ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CHALLENGES FOR HUMANITY is to understand the entirety of human beings—to comprehend self and others—in cultural and historical contexts across time. Texas Tech University scholars in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies examine relationships, individuals, families, and individuals within families. These researchers focus their teaching and research on ways that people live, grow and develop across the lifespan. Using the tools of social science, they study the development of individuals in families and family relationships that provide the proximal, or most immediate, context for individual development. These scientists are concerned with development and relationship processes and the ways that individuals and family relationships change across time and differ in the contexts of culture, social class, historical time, and place during childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Interdisciplinary in nature, the human development and family studies disciplines incorporate and integrate knowledge from biology, psychology, sociology, communication studies, anthropology, health studies and history as they explore the science of being human.

THREE RESEARCHERS, Malinda Colwell, Sybil Hart, and Elizabeth Sharp, examine the emotion of love from different perspectives. The interaction of an infant with others eventually leads to expressions and feelings of love, the least understood emotion, says Colwell, Ph.D., associate professor of human development and family studies. Interested in how children’s understanding of emotions, she has developed an interview, called the “Love Interview,” for preschoolers, from 2 to 5 years old, to understand what these emotions mean to them. “I want to understand how do children understand the emotion of love at a young age?” she asks. Studies focused on understanding children’s emotions have generally employed two methods: One explores children’s ability to identify facial expressions by showing them pictures of faces displaying the four basic emotions, which are happy, sad, mad and scared. The second method explores affective perspective taking to determine whether a child is able to understand how someone else would feel about some action that the child undertakes.

In its sixth year of study, Colwell’s project has established a database of studies of children as they develop from 2 to 5 years old. By utilizing video cameras, researchers record who the children are interacting with and who they are playing with to provide a measure of children’s emotional understanding that builds on these previous assessments. In an ongoing project with Texas Tech’s Child Development Research Center, Colwell is examining children’s emotional and social development and their relationships with their peers and teachers. In its sixth year of study, Colwell’s project has established a database of studies of children as they develop from 2 to 5 years old. By utilizing video cameras, researchers record who the children are interacting with and who they are playing with to provide a measure of children’s emotional understanding that builds on these previous assessments. In an ongoing project with Texas Tech’s Child Development Research Center, Colwell is examining children’s emotional and social development and their relationships with their peers and teachers. In its sixth year of study, Colwell’s project has established a database of studies of children as they develop from 2 to 5 years old. By utilizing video cameras, researchers record who the children are interacting with and who they are playing with to provide a measure of children’s emotional understanding that builds on these previous assessments.

Colwell’s research has shown that children who have good relationships with their parents are more inclined to show emotions, better able to understand emotions and more adapt at getting along with other kids in school than are children whose parental relationships are difficult. “Love is a difficult emotion to study because no single facial expression indicates it. How do children understand the emotion of love at a young age?” she asks. Studies focused on understanding children’s emotions have generally employed two methods: One explores children’s ability to identify facial expressions by showing them pictures of faces displaying the four basic emotions, which are happy, sad, mad and scared. The second method explores affective perspective taking to determine whether a child is able to understand how someone else would feel about some action that the child undertakes. The “Love Interview” provides an additional measure of children’s emotional understanding that builds on these previous assessments.

Colwell and her colleagues conducted intensive interviews with nine mothers whose children were in Early Head Start programs and who lived in poverty. The researchers, equipped with their tape recorders, spent many hours with families, conducting more than 100 interviews during the five-year period. Researchers observed participants in their homes, neighborhoods, their children in child care centers, played with the children and asked the mothers, grandmothers, dating partners, and home visitors about their lives, Sharp says. The culmination of the study’s research on relationships with peers and teachers.

Malinda Colwell is examining the emotional and social development and their relationships with peers and teachers.

In our study, girls were found to be more cooperative and supportive than boys with their peers and their teachers. What is interesting is that the girls who are more cooperative have a somewhat negative self-concept. They do not feel as good about themselves as they would like to. But, the girls who show a more assertive approach have a more positive self concept. Boys who are more cooperative also have a more negative self-concept than boys who are assertive,” she says.

Social skills are important for children’s development, Colwell says. “We have to make sure that we equip them with these skills and provide opportunity for them to practice these skills. Kids with a higher level of pretend play seem to understand emotions a lot better than kids who have only a high level of physical play. Strong associations exist between a child’s play traits and how well they manage their emotions.”

Interested in the socialization perspective and the ways adults help children understand and manage emotions, Colwell says an important part of the process involves empathy, or how adults relate to kids in the different activities and discussions that they engage in with kids. Her current study examines how parents teach their children about the consequences of emotions and the various responses that may arise from a particular emotion, recognizing that characteristics of both the parents and the children influence these teaching moments. “Generally, children who have good emotional competence have good social competence. This, in turn, helps them to have better relationships with the people who they come in contact with.” She continues, “Relationships get complicated as children grow older, but children who have emotional competence have the social and developmental skills necessary to slowly understand these complications and work through them.”

VARYING APPROACHES TO THE study of love exemplify the diversity of perspectives that are characteristic of human development and family studies research. Sybil Hart, Ph.D., D. H. Hutcheson Professor in the College of Human Sciences, seeks to understand love as she looks at jealousy as an expression of love in children’s emotional development. Hart’s research has generated new questions regarding biological factors involved in the occurrence of jealousy with children at ages 3, 6, 9 and 12 months. By understanding jealousy and early emotional responses, Hart is uncovering some of the aspects of being a normal human being. (See related story, “The Little Green-Eyed Monster, pp. 6)

Elizabeth Sharp, Ph.D., assistant professor of human development and family studies, focuses her research on adult manifestations of love. Studying families who live in poverty, Sharp worked on a five-year ethnographic study of young African-American mothers; the purpose of the study was to capture a complex understanding of the lives of families living in poverty. As one component of that study, Sharp explored romantic relationships.
A large number of people really have not been studied in terms of how their employment affects their personal life or their family adaptation.

more than just an occasional night. “That is a large number of people that really have not been studied in...
Title of the study is ‘Living in the Gray’ as the central finding was that the women described pervasive ambiguity in their lives. That is, without the socially-sanctioned roles of wives and mothers at their ages, they engaged in considerable introspection about their life course trajectories, often “going back and forth” about their contentment with being single.

**Gwen Sorell, Ph.D., associate professor of Human Development and Family Studies, her colleague Marilyn Montgomery, Ph.D., associate professor of Psychology at Florida International University, and her students have studied identity development in adult women and men for more than 20 years. “We are particularly interested in learning how adults define themselves in their various social roles as daughters and sons, wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, paid and unpaid workers,” says Sorell. The Adult Identity Development Project researchers have conducted in-depth interviews with more than 200 men and women ranging in age from 20 to 75. They basically ask research participants to tell them who they are. The interview includes questions for respondents about the importance to them personally of being a wife, a father, a secretary, a student, a woman or a man. “How do you behave because you are in each of these roles? How would you feel and behave differently if you were not in these roles? What do others who are important to you expect you to do in performing these roles? What, if any changes might you make in the future in your feelings and behaviors in these roles?”, questions Sorell.

People are remarkably diverse in their role-related identities,’ she comments. For example, an analysis by Sorell, Montgomery and Dana Taylor, Ph.D., of Family Enrichment Associates, of the self-decisions of 24 wives who were interviewed in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s revealed that every woman expressed resentment about others’ stereotypes and expectations of wives. None of the women defined themselves stereotypically. Women’s description could be developing a sexual identity was complex and difficult. These women experienced a lot of social discomfort from childhood through adulthood although most of them were satisfied with their self-definings and with their lives at the time of their interviews. For almost all of these women, some disruption in family relationships, particularly with their mothers, had occurred.

Guided by a variety of frameworks, employing diverse methodology, and focusing on different ages in the life span, the researchers are making progress in their pursuit of increased understanding of the human condition which, of course, has the promise to enrich the lives of individuals, relationships, families, communities and society.

WOMEN ARE LIVING IN A UNIQUE TIME IN HISTORY AS WOMEN TODAY, COMPARED TO EARLIER PERIODS, HAVE MORE OPTIONS TO STRUCTURE THEIR LIVES.

In a sample of 60 married women, 15 of whom were full-time homemakers, a third group of men and women experienced a prolonged period of searching and questioning that continued at the time of their interviews. “One thing that we found interesting in the pattern of findings was the lack of difference associated with type of faith commitment,” says Sorell. “Christians, Jews, Muslims, and those of other faiths or no institutionalized faith were represented in the different categories. And there were no gender differences.”

In a study of 12 self-identified lesbians ranging in age from 22 to 60, Sorell, Montgomery, and Page Heideman, found that the process of developing their identity was complex and difficult. These women experienced a lot of social discomfort from childhood through adulthood although most of them were satisfied with their self-definings and with their lives at the time of their interviews. For almost all of these women, some disruption in family relationships, particularly with their mothers, had occurred. One woman in the study commented, “It’s easier to be a lesbian than to be a daughter.” This provocative comment is currently being explored in a comparison of daughter role identity for lesbian and heterosexual women. Other current projects from the coded interviews include body identity projects on morbid obesity. Caitlin Pausé is conducting identity interviews with morbidly obese women to ask them about their physical body and how it interfaces with their roles as mothers and daughters, wives and workers.

The science of studying human lives is a complicated endeavor. Highlighting the complexity of studying human lives, these scholars focus on love, relationships, work, identities and the connections among these.