and it required an understanding of history, and I liked all of that. So, you know, I think that was one reason why I have never been tempted to ... when I came here to Graduate School at Chapel Hill, there was no question that I would go into psychology. I was interested in psychology, and I admired it, but I never would major in it, because I really wanted an understanding of how society is organized and how the forces in society could make a difference in people’s lives, as they have.

Thompson: And you did take a minor in sociology, then?

Elder: I did.

Thompson: With Jessie Bernard?

Elder: I took a minor here.

Thompson: No, sorry, I mean back at Penn State.

Elder: No, I did not. It was, it was simply an undergraduate degree, with a little bit of everything. I had organic chemistry, and I had two semesters of German.

Thompson: And no sociology at all?

Elder: One.

Thompson: What did that consist of?

Elder: That was just a course on social problems. When I completed my work at Penn State, and had decided to work, I was given this opportunity to work on the Dean of Men staff at Kent. The guy who was Dean of Men at Kent State, was a speaker on the Penn State campus, his name was Glen Nygreen, a sociologist, [who] got his Ph.D. at the University of Washington. He persuaded me to join him on the Dean of Men staff there, and one of the
requirements of working for Nygren was that everyone [could be] in Graduate School, whether it be psychology or sociology. So I chose sociology. And managed to get my Master's degree in a year [1957-8].

Thompson: Mmm. I don't quite understand how you got to Kent, though?

Elder: Yes, the guy who was Dean of Men [at Kent], spoke at Penn State, to our Service Fraternity, and afterward I just got to know him, and we got in touch, I got in touch with him after he left, [about] the conversations that we had had at Penn State. He [gave me an] invitation to come out and see the place, so, I managed to rent a car, go out to Kent, see the place there, and to actually sign up for a year, working on the Dean of men staff. And how that connected me to sociology is that Glen is a sociologist. He was also the way I was going anyway. So it turned out that way. And I managed to do my Master's degree.

Thompson: What kind of sociology was that?

Elder: Well, it was a reference group sociology for me. I was interested in the transition from home to different college environments, and depending on whether you're rural or urban, or whatever your family environment, community size-wised, how this influenced your shifting reference group identifications. So I was really interested in how this transition influenced the individual, how they thought of themselves. That's what I worked on. And it also kind of led me to the University of North Carolina, because Glen Nygren had studied at Seattle, at the University of Washington, under Charles Bowerman.

Bowerman was the new Chair down here, and had just [received a] big NIMH grant to study the reference group orientations of kids - sort of like James Coleman did in The Adolescent Society. He was planning on drawing a sample in the South, and also the Mid-West, and following these kids across the middle school years, into high school. And I thought that was so exciting, because it was kind of connected right with what I'd been doing in the past. And so that [was the] link was through [to] the network, basically. I had applied to places like Wisconsin, I can't remember them all. Wisconsin, I know, was one of them.

But I really had decided to go to Chapel Hill. It was because a key person, probably the intellect of the Kent State Department of Sociology, was a product of this Department. He was James Fleming. He was not a published person, but he ran [stimulating] seminars at his home. And he had read everything that anyone could have possibly thought of, and he was just an incredibly bright person, and very stimulating. We just loved being in his presence.

We took his course, anything he offered, we'd take it! And so he was very keen on my going down to Chapel Hill. He had been here, as a graduate student, under Howard Odum, and so he knew the earlier period.

Thompson: One thing that I asked you, but somehow we didn't get an answer to, was about friends?

Elder: Yes. Penn State, I really did not come away with lasting friendships. Where they came from was Graduate School, because I had ties with people through Karen at Penn State, but I had shifted from Agricultural to Arts and Sciences, and had very little Social Science. So the people I really knew were the people who were active on campus [such as Tom Hollander, now a trustee of Penn State], and these are people that we [seldom] maintained social ties with after we got through Undergraduate School. [However, Tom and I have kept in touch over the years.]

But we certainly did with Graduate School. And I think that's my entering cohort here [in this photograph. We would see them socially, we would write to them. I would see them at meetings, and they would, even after retirement, come back here and we would see each other. So there was quite a lot of interchange....

Bill Rushing was a person who was in my cohort, he was right next, we lived side, virtually. And he went to Vanderbilt and stayed there for much of his career. He's in organizations, and so I never really connected very much with Bill, although I'd see him at meetings, and we would have a coffee. But, thinking of people in my area of work, that didn't come along until later, because it wasn't there at that point.

Thompson: So when you came to Chapel Hill, that was to do a Doctorate [1958-61]?

Elder: It was.
Thompson: Yes. And what was that about?

Elder: Well, it was probably shaped, to a large extent, by the fact that I was going to do it under Charles Bowerman, on his project. So, in a sense, I didn't have to say I wanted to work on his project because I really liked what he was up to. But I really didn't have, beyond that, have a clear sense of where I was going. Later on, I framed it as a social structure/individual behavior framework, and then from there, I moved to a life course [framework], when I realized that I was really interested in changes — changes in the environment, changes in people, and their connection over time. And that happened, really, as I started working on *Children of the Great Depression* [1974]. It's amazing, I could [experience] my own transformation as I worked on that book. Initially, I was going to subtitle the book, "Social Structure and Individual Experience", but I ended up titling it, *Social Change and Life Experience*, which was exactly the theme that I'd been pursuing. And it became more and more of a life course study.

Thompson: So what's the story about how you got to Berkeley [1962-7]?

Elder: Yeah, well, that's again ... This was the period of the social networks, professional networks, because Charles Bowerman was a very close friend with John Clausen. Clausen was the Director of the Laboratory of Socio-Environmental Studies at NIMH, and he had Irving Goffman, and a lot of fine people in his laboratory. John had just accepted the Directorship at the Institute of Human Development at Berkeley, and I had applied for a Post-Doc Fellowship through NIMH [National Institute of Mental Health], which is called an "Independent Pos-Doc", where you can apply to NIMH, and you can indicate what you want to do, and who you want to work with. It's not programme oriented. It's not like applying to a place that has a Fellowship Programme. And I, basically, decided I wanted to stay here for another year, and so I did. And that was 1962, because I'd got my degree in '61. And my aspiration, at that time, was Charles Bowerman, finish off the book, to get a book out of this. But Bowerman was not a book writer, and if you're not senior, you'll never get that book written, you know! And that book never has been written! And so I went to Berkeley, and I went to Berkeley because Bowerman said to John, "I have this young man who really is interested in many of the things you are doing". And so John came down to Chapel Hill and I interviewed with him, and committed to going to Berkeley at this time.

And I didn't realize what an incredible transformation [I faced in the years ahead]! Because Berkeley was a place unlike any other place on earth. It had nine or ten ASA Presidents [American Sociological Association], and it had so many significant people in the discipline, like Irving Goffman, Herbert Blumer, Seymour Martin Lipsett, Reinhard Bendix, Kingsley Davis. Kingsley was the Chair at the time. Let's see, who else? William Kornhauser was there, David Matza also. Charles Glock in Religion, and John Clausen. Harold Wilensky, who came from Michigan. Harold was really an important influence in my development of the Life Course, through his work, and I want to talk a little bit about how that happened. But it was just the most incredible assembly of talent, and I will always remember coming to my first Faculty Meeting, and all the chairs were arranged in a big circle, and I really didn't think about prominence, the imminence of all these people, you know! When the Faculty Meeting was over, we were introduced, and [the faculty] would come over and introduce themselves. And I was really just so naïve, which was probably a very good thing, because if I realized what I was getting into, I might not have been so eager to go!

You know what I mean?

I'll always remember walking across this campus [Chapel Hill], and telling John Chibout in Psychology, John was on my Committee, and he had just published, *The Social Psychology of Groups*. He was probably the intellect in the Psych Department. I loved his taciturn straightforwardness. I waved to him, and I said, "John, I'm going to Berkeley", and he called back, "Good luck! You'll need it!" (LAUGHS)

And it was, you know, an incredible time, with all of these very prominent people. And there were three other people in my cohort. None of those people really stayed around. I was asked to stay around, and I remember Phill Selznick, coming up to me and saying, "We like what you're doing?" And, "We'll [hope you will] stay here". Neil Smelser was in the [faculty]. And can you imagine, a Department like this? Herb Blumer organized the Department, it was formed, I think in 1956/57, out of Social Philosophy. Then Blumer, in his golden way, just recruited all of these eminent people. Everyone wanted to go to the mountain of transfiguration, I guess, where this rather amazing revelation of ultimate truth in sociology was taking place. But it was a very exciting place, top graduate students.

And then it just exploded amidst all of the agitation on the campus, and ... the friction within just led people to go anywhere they could go. Martin Trow was also in the Department. These people, they would... like Irving Goffman went to Penn, Kingsley Davis pretty much retired shortly after that, Reinhard Bendix went to Political Science, some people [shifted] to Stanford. But the Department really lost its imminence, and it took a long time for it to come back. It had uneven leadership, leadership that was so bad [at times] that the University had to put in its own person as Chair. That was during the seventies. (LAUGHS) But now, it's really come back again, and it has got a stable set of excellent people [on faculty], and they know what they are and where they're going. But at that time,
they were just a lot of people with very big egos in a very small place, and it was a very explosive place to be, for that reason. But it was an amazing place to [experience], if you had time to think about it.

**Thompson: And did you get a chance to talk to these people?**

Elder: Oh yes, I did. Oh, yes. I spent a lot of time with Neil Smelser, and Neil was probably the closest to my age as anyone there. And David Matza, and Martin Trow, had a lot of conversations with Marty. Marty Lipsett also. I had many opportunities to talk to him. I spent quite a bit of time with Kingsley Davis. And because I know his wife quite well at that time, we would get together, and we were over at his house for dinner one time. But for a junior who doesn't have graduate students, who's just gotten there, you're really a peripheral figure in the Department. It was when I started getting graduate students that things really began to crystallize for me.

**Thompson: But was there a Department Seminar, where you had a chance of hearing them?**

Elder: Yes, there were seminars that we would have, like I'll always remember one evening, with Howard Becker and David Matza, and the debate was on issues in social deviance. The house was just filled with graduate students. It was much more then a seminar. We would have seminars at the Institute of Human Development that I would go to... We would have Faculty Meetings all the time, and I remember going to the Faculty Club and being with people there. But it was not a socially conscious place, in terms of bringing people together, doing a lot of socializing. [John Clausen and his wife represented our primary connection to a faculty house.]

Elder: [We had a] Very lively series of seminars at the Institute [of Human Development]. The Institute was primarily organized around psychology. John Clausen came, and he was really the first sociologist, and I was the second. So we were, clearly, a minority. And it was my first, it was not my first introduction, but it reinforced the minor I had in psychology here, because they had a great library at the Institute, and they were really... If I thought about it, I would have sat down and done some interviews with those [older faculty], because they were senior people, and they were about ready to retire. Oh, I could have interviewed people like Bernice Neugarten, Mary Jones, Jean McFarlane, and Bob Mussen.

**Thompson: Would you like to say something about them?**

Elder: Yes. Well, Jean McFarlane was the organizer of one of the pioneering studies, the Berkeley Guidance Study. It's a Berkeley study of people born in 1928/29, and it was heavily focused on the family. Her interest was in marriage and what role that played in people's lives children's lives, and she ran that study. It was a study of about 214 families... I think the first data collection was at 18 months, so that it was about 1930 that the first data were collected. But then just about every year through the thirties, up through 1945, and then data were collected at several points [in adulthood].

The big follow-up was 1960, then another in 1970, and another one in 1982, and they have been followed-up recently. So, in a sense, it's an incredible life history that they've been able to accomplish. Jean is a person who knew Dorothy Thomas, or W.I. Thomas's wife, and they wrote to each other. They were part of a very small community of women who were doing things that very few women were doing in the academic world in the twenties. And W.I. Thomas [wrote] a book with Dorothy Thomas [The Unadjudged Girl], and at the end he talks about all of [the early] longitudinal studies. So he really knew them, and it was a connection between Thomas and his desire for launching longitudinal studies that he talks about in several of his essays. Indeed, his Presidential Address talks about that, and what was going on in the country, especially in California.

**Thompson: Were you, at this point, aware of Thomas's own work?**

Elder: I became aware of Thomas's work as I got into Children of the Great Depression, and that then sort of led me to actually interview Jean McFarlane in 1981, in her own home. She had retired, and this is where I began to understand the network of people who were in her life. She never had a formal position at Berkeley, that was true of a lot of very prominent women.

The other woman who was quite prominent in Nancy Bayley. Nancy was Director of the Berkeley Growth Study, which is smaller longitudinal study of about 70-80 people born in 1928/29. And this study was organized and run in a way that made it difficult to integrate with other studies, even though they were the same cohort. For example, Nancy collected data in 1965, no one else did! And so there was less co-ordination between what she did

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Elder, G. *by* Thompson, P.
and what others did. The third study was run by Harold Jones and his wife, Mary Jones, and this is the Oakland Grove study that I based *Children of the Great Depression* on. Then [later I] began to work with Jean McFarlane’s Guidance Study [archive].

**Thompson: But just going back to Jean, can you describe her as a person?**

**Elder:** Yes, Jean was a very large person, and very opinionated. And the feeling I had, when I arrived at Berkeley, was that the last thing you wanted to do was to mess around with other people's data, that if you had responsibility with the Oakland Study, just stay there and be blind to what's going on, because there was a lot of friction in the Institute. There was a lot of conflict, disagreement, between people running different programs of research, and very little effort to get people to come together. And it was only after Jean retired that one could really bring them together. So in 1972, that was the first time that the [studies] were really brought together in a common data collection. Jean had retired, but she was larger than [life]. I was there during that year, on a sabbatical, I'd come back from Berkeley, and Jean was still in her office, and entertaining all kinds of people, and she was larger than life. I never really knew Jean before, as a younger faculty member. She was always at another part of the building, and I never had anything to do with her data, so I never really had a chance to talk to her. Marjorie Honzik was her student, her [close] associate, I don't know if you could really call her a student, but Marjorie got her Ph.D. and did a lot of the work on that study. And when I was there in '72, Marjorie was the one who was kind of running the show.

**Thompson: They were all psychologists?**

**Elder:** Yes, they all were. But [few] had a formal position in psychology, which is really interesting. Jack Block did have a formal position in psychology, and is well known, did one of the books on the Berkeley Oakland Study Archives. His book was called *Lives through Time*, and it was published in the early seventies, and it was what you'd call now a “person-centered analysis”, where you cluster people and follow them through time, and you use factor analysis to identify types of change across that. But his wife never had a formal position. Jean Block was good enough to be on any faculty, really. It was always an embarrassment to me, the anti-women sentiment on the campus. I heard it in Sociology Faculty Meetings, and I heard it everywhere, and you could feel it at the administrative level too. A lot of women who were qualified never got a position there.

**Thompson: Bernice [Neugarten], did you know her?**

**Elder:** I knew Bernice, I knew her. She came to Berkeley to help everyone think through the next step in the studies, and that was 1967, and the next follow-up was not really launched until ’70-’72. I really got to know Bernice when I had returned to Berkeley [1972-3] [for a sabbatical year]. I was invited back by a senior [faculty member] in our Department, Professor [Rupert] Vance, who was a former President of ASAA in 1944, and was well-known for his social historical demography. [Though] he was a person crippled for life by polio, he got up at Faculty Meetings, I heard, and said, "Let's bring Elder back".

[And this invitation was very attractive - despite some of my earlier experiences there.] When you're in the cross-fire at Berkeley between faculty who are really in their own little worlds, and you really have a minimal stake there, you're in between [the faculty] and the students. The students don't want you to teach you classes, the Senior Faculty do want you to do that, [along with the administration]. The students want you to stay out because of the conflicts on campus, boycotting classes, to try to get their way with the administration. There was a lot of friction, and it was very hard to truly concentrate. I can remember coming out of Faculty Meetings so tight, I could have run about 20 miles, you know! (LAUGHS) I can remember coming out of Wheeler Auditorium after a Faculty Meeting, between a phalanx of students on both sides, who were all waiting for us to make the big decision. And that photograph is in "Berkeley, 1960s", which is a film that you can pick up at a video store anywhere. (LAUGHS) It really transported me back to that period!

But just going back to the Institute, the third study was one organized by Harold and Mary Jones. And Harold had died, and John Clausen was the replacement for Harold Jones. He was a psychologist from Columbia. And Mary Jones never really played a key role in running the Oakland Study. John did. And so I never got to know the Berkeley Study at all, until I came back in '72, and that was when I was given the opportunity to develop a comparative cohort project, involving people born early and later in the twenties.

*Elder, G. by Thompson, P.*
Thompson: But what were you doing on the first stage, before that?

Elder: The first stage was simply focusing on ... I was asked, my responsibility was coding data at the Institute that had not been coded, and a lot had not. And it involved data collected in 1960, which was the big follow-up, funded by the Ford Foundation. None of those data had really been coded, except that “Q sort” [methods] had been used to develop measures of personality on people. But in terms of using the data to get social information on the life course of these people, no one really had any understanding of how many people were in the Korean War, Second World War, what kind of work life they had. There was no information like that available at the Institute, at that time. And so those were the things that I had to work on.

Thompson: So you were reading through these original schedules?

Elder: That's right, yes.

Thompson: It might be worth describing them?

Elder: Yeah. They were amazing, because they would be as long as 75 pages. I remember, especially, the wartime experiences that were described, because [they] would often come up at different points in the interview, and [when] you put it all together, and it's more vivid than Saving Private Ryan, by far! (LAUGHS) Huh! This was 1962, so it was over 15 years after the War, but my guess is that, for a lot of people, it's the first time they had been able to talk about some of these experiences. There's a section on marriage, work life, on kin relationships, on children. There was a section on social and political beliefs, on religion.

The problem, I think, is that the interview was not set up to systematically acquire this information. It was really set up more to understand the personality of the person. So one of the big problems we had was trying to fill in the missing gaps. It was not a structured interview, so it was hard to do. You would get a very vivid picture of people in this, and it was very helpful.

And John Clausen, in his American Lives, draws upon those kinds of interviews to try to get an understanding of life history, and how people had changed over time. John was very much a W.I. Thomas qualitative life history person. I mean, I didn't fully realize it, but John always was interested in the case. "Show me the case", you know. And so I would be working with all of this coding activity, and John would have a single case on his desk, and he would be fascinated by it, would ask me to come in, and we would talk about this case, about how you would work from the case to ... to what kind of people, you know! (LAUGHS)

Thompson: Do you feel he made that leap in American Lives, or not?

Elder: I don't, I don't think he did. No, I really don't. I think those interviews, or those life histories, represented the heart of what he was really looking for, and the qualitative part ... that's a book that really doesn't work very well, frankly. It's not a book that's well-structured at the beginning. So, if you asked John, "What is your theoretical structure you're getting?" -- he really doesn't have one to speak of, and I think that's part of the problem of the book. But it does remind me of Thomas, in the sense that you have the quantitative part, or the sort of social demographic part -- description of communities, of families and so on -- and then you'd have at the end, the life history of so and so! (LAUGHS) John had half the book of that, and half the book on the more quantitative part, and the two don't work well together. Really, they're just kind of two different things. The life history part is much more successful in coming out with an understanding of how the Depression influenced the life of these people, than is the qualitative part. The qualitative part is, has nothing to do with the Great Depression, yet he calls it ... 'After the Children of the Great Depression', or something like that, and it has nothing to do with history, to speak of. History comes in, I think, only in the life history part of the study.

Thompson: And you felt that difference already, in the sixties?

Elder: Oh yeah. Yeah, I did. I, I didn't ... I guess I didn't step back and say, "Why not?" This is the way John really wants to proceed, because he was forcing me to do all this quantitative coding, and conceptualization and all of that, and I thought, "Well, maybe he really wants that", you know. But when you see him actually put a study together, and realize that what he really wanted to do is just life history. And it's interesting because at Chicago, John got a job at the Institute of Juvenile Research, and one of his responsibilities was reading life histories of these kids. And I think it had a lasting influence on him, and he has always really appreciated that.
Thompson: So he was the person that initiated those retrospective life history interviews?

Elder: No, let's see, the retrospective.

Thompson: The ones that were done in the eighties.

Elder: Yes, he did. He did those in the eighties. Right. Coming out of my work with *Children of the Great Depression*, I used a 1985 survey that we did, and in that survey, a lot of the questions were questions that I'd come up with, through my coding experience. So they would deal with "Living one's life over again, would you do it a different way?" Turning points, a question of turning points, I think was present at that time. The notion of ... what would be another good example of ...? Oh, in *Children of the Great Depression*, I was really interested in ... there was a section ... I think it's Chapter Eight, maybe, where I use data early on, but I also use data in the adult years, to show ... oh, it's, "What was the best time of your life?" "What was the worst time?" And the people who saw things getting better, versus those who thought that the very best time had already been lived, were very different people! (LAUGHS) And I think that was something that came out of psychiatry, to some extent. There were people who were playing around with those ideas there.

You know, I came away from this experience much impressed with Bernie Neugarten's pioneering efforts, because she was, I think, you know, the age, and the role of age in people's lives, in a very differentiated way, focusing on timing and the extent of which age really was an avenue for thinking about time, and how people's lives are on different timetables. And she did this in the fifties, way before Matilda Riley was up there doing it. And I don't think she ever fully got the credit she deserved. She never got her work together in a way that would powerfully shape the field. She had an anthology of her papers in 1968, but she could have done that in 1960, she had enough out there.

She was still though thinking about the life cycle as a construct, and a lot of people use the term "life cycle", instead of using the term "life course", and I've made an effort to try to clarify the meaning of "life cycle" and "life course", and to argue that the concept of life cycle comes out of a number fields, but population biology would be one. All populations have a life cycle, but not everyone has children, and, therefore, has a life cycle, whereby a next generation [descended from them] is born and plays out its life and so on. And if you think of life in that way, then it's very much a part of the way one thinks about family, the generations and the life course. But it's not a replacement for the "life course" [which] is broader than that.

Thompson: So this psychiatric input, where does that fit in?

Elder: Well, I think George Vaillant, he's strictly out of that tradition in his work on "The Grant Study People". [They were men] who had graduated from Harvard. George gave a lecture once, and he was talking about a psychiatrist writing in the thirties, who had a way of depicting individual life courses, by describing their lives in terms of when they ended a role, they left it. That kind of graphical depiction is something we do a lot of now, and it's very interesting when you compare cohorts when you want to really know at what point do they overlap? Are they doing the same thing at the same time in history, or not?

Thompson: Because some of the earlier material that I saw, and maybe it's more a psychoanalytic perspective, but there was a lot of detail about mother/child relations, wasn't there? Observation.

Elder: Yes, yes. And there was not much on the adult years at all. This one guy obviously, yeah ... maybe I'll think of his name, but I've got it in George Valliant's writings, in his book. But George is the only person I've ever heard talk about this. (LAUGHS) But I got into doing this because it was a good way to think about cohorts, and where people's lives are, and to what extent they overlap or not, and whether they were really engaged in a totally different lifestyle at a different time.

Thompson: So now you're talking about when you came back, and you had the two cohorts?

GE: Yeah, yeah.

Thompson: So where did you go during that interval?

Elder: I went here.
Thompson: You came back to Chapel Hill [1967-72]?

Elder: In ’67,

Thompson: And on the Faculty by that point?

Elder: Yes, I was. And I had an appointment at Berkeley, access to the data and everything, in ’72. I came back on a sabbatical and spent a whole year there, organized the research team, and did all the coding on the Berkeley data. And that’s where the comparative work began.

Thompson: And you weren’t involved in any of the interviewing sweeps?

Elder: No. I was there when they were doing the interviews, but I never interviewed a single person. I just had the results. You know, it was sort of under the control of somebody else, so since I wasn’t always there ... they hired interviewers, and they trained them. John Clausen is the only person I can think of [who interviewed].

Thompson: So you were saying that John Clausen was [one of the few people] who did his own interviews?

Elder: Yeah, as far as I know, Jean McFarlane, to my knowledge, would do a lot of the editing of the interviews when they came in, and she also did some interviews herself. In fact, when she did the data collection, she didn’t have tape recorders, and people had to write interviews down, and some of those initial interviews were incredibly rich. You can see Jean McFarlane’s clinical background. ... She would meet them often, because the studies had a lot to do with giving access to services, of providing services for families, during the Depression. And it’s one reason the study sort of lost its control of its experimental [design]: in an experimental group, they could not say to one person, “Yes, we can help you”, and to the other person [in the control group], “We can’t help you”. And so that whole matched control design was, was just simply untenable during the thirties.

Thompson: So they intended, originally, to help out.

Elder: Yeah. Yeah, they did. They had an experimental and a control group. And they didn’t collect as much information on the control group as they did on the experimental, and that was always a problem for me. But in the later years, they treated each group exactly the same. It was just the early years they didn’t. They realized that their plan to have a control group was wishful thinking, because everyone was called upon to help, and so they provided a lot of counseling. They really referred people to good people in the community who could help. That’s what they did.

Thompson: So, was Jean doing some of these interviews herself, or simply meeting people?

Elder: Yeah. You see, I think it’s possible she did some of the interviews, because she certainly met all of these people, and she had a lot of observations about them. But I thought that other people [were involved as well]. I was told that there were social workers and others who went out to houses and did the interviews out there, the interviews were done there.

Thompson: But, yes, there is observation in their homes, isn’t there.

Elder: Yes. Yes, there is. But ... yeah, that’s right, there is. There is. So I’m not quite sure. It’s possible that she did a lot of those, because they’re certainly rich, and very good on the marriage relationship and the personality. Those two things are her interests. But the first interview is not very long. I mean, it’s something that might last three, four, single-spaced pages. (LAUGHS) But it’s great fun to read, I must say. The experimental group had about 111 families, and each one of those families had a binder like that, and you would have interviews, and we coded every single one of those. I read every single one of them, and did a lot of reading before I sat down and then wrote the Code Book on the interviews. But it was a remarkable experience to be able to read that kind of detail on these people.
Thompson: So they came alive for you, even though you'd never met them.
Elder: Yes, they did. Yes, when I meet [the study members] I'm always surprised, because I [don't know what they look like]. And that was true on the Berkeley and the Oakland Studies; they really came alive in my imagination. I thought I really knew them! Just like reading book! (LAUGHS)

Thompson: And you did then sometimes meet the real person?
Elder: Yes. They would sometimes be at the Institute, and say that, "I am so and so. I am a member of such and such", and it was always, I think, a saving factor for me that I didn't know the name with the ID number, so they were totally independent, I never could place a name with an ID number, because I think it could be a temptation to connect the two, and then you're always in jeopardy, you start thinking of people and use their names. And, you know, I was told that Berkeley people are everywhere in Berkeley, and so if you're at a party, don't talk about the project, because you might be talking to grandchildren, you know, people who know Mum and so on, and it could be dangerous.

Thompson: Did you think they had a sense of belonging?
Elder: Oh yes, they did. And that was also true of the Louis Terman study, on which I've done a lot of work, a lot on his work. Those people had such a sense of belonging that they insisted that their kids be part of the study, and it was a great disappointment when Terman died and no one was there to follow-up their kids. That was a lost opportunity too, that would have been a golden ... you could have done [marvelous] things with a follow-up with their children, as they were so unusually special. But the Berkeley and Oakland Study [members went], they really were identified with people. For example, Marjorie Honzik, her presence there was really important because they would send out cards every year, and Marjorie would know the family, and know the children, and be able to sort of ask how so and so is, and they were not strangers. They felt like they really had a place there. I think that they do really have this feeling of being part of something ... It was [enjoyable] when I finished Children of the Great Depression, I would get letter from people who had read the book. I mean, the book was sent to every single one in the study, and I would [receive] a letter saying, "I read such and such, and I think that you have the error on page so and so, that it didn't happen this way, it happened this way", or something! (LAUGHS) It's really unique when you have your study members still alive, and still talking to you! (LAUGHS)

Thompson: Yes. I'm wondering whether belonging to the group may have given them a bit of a lift?
Elder: Well, yes. [Consider the '72 follow-up.] I wasn't there, but [IHD] brought everyone back. This was, I think, in relationship to the '72 follow-up, and I thought they might have had Margaret Mead, or somebody unique and special, well-known there. But it was a whole evening up there, and they really did everything to get them involved.

Well, I think one of the things that you always wonder about is, if you do collect data on people, does that, in fact, make a difference in their lives? And the answer, one answer could be that everyone in the study is basically treated the same way, so you'd have a constant, really, across the sample. It may be that you're making these people into ... the effects of the experience are not as severe as they would have been otherwise, but still, if you analyze the data, the effects are quite severe. And you compare the results to other samples, and you get a sense that, yes, there might be some difference, but it's not a very big difference, and it would not change the picture at all. It might move the scale up a little bit, or down a little bit.

Thompson: And what about the people who dropped out, did you have much information about them?
Elder: We did. And ... yes, we do have a lot of data, a lot of information on them, and typically, you know, there was a lot of people from the lower classes, that is a standard loss category when you're following people up. There was quite a lot of work done on that issue of attrition, because every time we would submit a grant proposal, that would be an issue.
Thompson: But isn't there a pressure, when you put in for a grant, to state that the attrition doesn't really affect the results? I had a feeling, working with the National Child Development Study that some of the people who disappeared were the ones who were failing.

Elder: Yes. Yes. You would never find that out from them! (LAUGHS) No, you wouldn't. Yes, I think you have a lot of information on them, but you don't have that kind of information, where it's sort of self-definition of "might have", although a lot of these people are at greater risk of having committed crimes, or having done such and such. That's something that, I think, we could easily get. The kind of data collection that is done probably wasn't as thorough as it should have been on those kinds of things. Yes.

Thompson: So when is the moment when you brought together these different ideas? Is that the '72 period?

Elder: No. Well, I, in '65 I had worked all summer, and I put a manuscript of about 115-120 pages on John Clausen's desk, and I said, "This is something that I'm finding on the Oakland Study". I was look at economic change, and showing that one could get a handle on this, that it really made a difference and so on. And John was sufficiently impressed that he cited this paper in "Advances in Family Development," a chapter that he was doing at the time. But he never thought I would ever do anything with this, and so he was very surprised when I wrote the full manuscript. The next year, basically, I worked out chapters on the study, and then I gave them to the University of California Press. But I really wasn't there yet, and my transition to Chapel Hill gave me the time to, basically, work out, step back and work out the conceptual framework, to sort out the analytic structure of the study better. And so the second time when I sat down and wrote it up, I was so much better prepared. It was good that I really didn't go anywhere the first time, because I'd done a lot of work coding, and in analyzing the data, but I hadn't made the full transition to a life course framework at that time.

Thompson: But what was the framework that you had, as you were doing the coding?

Elder: Yes, it was a life course one, but it didn't have the nuances and the detail that I was able to come up with in Children of the Great Depression. And I had not really ever, at this point, sat down and written an essay on the life course, I think, in fact, even when Children was completed in '72, and then it went to press in 1973. In '72, that was the summer of my transition back to Berkeley. I went to Berkeley with the manuscript, and I sent it to Chicago Press, and they sent it back to me, and I was able to make some changes in it and so on, during that year, so if I say May of '73 first, it would be the May of '72, you know, it would be May of '73, that was when May of '73, I had returned the manuscript to Berkeley, to Chicago, and it came out in early '74. But that involvement with the Berkeley Study and all the reading I did, enabled me to be much more differentiated and to deepen in the richness of this, of the study. So it was a far better thing for having sat around for a little bit, and not having come out as soon as it might have otherwise. It was hard, because I really didn't know anything about the transition I was making, and no one else did either! (LAUGHS)

Thompson: It was a conceptual transition?

Elder: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was.

Thompson: Where did the ideas come from for that?

Elder: Well, they came from a variety of things. For example, I was ... I think I read Bernice [Neugarten's] work. And I also asked Hal Wilensky if he would let me see his Code Book on the Labour/Leisure Study in Detroit. And a Code Book is a marvelous thing, because if you really do it right, you provide all the rationale as for why X is here rather than here, and it really is a conceptual exercise. When I read Hal's Code Book, I realized what I was doing on the Berkeley and Oakland Studies, that it really was heavily a conceptual exercise, and Hal's Code Book was really great, because what he did was, he was still working with the concept of life cycle, but he wanted to look at the interlocking nature of life cycles. So there was a leisure life cycle, a work life cycle, and a family life cycle, and that was very much the kind of thing that I wanted to do, life course – look at family, look at the interplay of family, work, leisure, child-bearing history – and so Hal gave me a way of ... sort of encouraged me in this direction, and also gave me some ideas for developing variables, because he had developed some really interesting variables there, ways of capturing life course combinations and patterns, and also inter-generational patterns.

And so it was just a kind of a thought-provoking prod for me to read it, and I was in the process of, of developing the Code Book on the Berkeley and the Oakland Studies, and I think it improved that Code Book immensely. But it was quite an eye-opener when I looked at the Oakland Code Book, and I looked at the Berkeley Code Book.
Code Book, and I realized (LAUGHS) there was a huge difference between the two, just in terms of the richness and the detail, and what I was asking, and that could well be, in part, just what I had to work with. Because the Berkeley Study is a much richer study. The Oakland Study, it's more demographic, much more information on biology, less on the social side, whereas Jean McFarlane's [Berkeley] Study is very rich on the social side, and quite weak on the biology side. So it probably was very much a combination, I could do more things. But I also had really advanced in terms of ways of thinking about people's lives, and how they're put together, and so the Berkeley Study shows that.

**Thompson: Were Erikson's ideas an influence?**

Elder: Erik Erikson was, at one time, a staff member of the Institute, I think '38, '39 around, and I knew Erikson's work, but Erikson was interested in identity, and I was particularly interested in the need to contextualize people's life.

I think of the life course as part of, really, a large scale contextualism movement of the 20th century, putting people in context, or organizations in context. And the real demand I faced was, “How can I put people's lives in context -- the history, the social ecology -- in terms of where they happen to be at certain times in their lives, and also taking good account of the interdependencies between lives, the connections between life courses?” So that was the number one thing I wanted to do.

Erikson's work is useful as part of addressing the identity issue, in the sense that I think that identity is a [good] match with life course, because if you go through a transition, your identity has changed, and so dealing with social identity, or psycho-social identity, [is important.] I think it's a construct, a psychological construct, that fits beautifully with life course. But I never used Erikson's ideas to talk about generativity for example, as a phase of a person's life, but I never saw it as a psycho-social building process in a person's life. It describes an activity, and it probably, in doing so, describes how a person is influenced point in time. A lot of people have tried to go places with Erikson's model, but they haven't been very successful. It has not been a theory that has really taken off, and I think that perhaps it's so, because there are many other ways of looking at people, and this is just too limiting to be able to really say that much about people.

But it's certainly thought-provoking, and it certainly focused attention on the issue of resolving issues, and that if you don't resolve them appropriately, you end up with one category versus another, and you have more difficulty making the next transition. And so those ideas, I think, are built into the perspective of cumulative disadvantage and advantage, that we do carry forward the problems that we haven't resolved. And so we see people in their fifties trying to deal with issues that they put aside early on, I think, having to do with parents, their relationship with parents, issues of that nature. But it's, it will always be important work because it forces people to think about things they wouldn't think about otherwise. (LAUGHS)

**Thompson: Were there any other figures you mentioned, who were an influence?**

Elder: I think that one of the things that was important for me, at Berkeley, was that no one could be there without thinking about the big issues of the times, and most of the people on the Faculty were dealing with urbanization, of the world, or democracy, the big constructs in our vocabulary, and so it helped to reinforce the connection between individual experience, on one hand, and societal experiences, or societal changes, and global changes. And I appreciated that, because if I had come to the Institute of Human Development from another place, it could have been easy enough just to focus on the individual experience, and ignore those larger changes. But it was really a good place to try to keep your eye on both ends, and not lose one as you paid attention to the other. It's very hard to do this because, by definition, if you're focusing on one, you're not looking at the other, and it's hard to tell both stories at the same time.

**Thompson: And it's working out a way of doing that that was the real achievement of those years?**

Elder: Yes. Yes, it was, yes. Trying to! (LAUGHS) It was amazing. It was really a remarkable time, and I think, of all the times to be there, I was there at the right time, because I came when everyone needed the life course, whether they knew what it was or not! (LAUGHS) All the [study] people had grown up, and they didn't have any idea how to think about their lives from childhood to adulthood. John [Clausen] wanted to do it with the concept of career, but there is so much more. I mean, you could think of it in terms of multiple careers, you could use the career concept as the concept for trajectory or whatever, or pathway, and people are on multiple pathways that are interlocking at a point in time, and I think that what was so striking for me was how the Berkeley staff was largely indifferent to the context in which people lived, and they came up with examples, or explanations.

I can remember, I was, I was much taken by the extent to which the Berkeley staff was indifferent to the context in which these children were growing up. For example, they had collected all of these economic data, but
they never used it. And then the kids grew up, and when they reached for an explanation for why kids who were doing so badly, as children, turned out so well as adults, they would not look to the lives they’ve led, but would look inside the person, or how they worked out relationships with people.

One of the best examples of this is Jean McFarlane’s effort to try to explain the Berkeley kids, the boys were very young in the Great Depression, and many of them came out of the Depression feeling badly about themselves, having no sense of direction in their lives. As adolescents, they seemed quite lost, and they didn’t do well at school, and, and when Jean looks at them at age 40, she can’t believe how well they’ve done. What she doesn’t do is ask, “Well, what kind of life have these people led?” Some of these people went into the War, and some didn’t. And it made a lot of difference. The kids, the boys, who left home and went into the military, often did so as soon as they could, to get away from home, and you can see the developmental change in their life, up to age 40. They gained self-confidence, they gained a sense of assertiveness, and they were doing quite well in their jobs, they’d completed their educations, and yet Jean never really looked at this at all. She really was looking at a different thing. I always use this as an example of the Institute’s contextual perspective.

Lives are lived in a changing world, and if you study those lives longitudinally, over time, and ignore the context, the situations they’re living through, you’re going to miss most of the story. And I think that’s the big point, for all of these longitudinal studies that are going on throughout the world. We really do live in an age of longitudinal studies, and it’s so easy for people to ignore context, and just do the study and forget about where they’ve been. I can’t do that without missing a large part of the story, and I think that probably is the number one point that life course theory and research has to offer, that lives are always lived in context - historical and spatial - and you can’t look at historical time without looking at where it’s happening. And you can’t look at where it’s happening without asking when it’s happening. And then those changes make a difference in how we live out life, and that process has everything to do with who we become and how we are, psychologically, at life at age 50.

So I think this is the major contribution that we can make to the study of lives and human development: is to get the people who are doing the studies, to realize that it’s not just simply a cohort sequential design that they need. They need to pay attention to the changes that are taking place in the lives of these people, in a macro sense as well as a micro sense, and [to bring them] together.

July 9, 2001

Thompson: We’re at the Carolina Population Center. So after that return to Berkeley, then you come back to the University of North Carolina, at Chapel Hill - in fact, you were on leave from weren’t you?

Elder: Yes.

Thompson: And you’re here [University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1973-76]?

Elder: I was, I stayed here until ‘76, 1976. I was then offered a chance to help organize a Research Centre at Boys Town [1976-79] in Omaha, Nebraska. And they said, “Bring your research team, and we’ll fund that”. And it was too much to resist! I didn’t know what a disjuncture that would be in the lives of everyone, for my family and everything. But I brought people with me, two people in particular, and then, having spent two years there, I had to get them back, and it took another year to get them talked into something. So I over-extended my leave from the University, and at that point was, for the first time, going into the job market.

And the job market experience was an incredible experience for me, because it came at a time when I had completed Children of the Great Depression, and that was fairly well-known, and offers would come in from [a number of major universities]. I considered invitations from Chicago and Wisconsin and Cornell, Indiana, and Vanderbilt. [Well, one of my favorite stories is] I was sitting in the Chair’s office at Cornell, when Bill Sewell called me from Wisconsin. I didn’t know how to answer him, because here was the Chair of the [Human Development] Department at Cornell! And [Bill was asking] whether I would be interested in Wisconsin. And so it was not an easy situation [with so many options], before I made a choice and I just went there [to Cornell]. This time, I got all these invitations, and I had to weigh them, and there were apples and oranges, and I had to take into account my family and all that, and it wasn’t the simplicity of making a commitment and going. So it was an enjoyable experience, in one sense, of being able to meet people in different parts of the discipline, but it was a really trying experience for all of us.

Initially, I thought I would go to Wisconsin, but everyone wanted to be closer to the East, with family being quite old, and so Cornell looked increasingly promising, and I decided to go to Cornell [1979-84]. I had a joint appointment in Human Development, on the one hand, and Sociology, on the other hand. Cornell is a private as well
as a public school, and it joined the two parts of the campus. And that turned out to be a very good experience for me.

But what I'd hoped to do at Boys Town was to help organize that Center, which proved to be a very difficult thing. Boys Town is a philanthropic Organization, and they were raising money, initially, to care for boys, orphan boys, but over time, orphans became a rarity, and memory-disturbed kids became much more common, and so they changed their clientele, their population. Boys Town looks like a big campus. It has all the facilities of a campus, with large school classrooms, a church on the property, and lovely, fraternity-like structures, with live-in couples as staff. So it was really a high class kind of operation. I thought, initially, that I might collaborate with one of my historian friends, and do a social historical study of Boys Town. But they were not very open.

[Boys Town] runs by the Catholic Church, and they were not very open to research, period. And I think creating a Research Centre at Boys Town, and then doing the same at Stanford, and also at Catholic U in Washington, was not something they felt very comfortable doing, [since] they had no control over the ideas that came out of it. And I think they worried about that a lot, and eventually they tried to get out of the deal. So Boys Town had a lifetime of about four years, probably, across the board, but it was an incredible offer, initially, of so many thousands of dollars of support every year, for 25 years. And they built this phenomenal structure on the edge of a lake, and you had all the space that you could possibly want, it had large studies and everything.

**Thompson:** What facilities did you have here, at that point?

**Elder:** What did I have? The thing that made [Boys Town] look really attractive, on a temporary basis, was that I was deeply involved in the comparative study of the Berkeley and Oakland cohorts. I had a full load of teaching, and it was just impossible to do all these things – train students, teach four courses, and run the study and get some publications out and things. So, increasingly, I looked for a way to solve that. And I could have, I now know. I could have gone to NIMH [National Institute of Mental Health] and the chances were great that I would have had a research career development award. In '85, I did get a Senior Award that lasted for 15 years, and it was just terrific, [essential], because it enabled me to teach [and move along my research. But the teaching could be limited to a seminar per year.]

**Thompson:** Is that what brought you back here [Chapel Hill, 1984-], then?

**Elder:** Well, I think the family definitely wanted to come back, and I knew I had that opportunity to get a Fellowship at NIMH, a senior one. It could have fallen through, but everything worked out beautifully, and it lasted for 15 full years, from '85 through the year 2000, and it, basically, supported my salary, and provided travel money, and it enabled me to get grants and, instead of putting my salary on my [grant budgets], I could just pay it out of the Fellowship. And so it was. Then in 2000, the NIMH decided that the Senior Awards had come to an end, and they wanted to use all the money to fund new junior people, so that's why it ended. But it was, it was a [marvelous] thing, while it lasted, for me. (LAUGHS) Yeah.

**Thompson:** And what's your attitude to the relationship between teaching and research?

**Elder:** Well, it's very... I have a lot of teaching, I work with a lot of students, whether it's teaching or research, and I think what I was interested in doing was lowering the mass course experience, because I'd had plenty of that over my career, and having more opportunity to work with graduate students, post-docs, and train them at a level that I had not had before. And so during this period I did teach Freshman Sophomore Honors, [but mainly a graduate seminar on the family]. So, in a sense, they were getting a lot for their money. They were getting all this money that really paid for my salary, and they were getting [up to] two courses a year. That was much better than teaching full time. I wrote *Children of the Great Depression* in let's see...it was 1971/72.

**Thompson:** Yes. It came out in '74.

**Elder:** That's right. So in 1971/72. And during that time, I taught four courses, and I can remember what a drain it was on everybody! I mean, I would put the two courses together in the morning, so I would teach one morning, like Tuesday and Thursday, and then the afternoons, I would come home and write. And Monday would be a writing day, and my wife never saw me, the kids always came to my study door, and they wondered where Dad was, you know. And it was just constant work, to try to get it done in one year. But I had done a lot of the thinking through of doing this, so it was a matter of completing the whole project.

*Elder, G. by Thompson, P.*
After having finished [the book], I [received] a three-year NIMH grant to compare the two cohorts — the Berkeley and Oakland cohort. That grant gave me a chance to move another step, and I wanted to take off some of the pressure that I felt was on my family. I was full-time teaching, and working increasingly with graduate students. And so the Boys Town adventure seemed very attractive. I didn’t manage to achieve what I wanted to achieve out there, but I’m not sure. I think if I’d stayed here, on a Fellowship, I would have accomplished more, because I knew where everything was, and I had great resources and colleagues and everything.

But I just didn’t know that at the time, and so I came and then went into the job market and ended up at Cornell. And, you know, its funny how fate works, because if I hadn’t done this, I would never have gone to Cornell, I would never have been a colleague of Uri Bronfenbrenner. We were right around the corner from each other. We co-taught courses. So I had psychology as well as sociology in my courses for graduate students. And we had one [marvelous] seminar with 25 students from all over the campus. The students asked for this course, they wanted both of us to be there, and they would show up, and it was on top of everything else, that was irritating! And it was every week, and it was during the lunch hour, and running into, say, 1.30/2 o’clock. But the students played the key role in this. We were sort of coordinated, and I think they found [the debate between Uri and me] very interesting and satisfying to listen to, between two disciplines, and the differences that emerged out of that. So it was a [peak] experience, and we were there for five years—’79 to ’84.

Thompson: Could you say a bit more about Uri, as a person?

Elder: Well, Uri was the founding figure, in many ways, of the ecology of human development. He got his degree at Michigan, and was a very different kind of psychologist, even from the beginning. He was born in Moscow and came to this country as a very young child. And his immigration experience was always very prominent. He was always an international person. He had connections all over Europe, and he spoke multiple languages, and did some work in Russia, and did some work in Germany, so his research was international. Uri was very much in the socialization tradition that I was in for a while. And I moved out into life course, as other people frequently did, which brought time and social change and dynamics to the study of people’s lives. And Uri moved into ecology in a big way. So, by 1976, he was writing major papers on the ecology of human development, and in 1979/80, he had this new book on *The Ecology of New Development*.

Thompson: And by "ecology", you mean something different from the usual sense of the word.

Elder: Yes, it is. He had a multi-level view of the environment, and his first book was really heavily focused on what sociologists think about all the time, so it’s not particularly new for us, but it was for psychology. You had the micro environment, the meso environment, the environment that connected different settings together in the life of a child. And then the macro environment. And his work is still heavily cited and [it provides a] rationale for putting children and families in context today.

Thompson: Which you had already believed in?

Elder: Yes, I’d always believed in it, and Uri always thought we had great kinship... I mean, he really loved *Children of the Great Depression*, cited it all over the place in *The Ecology of Human Development*. And I think Uri changed. The big thing that was missing in Uri’s work was a sense of temporality, and he got that over time, but it was a kind of add-on to his model. I always thought that context was not a very dynamic concept in his formulation. That is, it was more a vessel in which people seemed to be situated, rather than a live organization, for example, or a firm, or an institution, or whatever, or a population. So a lot of things that he worked with were very static, and he, I think, basically saw the interplay between us, over time, as leading him toward much more of a life course view, that is not just for children, but for older people as well, and inter-generational. I think he became more that way through the interchange that we had. And, in fat, he started thinking of himself as a life course person, which is kind of strange! (LAUGHS)

Thompson: And you became friends?

Elder: We did, and still are. And we’ve gone up there and spent time with him, and when I was President, elected President of the Society for Research in Child Development, Uri was always a key intellectual critic, and so I could send him a manuscript, for example, and he’d know what I’m talking about. He was very helpful in getting me to reach out toward psychology in a way that psychology would understand, and so I could try it out with him, and
make some modifications, perhaps, and often it would improve it enormously. So this trip to Cornell, then, was probably the most successful one in terms of really connecting me to psychology, although many people, and the psychology part of me is that. But it's a funny thing, it's like a painting, you can see whatever you want to see in the painting, and psychologists saw me as one of theirs, and sociologists saw me as one of theirs! (LAUGHS) Even as early as 1979, people like Paul Baltes and others would always describe me as, as a developmentalist out of psychology, somebody who's really wedded ... But we had totally different [perspectives]. He was largely indifferent to the distinctions that I was trying to make.

Thompson: Sorry, who is this we're talking about?

Elder: This was Paul Baltes [at the Max Planck Institute], in Berlin. And for Baltes, it's been a long haul, and we've argued, over and over again, about his life span developmental psychology, and why it is not [contextual]? Why isn't it? And it isn't because, what a developmental psychologist is particularly interested in is the developmental processes and not the interplay with a changing world, and so that it was increasingly [clear that] Baltes divorced himself from any part of trying to understand this larger world. He started talking about cohort sequential models and, and designs that basically enable you to say that if you observe this developmental process in this cohort, and you do it in this adjacent cohort, and it generalizes, then it's basically equivalent to having multiple samples. But Paul never really became interested the questions I posed. I always want to know, or have an answer to [the effects] this transformation [had on people]. And Paul would start with the developmental processes, and sometimes reach out, or just talk about contexts as if he was really dealing with them, but they were pretty much just words in his analysis. (LAUGHS) They never became anything more than that.

Thompson: So when did you come across him first?

Elder: I came across him in '74. I wrote a paper in 1972, that was published in the American Behavioral Scientist and it was entitled, "On linking social structure and personality", and it was written as I was writing Children of the Great Depression, so you could see that I was making this transition from to thinking about problems from a life course perspective. And Paul ordered - the thing I remember is dozens of cards coming from Penn State [Paul's university at the time]! (LAUGHS) [See next side] Saying "I really like this paper".

And I didn't know him before, really. And, well, I wasn't quite sure what was going on here, because you could always Xerox these copies. He didn't have to keep asking me to send bushels of them, and so on! But, I think it was '73 or '74, he had a Conference at Penn State, and I participated in that, and this developed quite a ways. We became members of the same Social Science Research Committee on the Life Course. And when Paul made the decision to go to Berlin, he arranged a dinner with me and Karen, and his wife, and I think his purpose was to persuade us to go to Berlin with him. And it just wasn't something that [we wanted to do]. I think it was partly a reflection of the fact that Paul really didn't know how different we were! (LAUGHS) He eased over all of that.

Increasingly, I've been put my finger on some of the issues, and this paper I gave in Stockholm last summer, which is the chapter that you've just looked at, on the "Life Course and Aging", it really talks about the response of the life course model, and the life span model, to the contextual challenges of this period. Both [perspectives] represented, to some extent, an effort to put the organism in context. But they followed very different paths in doing so, and their questions were different, and they ended up becoming more and more differentiated, rather than coming together.

And even though I consider myself interested in issues of life span developmental processes, what I am primarily interested in, is [bringing] context – an institutional, structural, social context, cultural context – [to lives]. That tells us something about how people develop, and why they develop the way they do, and when roles change, and people change their environment, and they migrate from one setting to another. These were questions that Paul [ignored].

Thompson: I was also wondering about whether you could say just a bit about your relationship with interactionist thinking.

Elder: Actually, coming out of sociology, interactionist thinking was very much a part of the way I would approach, for example, the study of socialization, but I would also couple with it a more structural view. So I always had a cross-level view. And one can think of linking social structure and personality, as a multi-level way of looking at this. And you'd have institutional arrangements at the macro level, and then you would have these influences being processed and being expressed through families, interactions of families, family members, through peer groups,
through all kinds of interpersonal processes. And they became a way of thinking about why, how people developed the way they do. That’s kind of similar to what Children of the Great Depression represents, because it’s the family that represents the connection, the link, between the economic changes that were taking place and the children, this cohort.

**Thompson:** So were there any particular interactionists who you became close to, or were influenced by?

**Elder:** Well, Leonard Cottrell was here [at UNC], and so I had a chance to really interact with him. Let’s see. There are people who are not necessarily here, but people I would read, like Anselm Strauss, for example. When I told him this, he was so floored (LAUGHS). This was at the end of his career, and I just wanted to let him know that [I admired] his writing from status passages to his approach to qualitative work, which I thought was very generative and thought-provoking, and a good way to proceed, in many cases.

**Thompson:** You mean the grounded theory approach?

**Elder:** Grounded theory, yeah.

**Thompson:** But you weren’t doing that yourself?

**Elder:** Well, you could think of actually working with archival data and building in that way, and I think saturation of interviewing to a point where you’ve known, you’ve basically covered the ground, you’ve interviewed enough people. I think, in some ways, you can think of archival data doing that too. You read and read and read until you think you really understand this process (LAUGHS), and then you call it quits and you move from there.

**Thompson:** That’s really interesting. But just one or two other ideas. You’ve just mentioned linking of lives. I mean, I find that idea interesting—link lives. Could you say a little bit more about your ideas on that?

**Elder:** Well, you know, in Children of the Great Depression, I talk about interdependent lives, and this was a more economical way of communicating the fact that you never deal with a single life, you’re always dealing with people who are connected to other people, through their social ties, through their roles, through their shared experiences. And linked lives was, I think, a way of capturing that in a very personalized way. And it also fits, very nicely, the movement of the advancing network research, where we’re talking about the link between people, which is then modified by their links to, to a third party, and so it would fit the way we began to think about interdependence, and talk about it. And it was also consistent, to some extent, with growth, and the thinking about social capital and social ties. But I think I felt that the advance in social network research, even though it was very static, had increasingly begun to become much more dynamic. And dealing with friendships evolved under different circumstances, becomes a very interesting life course kind of question. One of the challenges, today, is to deal with shared lives, or link lives, in a developmental way, in a life course way.

**Thompson:** How could that be done?

**Elder:** Well, I think that we have some good examples of it, actually. One of my [former] students, Avshalom Caspi, used a wonderful data set, were stored at Murray Center, and he found out that if you think of relationships as regulatory systems, and once you’re in a [stable] relationship, you follow a course of development that is pretty much structured by the other. Once that relationship breaks down, changes occur, and you no longer follow that path. You can show that relationships are, basically, regulatory, and in traditional work with the Oakland and Berkeley Archives, he shows, also, the same kind of pattern.

And I believe that we’re beginning to understand that even when we deal with individual development, it’s almost fiction in a sense that who we are has everything to do with where we are, and what relationships we are in, and what relationships we’ve been in that have influenced us. So that link lives can be thought of as a developmental dynamic, as well as a contemporaneous phenomenon. And I think one of the challenges we’re going to have this coming year is moving in that direction with a longitudinal data, and trying to look at friendships that way, as [youth] move from high school into college, and beyond, and see if we can’t put some of these principles to work and see if we can understand why people develop the way they do.

**Elder, G. by Thompson, P.**
Thompson: Would household panels be another example of that?

Elder: Yes, they could, except that I don't think they've collected the data. The National Study of Adolescent Health was explicitly designed within a network framework, to have friendships, to interview friends, and to follow them across time, no matter where they go. So, no one has ever tried to do that. This whole period from leaving high school to entering college, or jobs, or whatever, or getting married, is kind of a blank, in terms of our knowledge of the other. It's not easy to study. And I think the panel of this National Study of Adolescent Health, has a really good opportunity to pursue this problem.

People here [at the Carolina Population Center] are keenly interested in doing this, so we're going to bring in a couple of people who have, in fact, been doing it, and expand everyone's notion of how you do it. There's some really good technical people here, who [address] this issue, from the standpoint of analysis and weighting, and all of considerations, but thinking through it theoretically, and designing it in a way that would make sense, is going to require the sort of input from people who have actually attacked a problem like this. And Caspi now at Wisconsin, might come down and talk about this, although he's not worked with Adolescent Health. One of the post-docs here, who is going to Georgia, is up at Michigan right now, taking some of the courses on modeling pair data, and I think this is going to be really interesting to take full advantage of this, and see what we can do.

Thompson: And there's another idea which, I think, goes quite a long way back, which is about human agency and competence. I'm wondering whether you could talk about how that evolved in your thinking?

Elder: I've always thought that human agency was a premise of symbolic interaction. It was an underlying concept of the organism there. In fact, if you go back to the sixties, you have behaviorism, which is a good example of people as pawns being shaped by the environment, and my psychological friends would say, "Sociologists, like you, you're all happy about this (LAUGHS), except that it doesn't square with reality!" And then you have people, like [those] following linguistic developments on the frontiers of the new cognition, who also had a notion of the individual as an agent of their own socialization, their own psychological development.

And I always had this sort of built-in preference for an agency view of the organism. ... Traditions in psychology that spoke about this, like Robert White's work on effective confidence. [However this view] must have come out of life history and symbolic interaction thinking, that the individual is a constructor of their life course, of their world. [The actor] can be constrained in all kinds of ways, but what we are really interested in is the interplay between the two, not between a pawn and a social structure, but between an agent, between an actor - a person who acts and thinks - and developmentally, we can study how people change from childhood into adulthood, and become much more effective as an agent, because they understand so much more. So, developmentally, it's very consistent, because the story of development is the story of becoming an independent actor - a person who can act on his own, or her own, and can be self-directive.

Thompson: And do you think that your ideas have changed about that, over time?

Elder: No. I really... I think I've always been very... I think my interest in development, and my interest in the life course and social structure, always has this interplay between the individual, who is able to take a situation that's constraining, and work out adaptations that can only be understood in terms of an agency view of the individual. So I've always... I think the new psychology, the new cognitive psychology, really favors this, and the Skinnerian view of the world has gone by the wayside to a very large extent. It's funny how Watson, in the twenties, talked about it. Skinner rode that horse for a long time, and was very persuasive, but very few people really believe this today. I think that what is coming in is a very active view of the individual, and action theory in Europe is an expression of that, and also symbolic interaction always has been.

Thompson: Now, another general issue is about the way that you can interlink, in terms of methods, you can interlink the qualitative and quantitative. And you've got very special experience of that. I was wondering whether you could reflect on how your ideas of that have changed?

Elder: Well, I think, for years we though that the way to analyze data was, what is now known as the "variable centered approach", that is, you have characteristics of individuals and you analyze these, these data. Nowadays, we have also the option of a person-centered approach, where we view people, according to profiles that make sense, and we can also utilize their voice, their description of themselves, so that we have types of people, and we can think

Elder, G. by Thompson, P.
about how types of people change over time. Person-centered approaches are so well suited to the use of qualitative information, and they help to [provide] a real understanding of what a profile means, and how people think when they have this profile. Without it, we don't really fully understand that. And so the two come together very nicely in that regard.

Thompson: But when you started, of course, you didn't have...

Elder: I didn't have that. But at Berkeley, there was this debate between two branches of [psychometric studies]. The cluster analytic people, Robert Kleinman was the senior person in the [cluster analysis] area, and he did a lot to advance cluster analysis there. And the factor analytic people were the variable centered approach, that was created by Jack Block, and all of these people were really the top of the line in terms of their field. But there was this debate going on. And I think that Jack even used inverted factor analysis to actually cluster people, and so even at that early stage, he was interested in arriving at types of people who followed certain pathways across time.

Instead of grouping people in terms of their developmental processes, I would group them in terms of their social relations or their social characteristics, and then make comparisons between people who had followed different pathways. So I would work on the social side, and they would work on the developmental side, and I think we were different in that way. But I always found it very useful to arrive at types of people who have followed different life courses, and ask about are the implications of that? And one way to find out is to go to the interview and have them actually talk about that, or to put it in their own voice, and give meaning to their own experiences, that you couldn’t get from the quantitative material.

Thompson: So, in a way, the process is that immerse yourself in the interview, you then use quantitative techniques when you’ve sorted out different clusters of people, different types of experience, but then, at the end, you have the experience to use as evidence?

Elder: In a sense, there is this back and forth approach that, that [you ask about]. How did I arrive at the variables in the first place? You have to come up with a codebook. Once [this is done], then you would use quantitative techniques to identify the passage over time, the implications of all of that could be determined by going back to the materials that gave rise to it. So, in a sense, in a working out, or getting to the point where you can actually code people, means that you have to comb through all of these interviews, and... and all kinds of instruments, and pull that material together. [With this accomplished, when] you'd have it all pulled together, and you would be discovering through quantitative analysis that [certain] people went this way, and [others] followed a different path. That would then enable you to go back and say, "How is this revealed in the meaning [of their lives]?” So it is going back and forth.

I can see a lot of different ways of doing this, depending on the data one has. We could have a data set that we work with, and what we don't have is the qualitative, open-ended interviews. And we might want to subset this data set and interview these people, trying to really understand what is happening here, [a meaning] that doesn't reveal itself through the quantitative analysis.

Another way to go is to just interview all members of one family, to try to think of the family unit as a whole unit, and to arrive at themes that define this family. That is something we have tried to do with the grandparent data, and the young people in the Iowa Study, where we have two [models] of information on [the grandparents] – we have their children, and we have their grandchildren. And we have all of the living grandparents, so that we’re able to look at even the interplay between size of family and so on. But I think there are a lot of different ways to go on this. The thing that really made *Children of the Great Depression, Children of the Land*, and even the work we did on *Children in Time and Place*, [very distinct and different,] is that we had access to observations and rich qualitative information that helped us understand what was going on, because it was a deeper understanding that we would not have had. It took us beyond the...
Thompson: You were saying about qualitative and quantitative data, and how you organized that. You didn't like quantitative data on its own.

Elder: Yes. I remember an exchange that we had when some people from the US Department of Education down here, while I was still working on my dissertation. I shared with them my feeling that there are great advantages in a project if you have both qualitative and quantitative [data], and bring them together. Because in this particular study, I had the qualitative [data from] 60 interviews of kids, very detailed, and so I had that to appreciate. Then we moved to a quantitative mode with questionnaires that were sent out to something like 20,000 kids in the North and the South.

Thompson: What's missing if you only have the quantitative data?

Elder: Well, I think that you don't really [know, we wouldn't] have a good understanding of the mechanisms involved. [This means that we] can speculate as to what's happening, but the meaning of people's actions would not necessarily be clear, and so [we might] end up [by concluding], "It could be this", and "It could be that", you don't know for sure. And so I felt, at that time, even at that early time, that I needed to have both of them. And so when I went to Berkeley, I did have both of them, and there was a great advantage, in a very different sense, in that I wasn't involved in data collection, but I had all of these interviews in the Archive that I could work with.

And now I'm working with one of the largest nationwide studies in the country, called the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and it has tremendous advantages in the sense that it has contextual information - on class levels, communities, neighborhoods, and schools, that includes also a measure of friendships over time. [We are] to be able to locate kids in a context of friendships, peers, and do a pretty good job of studying peer processes.

In addition, [the sample] has racial and ethnic diversity. I've never had that in any study I've done. We have a very substantial Spanish-speaking population, Cuban/Mexican, Central American students. We have Puerto Rican students. And there are large enough segments, or sub-samples, so that we could actually work with them to some extent.

Thompson: And you have West Indies as well?

Elder: We don't have West Indies, no. That would be an interesting group to work with. We also have a very substantial Asian population – Filipinos, Chinese, and a smattering of other cultures too. And then we have a large African American sub-population. So, for the first time, I've been able to look at the cultural meanings of, for example, maturation, of growing up fast versus growing up slow, and the implications of that for Hispanic or African American [youth]. And I think, virtually everything we have done has profited from the multi-level nature of the study, and also the ethnic and racial diversity. But it is a sample that has a lot of the characteristics of the Census. It's more than that, in the sense that we have data from the mothers, and some data from the fathers, we have data from the kids. So you have multiple respondents. But we don't have any construct adequately measured, in some sense. I'd like to have more information on every construct.

Thompson: And when you say "data", you're talking about ...?

Elder: These are interviews where the interviewer goes out and actually interviews them. The very first wave of data collection was carried out in the schools, and it was purely a questionnaire approach. But the second wave [included] interviews with the mothers [and fathers] of kids, [along with interviews of the youth]. The third wave features interviews with the adolescents. The fourth wave, just collected, has employed advanced ways of collecting data easily, audiocassettes, collecting life history information on kids by using a computer. [This data] will carry the sample all the way to age twenty-six, and out of college and so on. This wave of data collection is going to give us a chance to really bring time into the picture. We haven't really had that. So we've had to look more at the richness of their environment, populations, cultures and so on, but we haven't been able to follow them across time as much as we wanted to.
We've done a lot of studies looking at the event of growing up in different kinds of environments — the Spanish neighborhoods, for instance, different kinds of school, what the implications are of ethnic diversity in the schools. We also worked to obtain a sense of whether there are other significant people, like coaches or teachers, or ministers, or people who are involved in athletic, community athletic organizations, peers, religious communities. We've tried to explore and assess the contribution that significant others in all of these roles might make in counteracting the disadvantages in the lives of the kids, and also offsetting disadvantages at home, where the kids really don't have parents to turn to. This provides an opportunity to look at that. So we've looked at the role of being involved in a religious community in a low income neighborhood, for example.

Thompson: And with your earlier work, because you were saying how you'd get to know each case, but on this scale, you can't possibly. So is there any way of dealing with that?

Elder: Yes, yes. There are ... [Sometimes] you can understand how a process works in a population. Beyond that, you need to design a study that will give you the richness that you need to have. [In a large nationwide study], we found that we could not go into the field and interview the [respondents], beyond what we're already asking. Because we would jeopardize the operation of the kids and the parents, and we don't have the kind of close relationship that we've always had with people in our studies. So there's a definite limitation here, but, on the other hand, the other studies couldn't do what these studies do [inspiring a broad scope, population diversity, etc]. It's a real trade-off, but it's turned out to be much more rewarding than I thought. And for the first time, it really brings in culture that I've never been able to address.

Thompson: When you say "culture", you mean...?

Elder: I'm talking about ethnic cultures, like, for example, the Spanish, Chinese, [and African-American].

Thompson: Does that make you feel that the paths that you've begun to work out as important, are different?

Elder: Oh, I think, at this point, (LONG SILENCE), I don't have, really, because looking back on it, I've realized that virtually all of the [other studies I've directed] had this focus on trajectories of resilience, doing better than expected, versus trajectories of increasing risk, doing badly. Now, Children of the Great Depression had it, because we basically expected, everyone expected. This generation [was thought] to be a lost generation, but it turned out to be quite an accomplished generation. And so the story is one of resilience. And the Mid-Western study is clearly one of resilience too. And I did a lot of work on the Second World War, as well as Korea, looking at the effect of that experience [successfully equips] people, in many ways, for dealing with some very difficult things in their lives. And so I think the themes that are present in these studies, were present in the other ones [as well. The central question is], "How this is working in this population, versus that population?"

Thompson: Another general point is that... some qualitative sociologists would say you should only use your own data, that you have to do the fieldwork yourself. What's your view about that?

Elder: That's a view that's very embedded in psychology too, the feeling that you you've got to use data collected by yourself, and that every student should have that experience of going into the field and collecting their own data. I did participate in data collection, not face-to-face interviews. But also, at Berkeley, I designed the instrument, sent it out, and got a lot of very good information that way. The only thing I haven't had is a lot of face-to-face interviewing. The only time I've really had a lot of that was in preparation for my dissertation, where I interviewed 60 kids for three hours or more. I have not been able to do that in any of these other studies.

I think if you have open-ended interviews in an archive, you read them, and you read a number of them, you gain everything except the facial expressions (LAUGHS), and you can even imagine that because, in some ways, in some cases, they're recorded, because the interviewer will say, "So and so, tears came to his eyes when he said such and such". And when you really get to know them, you might not recognize them if you see them on the street, but you understand their psychology quite well.

Elder, G. by Thompson, P.
Thompson: And you did a book, I think, about Working with Archival Data, and I right?

Elder: Yes, I did. I gave a series of lectures at the Murray Center at Harvard, and I worked with two students [Eliza Pavalko and Elizabeth Clipp], and we were there for two workshops, in successive years, and compared all of these overheads. I realized that I had to educate every single generation, literally. And what I needed to do is to write it down, every word, writing it down, and I told the other two to do that. And then [we] put it together as a Sage Monograph.

So it's all based on our involvement in the Terman Study, which, in some ways, has a resemblance to the National Study of Adolescent Health. It's not based on face-to-face interviews, it's based on questionnaires that are formed and then mailed out. But many of the questions are open-ended, and that's great, because we were able to look at those materials, and really get some understanding of these people. But we had to do massive re-coding of these data, to get an assessment of health, wartime experiences, and late life career.

Any one wave of data in itself is inadequate. The Terman Study is probably the longest-term study in the world, because I have people who were born in 1902-1920. They started collecting data in 1922, and there are 13 waves of data, all the way up to '92, so we have 77 years of data on these people. What no one had ever done was to bring them together in a life course framework.

What we did do, we got into this because I was interested in the Second World War. Some 40 percent of the men were over thirty when the war started, some 40 percent went into the Services, and about 25 or 30 percent went into the war industry, and we coded that. So we were able to look at the men who were mobilized into war industry and the implications of working in an industry where the world's the limit in terms of how much you earn. If you work [nearly] 24 hours a day, and you got ... you were into new areas, [the work became] enormously exciting. What we found in doing this study is that the men were in occupations when they were mobilized.

They gave us a chance to use occupations as the sorting mechanisms. It really could be very practical, where we could look at engineers who were almost uniformly mobilized into the munitions industry, because of the great need for someone with expertise, to run the factories, the munition plants, the aeronautical plants. The younger engineers, who were much younger, were drawn into the Services. The medical folks all went into the medical forces, every single one of them! And the lawyers did too. People who have talents, skills, became apparent in one field or another, and the priority placed on skills, increased markedly over the War Years. So the time that they were mobilized, occupation skill was everything.

But the Archive required a lot of detailed work, and I think our mistake was that instead of asking for the least common denominator, we too often tried to elevate the archive to what we wanted. That's a mistake. We typically asked, "Well, what is the least common denominator across the entire Archive? And wouldn't it be a lot less frustrating if we..." (LAUGHS) So we wanted to develop a model of men going into this mobilization process and sorting them into one line of work versus another, and we needed to know the sorting order. And one thing that's truly missing in this study is a sense of time and temporality. We just did not have very much information on this. So we had to use everything under the sun, including finding out when industries were mobilized, to be able to identify starting times for estimating these things for the model.

Thompson: Now, still thinking about archiving, suppose that you were given yet another task which was to devise a plan for choosing qualitative data sets for archiving across the US, I'm wondering what you would be looking for?

Elder: Well, actually, in the Iowa [Farm] Study - we haven't talked about that study, but ...
Thompson: Let's come back to that.

Elder: Yes. I [obtained] the money to do a study of the generations, and one part of that was collecting open-ended interviews from the parents of the kids. We covered [many] topics and we had these files, and we used them extensively in the book, but that's not something that everyone in the whole project wanted, but, since we had our own money, we could do what we wanted to do, and we did, and it was very useful.

But I would always want to have both quantitative and qualitative. I would never be satisfied with just qualitative data. And if I had qualitative data, it's not a free association kind of data that I want. I would have a whole series of questions that were focusing on the life course and life experience, and try to get a person to talk about that aspect of it, and follow-up questions, so that people are not allowed to drop a topic, and then you're left with wondering about, "How did this end up?" So I think a lot of the mistakes made in the past have been to just ask the question. They answer, and then move on to something else, and then you, you [don't] have a follow-up. "Well what did you mean by that?" So there has to be a more interactive approach. I think that's one kind of qualitative data.

Another is observational [data, which] can be collected by videotapes, in fact, we did it in the Iowa Study, and you can actually develop typescripts from the video tapes, and use that extensively, as well as just looking at the video tapes. Video tapes give you both the qualitative data and the visual representation of the person, interactive ... in some cases, husbands with wives, in some cases parents with children. You can't pick that up from just an ordinary interview.

[INTERUPTION]

Thompson: We've just begun to talk about the farm study. I was thinking about the farm study that, in a way, it took you back to your own roots?

Elder: It did. And when I was at Cornell, before I moved down here, I had done some space work to actually launch a study like this. But when I got down here, I was contacted by people at Iowa State, who were planning to launch a study, this was '86, on the farm crisis, patterned after Children of the Great Depression, and you can see the pattern. The sample starts with [children in the seventh grade] and, of course, that's exactly what we had in Children of the Depression. (LAUGHS) I didn't think it was significant to do that, but they did, and you can see, also, the richness of interviewing many people, because in the Iowa Study we have 451 families, about 30 percent were on the farms. And another, say, 30 percent, would have connection with farming - maybe growing up on a farm, but not running the farm. So that really gave us a differentiated picture of the area, the area around Ames and Des Moines, and north of Ames. It's premier farm country. The sample was drawn from eight counties that are all well above average in terms of farm produce.

Thompson: Did you visit there yourself?

Elder: Yes, we did. We drove round the whole area, through the communities, and had a chance to meet quite a few people, and ... so the study started in '88, with a pilot study, and '89 was the first wave of data collection. And then the plan was to have two days of data collection for each person, for each family. The first day would be devoted to all members of the family...

Thompson: So what did they do, though, when they were having this done?

Elder: Okay. Well, you could see it so clearly - the questions would deal with a series of challenges or issues that all couples have to deal with - finances and so on. And I can remember one where the wife was really interested in getting to the bottom of some of the issues that they were confronting. The farm was not doing well, and they had to make [difficult] decisions. The husband was stonewalling the whole thing, and so, they were sitting side by side, and the husband just simply pulled his chair this way, and the wife pulled her chair over this way. So you get a good sense of what it's like in this family. (LAUGHS)

Now, you could do a lot of things with those videotapes. You could make a typescript of them, and I did, a good many of them. They were all coded. And the big question is where they're going to be stored, because they're priceless. They cost a fortune to collect. And you could take a family and use these multiple videotapes, and come up with a sort of characterization of the family, how the family interacted and so on.
So the couple was one unit, the children represented another unit, and the whole family was the third. And each of these sets represented a focal point of coding, and we used a standardized, well developed system proposed by Mavis Hetherington of the University of Virginia.

So that was happening the first year, in ’89. They were again contacted in 1990, 91”, and ’92. Each one of those years we did all of those things, ’93 was simply a contact year with a few questions, and ’94 was the graduation year for the kids, their senior year.

And in that year, I got money to interview the kids, to do open-ended interviews, and that really made a big difference for us. [They provide] such a rich picture of these kids. They were so open and candid. So I have a chapter on the work experience of the kids, it’s entitled, “Always Work To Do”, and the kids were wonderful with that, the way they describe it. One girl didn’t know whether she could work with adults. She was really worried about it. Another one worried about, “How am I going to talk to adults...” she was a receptionist, and she had to talk to the people in the waiting room, keep them entertained before they went in to see the doctor, and she had real concerns about whether she could keep a conversation going that long with these people. So it was really very interesting, and it added a lot.

We contacted them in 1995, and [carried out] a full set of data collection. Then we also did it in ’97. They were reached again in the year 2000. And there are two more data collections that are part of the study.

**Thompson: Two more to come?**

Elder: Yes.

**Thompson: You've already published Children of the Land (2001), haven't you? And the earlier book was?**

Elder: The first book was called Families in Troubled Times (1995), and it was very much a take-off of Children of the Great Depression. It was an effort to try to trace through the process by which economic adversity makes a difference in family life. [The sample] was all rural.

**Thompson: And is this drawing on the new material - the Iowa material? Because you were only half way through the fieldwork at that stage.**

Elder: The first book was based on the first wave of data collection, that’s all. The second one, Children of the Land, was really based on the [following] issue: if things are so tough, and if everything has been chronically depressed over time, and the farm families were doing more poorly at the end than they were at the beginning, why were the kids doing so well in school? So this really is a resilience question. And this [issue] led me to focus on the role of farm families, and the way in which social capital, or social ties, played such a role. They were so connected to institutions. They also had strong ties across the generations, and with siblings who lived in the region. And then the kids were very involved in community activity as well as school activity. So there was an inter-generational transmission of these social connections.

**Thompson: And skills as well?**

Elder: Yes. Yes.

**Thompson: Do you think it's important that, on farms, you have to learn a whole series of different technical skills?**

Elder: Yes, yes. Well, I have a section on the mastery experiences that kids have. (LAUGHS) Learning the job that they all had to do, and that was a very important thing. And fundamentally, they felt very resourceful, coming out of a farming life. For a very large percentage of them, they wanted to bring their kids up on a farm. They didn't want to farm, but they wanted to bring them up on a farm. So they had made a distinction between the lifestyle on the one hand, and a way of earning money on the other. They had been through the crisis, and they didn't like that one bit. They didn't want to tear themselves up like their parents had, over trying to keep things going. And so it has been a very rewarding study.

_Elder, G. by Thompson, P._
It is a study of social change, and it does speak to the diversity of rural America. It’s not just simply a rural sample. We have everything from families that are professionals, to families that are, basically, hooked on farming, and to those who have been pushed off the land to those who grew up on farms but no longer live there. They’re still very different from the non-farm non-farm group that has absolutely no connection to farming. These people are, in many ways, the most mobile group, they are less connected to institutions, less invested in things. When times get difficult, they just move away.

Thompson: But do they show the same success?

Elder: Yes, yes, they don’t. And [when we] compared professional families, where the father or the mother is professional, with a farm family, they were on a par, basically, even though one was so much better educated than the other. And the other big difference was all of these social connections that farm families had, the resourcefulness they had, the ways they were able to mobilize their resources. [This] made a huge difference. They would work together to make things better. Somebody else would step in and help out when problems arose. So they were nested in a context that was full of supportive resourcefulness, and they did quite well.

When I sent the book manuscript to Chicago to be looked at, they sent it to a woman at the University of Illinois, and she wrote pages, single spaced, on the book. One part of it was so good, I asked her if I could quote it. She said, “I can walk into a classroom in the University of Illinois, and I can pick the [farm kids out] – they’re non-complainers, they know where they’re going, they have a sense of purpose in life. They have real connections to their families, very close, and so on”. It was very, it was [so affirming] to have that kind of [response], because you think you have reality, but you’re not quite sure.

And then the book was picked up by the editorial editor for the largest association of dairy farmers in the country, and she did an editorial on it, which was a full page. She was really, I think, impressed with the way the book got a handle on the issues as she saw them, for farm families – the threat to smaller farms, the benefits that children derived from living on a farm. We had a long conversation, and it turned out to be a [rewarding] experience. But those kinds of feedbacks are rare, because often, we don’t get our books into places [for] the ordinary reading public, we don’t get them to the populations we were studying.

Thompson: When you sent Children of the Great Depression out, did they tell you what they thought about?

Elder: Well, some did! (LAUGHS) Yes! Yes, some did, which was really nice.

Thompson: Did anybody criticize it?

Elder: No. Well, one of them just wrote and said, “Take a look at this page. I think you have facts wrong on this.”

Thompson: But that finishes the Iowa Study?

Elder: The Iowa Study is still going on, and it has three parts to it. One part is following children, and they are now bearing children, and that has two more waves of data collection. We have a survey that is finishing up on the parents, so the parents are now in their fifties, and they are being followed up in the year 2001. And I’m involved in that one. And the third part of it is the inter-generational study, which includes grandparents, parents and children. And that one is going to finish up next year. It was a project that I got the money for, and it was a very good place to study this kind of inter-generational relationships - the role of grandparents in the lives of grandchildren, and the impact of grandparents on grandchildren - looking at it both ways.

Grandchildren make a difference as to how people age, and grandparents make a big difference to their grandchildren. And we were able to document that, and look at the factors that made a big difference in the relationship. It’s a good study, I think. We’ve also compared it with other studies in the country, so we have the contrast between the Mid-West and California, the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, in two different settings.

So, there are three prongs, and I’m involved in all three of them, actually, but the inter-generational part is beginning to wind down. The study of the parents is beginning, just ready to get off the ground, it’s going to look at the relationship between mid-life experiences and the impact of the earlier socio-economic changes that were going on in their lives. And then the kids are going to be studied for quite some time. My guess is Rand Conger, who was running that part of it, may well turn it over to another person, I don’t know. That’s another five year project thing. They’ve been doing this for a long time, and may want to get another generation on it.

But it’s the only project I know of like this, on rural America, and it’s been a very rewarding project for me.

Elder, G. by Thompson, P.
It's told me a whole lot of things that I didn't know before, and enabled me to understand them better.

**Thompson: Which piece in particular?**

Elder: Well, I'd never really, in depth, studied a rural population, and this gave me a chance to do that. And it gave me, also, some real insight into the strength of the heartland in this country, how important it is, not only in terms of bringing up kids who become valuable members of society, but what it is about that experience. I don't think we knew what it was, we simply pointed to that experience and said, 'This person grew up in the Mid-West, and that should mean something.' But I don't think anyone really knew for sure.

Then I also got involved in a McArthur network. I joined the McArthur Foundation, [which had] established a set of networks, working groups, and I was recruited to join a McArthur network on "Adolescence in High Rise Settings." And that started in 1988/89, right at the beginning of the Iowa Study, and it really made a big difference to the Iowa Study, and gave funds to it, and made it possible to do things that we wouldn't have done otherwise. It really was a helpful association, and the network was filled with very good people, like [sociologists] Marta Tienda and Bill Wilson, and [Arne] Sameroff in psychology, and [Tom Cook] in psychology. And so every time we got together, you really learned something [new]. ... We would get together six times a year, so it was a very intensive experience.

Out of that McArthur network, we did another book, on Philadelphia. This was inner city Philadelphia, and it was a study of families and kids at risk in the inner city, both black and white. That book is entitled, *Managing to Make It* (1999). Frank Furstenberg is the lead author. I wrote [one chapter on the families and worked on several others].

The distinctive part of that study is that it never used videotaping or anything, but it did use in-depth interviewing, in addition to the quantitative survey. And those in-depth qualitative interviews were really great. They gave us richness; they really brought to life what it's like to live on the street, for example. How hard it is to bring up kids in Philadelphia. What lengths parents go to make it possible for their children to flourish. We all ended up with great admiration for the parents. Some of them, they would join organizations, churches, just to make sure their child would be protected from the gangs, the adverse influences.

**Thompson: So what was the way of "making it"?**

Elder: Well, it was ... it was the role of the parents managing to control, to minimize risk, maximize opportunity, outside the household, between the household and the larger world, larger institutions out there. For example, how to make sure that the child gets back from school. Parents got that involved in school just to make sure that things went well in school. They would get a job at the school. It was called, originally, "The Family Management Project," which really was, how do you manage risk? Can you minimize it? And how do you create opportunity?

And the big story in this study is that neighborhoods are very diverse environments, that families work out very different styles of responding to the same risk. And so they're highly heterogeneous, and therefore, neighborhoods have minimal effect overall. There's interactions, to some extent, between neighborhood and characteristics of the child and the family. But the big story was really at the family level, focusing on what families did in high risk environments. There were a lot of similarities between Iowa and Philadelphia, in the sense that it was also the case of how families managed a very difficult situation in Iowa, and enabled their kids to just do exceedingly well. The parents were very much involved in the lives of the children. The grandparents were too.

**Thompson: I was going to ask you about that, because Iowa families, you said, were intact. But, presumably, a lot of these Philadelphia ones were not?**

Elder: A lot of the black families were not, and so we looked at that too. And, clearly, these families are at greater risk. And even in the Iowa study, we added single-parent households to the study [in 1981], because we wanted to. They were not going to help us understand rural [farm] America so much as enable us to understand the family. Once a family breaks up, it moves to [nearby communities], and ends up in the small towns.

We found many of the same properties of family breakdown in Iowa, as we did in Philadelphia. Single parent households are a high risk environment for kids, grandparent don't make up the difference, or compensate for [loss of parents]. We found that, basically, grandparents are often redundant strengths in families. That is, the strongest pair of grandparents you find typically in the best families, because the parents are so receptive to them, and they talk about them all the time. The kids come away thinking their grandparents are real people, and they're happy to see them again, whereas when parents can't get along with their own parents, nothing is said, the grandparents become strangers to their grandchildren, and no matter what they do, no matter how often they come, to some extent, they're not represented there.

*Elder, G. by Thompson, P.*
Thompson: What about being brought up, from scratch, by grandparents?

Elder: Well, that’s something we didn’t have [much of]. In the inner city that was much more common. Some of the black families, for example, had that. And what they do is, minimize the costs of the risks that might exist otherwise, but they don’t eliminate, they do not replace having two parents involved in the lives of these kids. So it could be worse. It’s not that bad, but it’s not that good either. But is was a very useful study, I thought, and it gave us an inner city study and open country study [to compare].

Thompson: I wanted to ask you about the various people that I think you haven’t mentioned, but I think you have had some connection with. And the first one was Reuben Hill.

Elder: Yes. Reuben, he was at the University of North Carolina for a while, and when Charles Bowerman came, [he] replaced Reuben [who] had chosen to go to Minnesota. And I only got to know Reuben Hill by going up to Minnesota, and Reuben, actually, was asked by Chicago, to read Children of the Great Depression, I later found out! (LAUGHS)

But I think one of the interesting angles here is that Reuben was an advocate of the family life cycle way of thinking about things, and he was very upset, in many ways, [when I challenged that view.] He was a person who didn’t like to see himself displaced or challenged at all. And so early in the seventies, when we started doing this new work, Reuben tried to make it seem as if it’s the same old thing that people had been doing. But, increasingly, I became critical of this approach, and Reuben became explosive over the issue. But we always had a great relationship. I mean, it was funny, [in a sense.] He got a bold of a paper of mine at a Conference, and he just [wrote] all over the place with a red pen, and I could tell he was not very happy about it!

But we always had a good relationship. I was invited up there to meet his students, and was there when he became Regent Professor, and Phyllis Moen is one of his students, and I got to know her [in Sociology at Minnesota]. So it was a good relationship. And we represented two stages in the study of the family. I always found myself not happy about the extent to which Reuben created a kind of little clique around him, [which] wasn’t open to anyone who was interested. It was organized through the national Council of Family Relations, Research Committee.

But we had Reuben over to our [home] at Cornell, for dinner, and he reminisced for hours about his experiences and everything. So we really had a good relationship over the years.

Thompson: He did three-generational work, didn’t he? Was that an innovation at the time?

Elder: Yes. But it was not a very satisfying study. ... He didn’t recognize that he was really capturing history, historical achievements at the same time. (LAUGHS)

Thompson: Now, you mentioned Frank Furstenberg a moment ago, but I wanted to ask you about him.

Elder: I met Frank [in] ’68, at an NIMH Conference [in Washington]. He had just completed his dissertation, ’67 or so, and we have known each other ever since. He then got into writing his book on grandparenthood, and I had finished Children of the Great Depression, and Frank became very depressed over the task of putting that book together. And I remember, he and his wife drove down to Chapel Hill to spend some time with us. And so I’ve known Frank a lot, have had contact with him over the years. And we were on the McArthur network together.

Frank’s work reflects his mentor’s work in a remarkable way, [William] Goode in sociology. Both of them studied divorce, both of them studied illegitimacy, and the consequences of all of that. It’s a remarkable similarity. I think Frank became one of the early persons to really do a life course kind of study. And our paths have interconnected at many points. I knew him when he was married to Linda Furstenberg, and then he remarried, and so I’ve gone through two of his wives already! (LAUGHS)

Thompson: He’s interested in divorce and remarriage, isn’t he?

Elder: Yes, he is. That’s exactly what Si Goode was interested in as well. (LAUGHS)
Thompson: And what about Andrew Cherlin?

Elder: I’ve not had that much contact with Andy. I think Andy, at first, thought life course was a lot of nonsense, and I think that’s changed. But it depends on where you’re trained. He came from UCLA. I think, probably, the person who trained him though, you know, “This isn’t anything,” you know, or “This doesn’t have anything to contribute to the family,” and so on. And so Andy’s initial orientation toward me was sort of, “This is a lot of nonsense.” But we’ve always had a good relationship, we just haven’t had that many of them. Frank and Andy have developed quite a close relationship. They live very close together and so they collaborate on a lot of topics. Actually, some of the topics I’ve done, he’s done too, like the book on grandparenthood. We are putting a book together now on that.

Thompson: Do you like this idea about the New American Grandparent, or not?

Elder: I don’t know how new it is, frankly! I mean, that topic was [dealt with by] Bernice Neugarten [in the early 1970s].

What we try to do is to show, more clearly, what grandparents do in their relationships with their grandchildren. And we try to look at it in various ways. We have quite a lot of correspondence between their findings and ours, which is good too. But I think we add [something] to the study of grandparenting that they really couldn’t do, basically. But that builds upon, draws upon their work.

Thompson: Another person who worked on the original Berkeley material, I think, was Arlene Skolnick, is that right?

Elder: Yes. Yes. Arlene’s been a great friend over the years, and I’ve had dinner with her lots of times with her husband. But we’ve never had much in the way of an intellectual exchange. I’ve not really been in conferences with her [much], and so it’s just [been mainly] a friendship.

Thompson: And then you refer to Tamara Hareven.

Elder: Well, Tamara was really important in the sense that she’s a challenging person to be with, as everyone knows! And you might want to live 3000 miles away! But you have to worry about Tamara, because she’s often 3000 miles away! She’s either in Japan or Europe or some place! The first thing that she did of significance for me, was that she brought me [together] with historians at Williams College, and this [workshop] lasted a whole year. We met several times during the year [I believe 1975-6], and then we met for a full week at William’s College, and focused our attention around the 1880 Essex County Census data [Massachusetts]. We tried to use cross-sectional data in a life course kind of way. The book was called Transitions [1978] that came out of this.

And in many ways I’ve used her style of organizing groups around a data set, [including] the Panel Study Income Dynamics, where we brought [young] people together around that dataset. [This conference produced] Life Course Dynamics [Cornell University Press, 1985].

But Tamara also became editor of the Journal of Family History and played a key role there. She really has been a very active person in promoting this way of thinking and history. And she is continually organizing conferences. She came down here [1975-6] in the middle of doing her book on Family Time and Industrial Time, and wanted some help in how to organize the archive on Amoskeag in terms of all the work data and everything. So we spent about three days doing that. So there is a lot of that kind of interchange going on. [I might add that she was the most important initial bridge to history on life course thinking.]

Thompson: Have you had any interchange with people in Britain, with similar interests? I mean, I was thinking about possibly Michael Rutter or George Brown.

Elder: I’ve had interactions at various levels with Michael Rutter, and a fellow by the name of Richard Wall, at Cambridge. I met him, and we’ve been on conferences together, and so we’ve talked a lot about similar things, but we’ve never collaborated on anything. Peter Laslett I’ve known and met at different places, but no real collaboration on a project.
Thompson: I was wondering what you thought of Rutter's work on resilience?

Elder: I do cite it, and I think he really helped to clarify a lot of things. [But] I'm not sure [his conceptual] distinctions can be maintained.

Thompson: Which distinctions do you mean?

Elder: Well, between protective factors and risk factors. (LAUGHS) The more you think about it, the more it just sort of fades away! (LAUGHS) But Michael is a very impressive guy, [with] valuable ideas that I've drawn upon. Some of his essays are pure classics. Probably the big interaction with Michael is through all the writings that he's [produced]. Then also one of my students is working with him, Avshalom Caspi. He [and his wife, Terri Moffat] moved to London and have lived there for several years. We have worked closely. In fact, Caspi is co-author of something with Michael, so there's that kind of connection.

Thompson: And have you managed to spread this life course approach outside the Anglo-American world?

Elder: Yes. Very much, in a big way. It's amazing! (LAUGHS) I really can't quite understand why it's so popular, but, first of all, Children of the Great Depression was translated into Japanese in '85, and then Children in Time and Place [1993] and Methods of Life Course Research have been translated into Japanese. ... I'm always told that, "This is very popular over here. Yes. Please come over here and tell us about it" (LAUGHS). But this is also true of China, which is interesting. [Huang Ping and his wife] translated Children of the Great Depression into Chinese. I was there in '97 for a month, and it [seems to fit with] a changing society and life time so well. The big puzzle is why it became so big in Japan. I was invited, in '86, to run a workshop in Tokyo, for a week, and I did that in other places. They were happy enough. Then in '97 I had another workshop, this was sponsored by the Japanese Society of [Developmental] Psychology.

Thompson: We've finished talking about work.

Elder: Right. Right.

Thompson: Now, I thought it might be interesting if you could say a little bit about living in these very contrasting communities, because you've been in Berkeley, you've been a lot of the time here, and, you know, the difference between the South and California.

Elder: Yes. But all of them are college/university towns, and I've always thought of Berkeley as a small place, even though it's over 100,000. It felt like a small place, with a lot of civic consciousness. So I think we really felt like we were going from one [similar] community to another. Chapel Hill is unlike the South, in many ways, and so we didn't notice or feel a big difference there, [though] it's also very much a smaller place with a large university. So I've always thought of ourselves as being captured by a residential history of having lived it really attractive places. And when I was considered for a position at the University of Chicago, there was a general veto by the family, [my three sons] did not want to live in a [the big city].

Thompson: Would you have found it interesting, do you think?

Elder: I think I've always had a real affection for the Committee on Human Development at Chicago, but that had sort of faded by that time.

Thompson: I mean as a place, though.

Elder: As a place to live? No. No, I don't think so.

Thompson: And you lived in the South, which is very different.

Elder: Well, the only way the traditional South intrudes, is when [we] have had legislators imposing their narrow views on the way that the University should function. We had racial strife and all of that in the sixties, but virtually every place did. And we had a lot of student strife on campus.
Thompson: Did you involve yourself in any of that?

Elder: I was very much involved at Berkeley, and then here we were involved to some extent. I was not a mobilized actor, in all of that.

But I did teach, on this campus, Social Movements, which was a topic that Kingsley David asked me to teach at Berkeley, and I taught it all the way through [the years] at Berkeley, and then I taught it here. And in all of those times, it [seemed] a very relevant course; in fact it was a sort of a road map on what was going on. It was a favorite course of mine to teach, because it involved different levels of analysis, and it involved real events that one could connect into and try to explain. It also enabled me to draw upon different theoretical traditions, and I liked that. And it was a popular course too, [bringing] 80 people in at eight o’clock in the morning, for example, when most people are unconscious! (LAUGHS)

So I think the big difference was that when we went to Berkeley initially, the first time, I felt this enormous burden lifted off my back when we drove across the mountains, the Rocky Mountains, into the West. There was a liberating quality to that, and I was always partial to that anyway. In my home environment, I was subject to the constraints of family and tradition and all of that. So going to Berkeley was sort of a transition into adulthood, away from all of that. Here the contrast wasn’t that great, although it was certainly different from Berkeley, and I retained my ties to Berkeley, so I would frequently go back and forth, live in both worlds, to some extent.

Thompson: Were you actually here during desegregation?

Elder: I was here, yes.

Thompson: Was that an interesting time to be in?

Elder: I was here. Well, desegregation was still going on in ’67, in terms of marches and celebrations. When Martin Luther King died in ’68, that was very big on campus. Lots of marchers and lots of demonstrations. And then there was a huge struggle between the cafeteria workers and the University — they were underpaid, and everyone felt they should be paid better — and the State brought in the State Troopers. Issues of economics, social justice were played out here, just as at Berkeley. We had a lot of conflicts over issues of free speech here.

Even while I was in Berkeley, recognized Communist leaders were invited to the campus and were refused admission. However the students had them speak from outside the stone [boundary] wall, and they would all gather around, and they sat there chatting, eating hamburgers. (LAUGHS) So it was an interesting time, it really was.

And I think that Ithaca is also a very liberal place, with beautiful [scenery].

[SPEAKING TOGETHER]

Elder: So I really have always thought of myself as blessed by being in lovely places that I always have still very strong affection for. They are different in many ways, but [they are] places I still would choose to live in. I would go to Berkeley and I would enjoy the kind of environment we still have there, it still reminds me of a small town embedded in a large urban metropolis. The kids loved all of these places. They really did, which made it very nice. The oldest boy was most strongly influenced by Berkeley, [although] he was born here [in Chapel Hill just before we moved west].

Thompson: He was born in 1960. And his name is?

Elder: Brent. Brent really grew up in Berkeley. He was two years old when we moved out there, and so his early five years were all there, and it made a big imprint on his life. I think that’s one reason why he’s still there. He lives in Santa Cruz, and heads up a program in engineering, especially designing instruments for the film industry. The company is, has the name “EMU”, or “Electronic Music” (LAUGHS). He was trained as an electrical engineer with a physics major [at Cornell], and he went over to California to work for Hughes Aircraft, [but] didn’t like the size of the place, and the fact that he would never have any scope in his work. So he has gravitated toward smaller size companies, [where] he can have a hand in the creative process. He received a National Award from the Audio Engineers, one year, and that’s really his [major recognition] from that sort of work. But he hates many aspects of managerial operations where you have to let people go, after hiring [them] … He’s just gone through another very difficult week of that sort of thing in California. Rod was born in Oakland.

Thompson: Were you living in Berkeley?

Elder: We were living in Berkeley, and he [was delivered at] the Oakland Hospital.
Thompson: Oh, I see.

Elder: [Rod] is very fond of Berkeley, and the West and everything. And if his choice were to come up, he would like to settle in Colorado, probably.

I think, in fact, all three boys were strongly influenced by the extent to which we camped everywhere. They loved that, and they still love it. They went through Scouting all the way from the beginning, through Eagle Scouting, and they’ve gone on many of the special adventure trips, like canoeing and the boundary water area of Minnesota, and hiking, and the Sangre Crías Mountains in New Mexico. I think one of our gifts, our most important gift, maybe, is that we got into camping and it brought the family together in a neat way. It gave the children a real place in the family. They looked forward to it, and they all placed a role, and they fell in love with it, and are perpetuating [a wilderness life style] in the lives of their kids. They’re still doing it.

Thompson: What does Rod do?

Elder: Oh, Rod, Rod is [called a Director at] Merrill-Lynch. He heads up the [Taxation Policies Division], so he’s doing exactly the economies that he was trained for at Cornell. And Brent, right from Day One, was an engineer, always an engineer! (LAUGHS) Jeffrey always was [always] in the Social Sciences [too strongly influenced by his father].

Thompson: And Jeffrey was born in what year?

Elder: He was born in 1968, [in Chapel Hill]. We had just come back [from Berkeley]. He applied to many places, he applied to Berkeley and got in, he applied to the University of Michigan’s Residential College, and he [was accepted] there.

But when everything was said and done, he wanted to come here, because I think he’s more attached to this area than the other two. He really falls in love with the place every time he comes home! He doesn’t want to leave. And he has a lot of friends, and [Jeffrey] was very involved in Honors and the Student Leadership Program on campus, and knows a lot of older people through [our] associations. So he’s very much attached. I wouldn’t be surprised if Jeffrey would end up in this area. [Jeffrey resembles me, and also his mother and her artistic abilities.]

Rod lives outside [of Philadelphia, in Washington Crossing], which is a lovely small community, [on the Delaware River, Earlier he was at] Atlantic Beach, right on the coast, with huge live oak trees. I’ve never seen such big live oak trees in my life!

And all three, I think, are mountain people, they really would prefer to locate in the high country. And so Brent would love to be in a place like Boulder, for example, in Denver, and Rod would love that too. His only reservation about where he is is that that there are no mountains where he could ski.

Thompson: And Jeffrey is doing what?

Elder: Geoffrey [has an MA in Sociology and currently] is working for a non-profit organization [United Way International]. He heads up a component of the Research Division that deals with the campaign for mobilizing money every year. And so, for example, last year he put together a Research Program that described ways of giving across the country - by region, or by States - and so communities that were interested in facts that would help them mobilize more money, and raise more money, found the brochure and the graphics useful. I don’t think Jeffrey is [set in his career], whereas Brent is quite happy with what he does, and Rod is reasonably happy with what he does. [Rod] does [his work] very well, but he would rather make wooden boats, wooden canoes. He really loves canoeing and the out of doors and that sort of thing! (LAUGHS) Jeffrey is the linguist and the writer in the family. He can write poetry faster than I can probably write a manuscript! He’s just very good at that, and he really wants a job that would use his talents, use those capabilities. I don’t think he’s really found it yet. That’s a big issue for him. He likes to be surrounded by challenging people, and he hasn’t found that either. But he loves the idealistic dimension of the non-profit world. He likes many aspects of what he does, but it doesn’t allow him to develop the creative side of his personality, and some days he’s really down about it. I tell him, “Get a good night’s sleep!”

But he’s in United Way International, that’s the name of it, and it’s the parent company of all the United Ways throughout the country. He works in Alexandria, Fort Virginia, a lovely setting. He’s doing the non-profit stuff, which he really likes. He would prefer to be involved in the community building dimension of this Program, instead of the [fund-raising] part. So he’s still kind of fishing around for the right place.
But finding a place that uses all your talents may be aspiring towards a hopeless goal, because it's very hard to [express] so many diverse talents in a single job. He likes the freedom he has in his job, because they prize what he does, he has time to get on his bike and cruise up the Shenandoah, and into the Blue Ridge Highway. And [the organization] they gave him time off to be with his mother during [her fatal] illness. His brothers could never get away, because they're very central in their organizations. He's kind of in a quandary as to what he wants to do, very much [in a] quandary.

Thompson: But you see more of him than the others?

Elder: I do, because he's close by. And especially this past year, with his mother and everything. We spent Christmas together, and we [drove] to Asheville and the Biltmore House and had a great time doing all of that. And since he's only about four and a half hours away, it's not surprising at all to see him down here for a weekend. He has a lot of people that he likes to see here. He resembles his mother in [many ways]. ... 

Thompson: What do you mean by that?

Elder: Well, I think his artistic abilities, and his gardening interests, the aesthetic side of life, I think, is really developed [from his mother]. And he's great fun to [be with], wonderful company, because he really is an upbeat person, always looking on the optimistic side. If you have to go through a crisis, you want to go through with Jeffrey, because, Number One, he believes you're going to make it! He doesn't think you might now! And he'll find a way to do it. And he's a gung-ho guy, who will mobilize everything to make it happen. If you felt like you couldn't quite stand up, you know, Jeffrey would be behind you to hold you there! (LAUGHS) He's the leader of the three, in organizing group things, like the back-packing trip that we took last year. If it hadn't have been for Jeffrey, I think we might have forgotten our clothes! You know, I mean, Jeffrey is really very good at that. And he's also organizing another one this year, right after, up to Canada and spend a week there. Two of [my sons] going off to the Grand Tetons, and doing some hiking.

Thompson: Coming back to when they were younger, I mean, what did you feel you wanted to be, as a father?

Elder: Oh, I vowed that I would be much more open to them than my father was to me. And so I always praised them as much as I could, and would let them know when they did good things. I would let them know. I spent time talking to them, so if they were going through difficult times, Karen would tell me, and I would pull them aside and we would disappear some place and just sit down and talk about it. To this day, those times are monumental times in the lives of the children. Rod was going through a difficult time, and I did this a couple of times. I think he feared the worst, and all I did is, pull [our] chairs up, and we just talked about it — what he was feeling and going through at the time. My father never could praise me, or my brother, and my mother had trouble with this too.

Karen was always expressing her love and support and [she was] a very loving mother toward her children ... and toward everyone, really.

And I vowed that I would just make myself accessible and open. Anything they wanted to talk about, they could talk about. But I cannot remember any time that I [had to] sit down with them over school matters. All of them did very well.

[TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION]

Elder: We vowed that we would be, both Karen and I, much more loving and open and supportive of our children, in praising: affirmative, letting them know that we were really [proud of what they were doing. [But] I think that the only thing — the kids had the idea in their heads that I'd be disappointed if they didn't become an academic, because I would often be outspoken about people who were leaning on a shovel! (LAUGHS) And they took it for real! [However,] I let them know that I was proud of everything they were doing, and that the important thing is doing what you really love, and doing it well. And all of the kids have done amazingly well.

So we've been very fortunate really, and I attribute an awful lot of it to Karen, because she was always in their life, and always teaching them something, and she really had this loving side, she was always a very firm person too.
You didn't find kids just lazing around without anything to do; they always had their face in a book or something. My memory of Rod is, sprawled out on a couch, with a book at his face. And Brent always had two or three things going on at one time. He was listening to a newscast, reading a book, writing something or doing something. He always had a fascination with technical things. He might be working with something technical while he's reading a book. But he was always multi-tasks, and involved in things that challenged him.

Jeffrey was a guy who puzzled us for a long time, because he was a kid who never seemed able to sit down, or be still! He as always on the go. Always! And he was an active child inside Karen, even. And a very very lively guy, and he's still high energy! Still high energy! (LAUGHS) I mean, when all of us are dragging our tails, he's running up the hill! On this last back-packing trip that we had, I couldn't believe it, he just never wore out! Always had more energy.

**Thompson: Was Karen working during this period?**

Elder: Karen was involved in the organization of the first kindergarten in the State, and she actually taught one year, but she only taught half a day. So she would organize her work so that she would be home when the kids are home, when they come home from school. She also worked at the Botanical Garden, that was when we came back in '84. And also she worked in the Botanical Garden on special occasions, when the kids were younger. She would go on plant rescue operations where they would bring flowers back, wild flowers, and in our older place where we lived in Chapel Hill, she would bring these flowers home in her car [and plant them along a trail].

**Thompson: This man who led the plant rescues ...?**

Elder: Yes, he would simply say, "Take them home and plant them, seal them in along the path."

**Thompson: More than you?**

Elder: Yes. Well, more in the sense of, very much in the committee structure of the Church. We were often both involved in landscaping, and I loved that. I would do things that she was involved with, so I could spend more time with her, and so our initial church was the Binkley Church, which Bob Seymour headed up for years, and that really paved the way for desegregation in [Chapel Hill], and then set up the Senior Centre, and did amazing things.

**Thompson: And you were a member while it was doing that?**

Elder: Yes. And we marched in the marches that Seymour led. He was very much an activist.

**Thompson: So was that, when you went, was that a mixed congregation, or not?**

Elder: It was mixed only in a very minimal way, just a few black people there.

[Today our] United Church [in Chapel Hill] has many more young blacks, as well as older people, a very diverse [congregation] from an ethnic standpoint – Hispanic, Spanish-speaking. In fact, it has a Spanish-speaking church inside it that it’s sponsoring, so there’s a real connection between the Hispanic population in the region and this church. A husband and wife team are Ministers, and it has the reputation that, “If you want anything done in this town, just go to the United Church!” (LAUGHS) Because they’ll find a way to solve it, and they’ll put people on it. Everyone’s very active, and when I was doing [so many things] on campus, it was very difficult for me to be as active. I would be involved like other people, but I wouldn’t be running things in Church. We would always go, Sundays, to Sunday Services, and we were often in special groups and so on, that were organized by the Church.

But Karen was a member of the Building Committee, which was the big committee, because they were making all the choices on our new church, all of the sanctuary, and equipping it with furniture and all of this. And she was also a member of the Trustees at an earlier time, and a key person there. She was also on the Landscape Committee. She did it as well as anyone there. And she really became a central fixture in the Church. As someone said, “You go there, and you’ll always see Karen.” (LAUGHS) She really became a beloved person there, and very well-known, and during her illness, she had the most enormous support system ever seen! Two women coordinated the provision of food, every single night, running from February, all the way into the middle of May [2001].

_Elder, G. by Thompson, P._
Thompson: And that was earlier this year, wasn’t it?

Elder: It was, yes. And they coordinated not only the academic input, but the various groups that Karen belonged to, she belonged to an Aerobics Group, and they were part of this team. But it was really quite... something else too.

She was a person who grew up in a family where her mother never really expressed the love that she should have [had. She] never was fully accepting [of Karen], and always was critical, negative. And I think it had an awful lot to do with Karen’s inability to understand how loved she was by everyone, and, during her illness, people would send her letters, my students would. She was loved not only by my students, but by everyone on the Faculty, different places, but many people on the campus and also in the Church community particularly, and I have an orange box, like this, and it is just filled with letters. It’s just amazing!

And she read a large percentage of them, and I hope that she really answered the question that she had asked me for many years. She felt that I had done all these things [but wondered], “What will I have done in my lifetime?” And I said, “Well, you’ve raised three wonderful children. You’re loved by hundreds of people. You’ve worked, you’re done all these things in different communities, community-centered kinds of things, helping people. You’ve made a difference in hundreds of lives.” And you can see that in those letters. A Japanese man who was on the Faculty in Tokyo, wrote a letter and said that, “You made me feel at home. You welcomed me, and made me feel as if I belonged here, and I’ll always remember that.” Yes, just one after another! It was a wonderful tribute to her.

Thompson: How wonderful.

Elder: Yes. Yes.

Thompson: And apart from all these activities you’ve described, and the camping, were there other leisure activities you had together?

Elder: Yes, we would do a lot of traveling. She would always go with me whenever possible, especially when the kids grew up. We’ve traveled in many parts of the world – all over Scandinavia, [Great Britain], Germany, [Japan, China]. One of our favorite trips was just renting a car in Heidelberg, and taking a loop trip down the Romantische Strasse to Lake Constance, and then round and back to Heidelberg. And she loved our visit [1999] to Switzerland, to the high country there, and the beautiful meadows. You could hear the cow bells ringing across the valleys there.

We belonged to a lot of groups, and many of these were out of the Church, and we would just be in these together. When we became a member of the [United] Church [at Chapel Hill], she found people that she loved to be with. She always had a complaint about the academic world that it was filled with people who had an inflated sense of themselves. She loved this Church, because it was loaded with talent, but people didn’t parade around with a sign on their forehead, “I am so and so!” (LAUGHS) And she just really enjoyed being with them. And so we were involved in a group called the “Regeneration [Generation],” which really was middle-ages, and she played an organizing role there, and she was very much involved in a Group that got together to look at films, and who would go back into the early years of the film industry, and dig out classics and often have discussions about them. She was very fond of this, and the group involved people that she really loved to be with. We had [many] friends we enjoyed being with.

In recent years, I tried to organize my life so that I would be [at home] throughout the morning [so that I had more contact with Karen]: instead of up there [on campus] all day, I would be here. I would often be working in my room, but she would come in, and we would do things together, I would help her or whatever, so that it wasn’t a long stretch of just being away from each other. And I enjoyed just being here. Karen was a person you could just enjoy being with, just knowing that her presence was here. It’s almost as if you’re communicating, but you’re not even in the same room, or you might be in the same room, but you’re not necessarily talking to each other, you just enjoy being together. I think we have always felt that.

We have always enjoyed camping, but we also enjoyed taking off in the car and, without a plan or anything, just spending four or five days exploring areas that we didn’t know anything about. And she loved that kind of thing as much as spending hours and hours planning something.
Thompson: And as you've got older, how did you feel about getting older?

Elder: I guess it kind of snuck up on me, because people would say, "Well, you're 60 now, you know! You know!" (LAUGHS) And I'd never really thought about it! I've had grey hair for a long time. [Even] my parents started saying, "Don't you think it's time to retire?" (LAUGHS) But as long as [one had] reasonable health, it makes a big difference. My side of the family is very lucky on that. My mother's side of the family had good health, and [the members have] lived good long lives.

Thompson: So what do you see yourself doing in the future?

Elder: Well, I think my big challenge is to try to restructure my life now. It's very hard to do this when the person who has died has been so central to your life, and it's hard to imagine. It leaves such a huge void, it's like the Grand Canyon. It's not just filling it with students, or filling it with other activities. When I go other places, I'm invariably thinking about, "Well, it's ... it's too bad that Karen isn't here to see this with me," or something. So I think it's going to be a long [time before I] make the transition away [from] where I'm so preoccupied with this that I can't enjoy something that really is enjoyable. I can remember coming home from trips, and telling Karen that, you know "I was in a beautiful place like Vancouver, but I really didn't enjoy it, because you weren't there!" (LAUGHS)

Thompson: It sounds like you were in love for the whole of your married life.

Elder: We were. I described it as a romance of 45 years. Yes. And people would describe it this way too. The letters would come in and say, "We know that Karen was your life-long love, and that it's going to be a real struggle for you." When we were in Boulder once, with the MeArthur team, Jaque Eccles [from the University of Michigan] had a group of women who were at the Ph.D. level. And I guess it just communicates when Karen and I are together, this chemistry that [would] light up each other's lives. They came over to Karen and said, "We wonder whether you would share a few minutes with us. We would like to know what it takes to have a successful relationship." (LAUGHS) So...! It really, it's been a wonderful thing.

And, you know, it's amazing that I knew it right from the beginning, right from the day I met her. And she found it very hard to believe that I really never dated another person. And what you always regret, I think, is that we had such a wonderful [relationship], and I thought we were taking full advantage of it, but then when you lose this person, you think, "I should have done all kinds of other things." But I can't think that, because you can't re-write the past. We weren't sufficiently aware of the fact that we weren't spending all of our time together and doing all of these things, and enjoying each other constantly, because it seemed like it was constant. There is a tendency [for me] to think, "Well, maybe I should have retired ten years ago," but everyone would have thought I was totally crazy to do that! (LAUGHS) because I was, by today's standards, a very young person. But she was [such a loving] spouse and partner. And friend. She would come up to me and say, "Do you know how much I love you?" And I would always answer, because I always knew. But it got to the point where I felt that she didn't believe that she was really the center of my life, and the most important event that ever occurred in my life! So I sat down, and I wrote a letter to her on Valentine's Day, that was two years ago. And Jeffrey came up to me, and said, "Dad, you know that letter you wrote to Mum is dog-eared. She keeps pulling it out and reading it!" (LAUGHS) I'm so glad I did it.

Thompson: That is marvelous.

Elder: Yes, because there was something inside her that said, "I'm unworthy of this," and she would keep raising this issue over and over again. She never wanted to be the central theme of anything, she really didn't want that. She didn't want us to name something after her. She insisted that if you're doing something up at the church on this wild flower preserve, "Do not put my name on this." It's the same kind of understating, and sometimes not really believing that she deserves it. But the overwhelming [number] of letters [told her how loved she was]. The letters were just amazing. One of my [former] students wrote a letter that was so fine, that I said [to her], "Most of the letters are so heartbreaking, it's very hard for me to read them, but I liked to pull out your letter, you know, every month, and read it, because it is such a celebration of [Karen]." She just put a lot of effort into thinking about this letter, and she really knew which was [indeed] special too.

Thompson: Well, that's where I think we should end. Thank you so very much.

Elder: It's been my pleasure, I've enjoyed it.