# I The Changing Family

The study of the family does not belong to any single scholarly field; genetics, physiology, archaeology, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and economics all touch on it. Religious and ethical authorities claim a stake in the family, and troubled individuals and families generate therapeutic demands on family scholarship. In short, the study of the family is interdisciplinary, controversial, and necessary for the formulation of social policy and practices.

Interdisciplinary subjects present characteristic problems. Each discipline has its own assumptions and views of the world, which may not directly transfer into another field. For example, some biologists and physically oriented anthropologists analyze human affairs in terms of individual motives and instincts; for them, society is a shadowy presence, serving mainly as the setting for biologically motivated individual action. Many sociologists and cultural anthropologists, in contrast, perceive the individual as an actor playing a role written by culture and society. One important school of psychology sees people neither as passive recipients of social pressures nor as creatures driven by powerful lusts, but as information processors trying to make sense of their environment. There is no easy way to reconcile such perspectives. Scientific paradigms—characteristic ways of looking at the world—determine not only what answers will be found, but also what questions will be asked. This fact has perhaps created special confusion in the study of the family.

There is the assumption that family life, so familiar a part of everyday experience, is easily understood. But familiarity may breed a sense of destiny—what we experience is transformed into the "natural."

Social scientists have been arguing for many years about how to define the family, even before the dramatic changes of the past four decades. Now the question of how to define the family has become a hot political issue. Is a mother and her child a family? A cohabiting couple? A cohabiting couple with children? A married couple without children? A grandmother who is raising her grandchildren? A gay couple? A gay couple with children?

In his article, "The Theoretical Importance of the Family," William J. Goode defines *family* as a special kind of relationship between people rather than a particular kind of household or group, such as two married parents and their children. He argues that in all known societies, and under many social conditions, people develop family-like social patterns—a "familistic package"—even when some of the traditional aspects of family are missing.



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What is in this "familistic package"? Continuity is an essential element: the expectation that the relationship will continue. This makes it possible to share money and goods and offer help to the other person, knowing that in the future that person will reciprocate. Familiarity is another benefit; family members know one another and their likes and dislikes. In other words, the family is something like a mutual aid society. It helps individuals meet their multiple needs, including the need for affection and companionship, and also serves as an insurance policy in times of sickness or other trouble.

Still another obstacle to understanding family life is that it is hard to see the links between the larger world outside the home and the individuals and families inside. Several of the selections in Part One aim to show us these links. For example, Anthony Giddens argues that there is a global revolution going on in sexuality, in marriage and the family, and in how people think of themselves and their relationships. He argues that we are living through another wave of technological and economic modernization that is having a profound impact on personal life. Further, he sees a strong parallel between the ideals of a democratic society and the emerging new ideals of family relationships. For example, a good marriage is coming to be seen as a relationship between equals. Giddens recognizes that many of the changes in family life are worrisome, but we can't go back to the family patterns of an earlier time.

Nor would most of us really want to. Nostalgic images of the family in earlier times typically omit the high mortality rates that prevailed before the twentieth century. Death could strike at any age, and was a constant threat to family stability. Arlene Skolnick's article reveals the profound impact of high mortality on family relationships.

Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout analyze Census Bureau statistics on American family life across the entire twentieth century. They find that many widespread worries about today's families are based on mistaken understandings about history and overly simple impressions of family demographic change. For example, many people worry about the increase in one-person households. But the cause is not people fleeing marriage and family. It's that the elderly population is growing larger, they have more money than in the past, and prefer to live alone if widowed.

The readings in Chapter 2 are concerned with the meaning of family in modern society. As women increasingly participate in the paid workforce, argues Sharon Hays, they find themselves caught up in a web of cultural contradictions that remain unresolved and indeed have deepened. There is no way, she says, for contemporary women to get it "just right." Both stay-at-home and working mothers maintain an intensive commitment to motherhood, although they work it out in different ways. Women who stay at home no longer feel comfortable and fulfilled being defined by themselves and others as "mere housewives." And working women are frequently anxious about the time away from children and the complexities of balancing parental duties with the demands of the job.

The cultural contradictions that trouble motherhood can be seen as a part of the larger "cultural war" over the family. But there are more than two sides in the family wars. Janet Z. Giele carefully diagrams *three* positions on the family: the conservative, the liberal, and the feminist. The latter, for Giele, is the most promising for developing public policies that would combine conservative and liberal perspectives. The feminist vision, she argues, appreciates both the "premodern nature of the family" with the inevitable interdependence of family with a modern, fast-changing economy.

# 1 Families Past and Present

## READING 1

## *The Theoretical Importance of the Family*

William J. Goode

Through the centuries, thoughtful people have observed that the family was disintegrating. In the past several decades, this idea has become more and more common. Many analysts have reported that the family no longer performs tasks once entrusted to it—production, education, protection, for example. From these and other data we might conclude that the family is on its way out.

But almost everyone who lives out an average life span enters the married state. Most eventually have children, who will later do the same. Of the increasing number who divorce, many will hopefully or skeptically marry again. In the Western nations, a higher percentage of people marry than a century ago. Indeed, the total number of years spent within marriage by the average person is higher now than at any previous time in the history of the world. In all known societies, almost everyone lives enmeshed in a network of family rights and obligations. People are taught to accept these rules through a long period of childhood socialization. That is, people come to feel that these family patterns are both right and desirable.

At the present time, human beings appear to get as much joy and sorrow from the family as they always have, and seem as bent as ever on taking part in family life. In most of the world, the traditional family may be shaken, but the institution will probably enjoy a longer life than any nation now in existence. The family does not seem to be a powerful institution, like the military, the church, or the state, but it seems to be the most resistant to conquest, or to the efforts people make to reshape it. Any specific family may appear to be fragile or unstable, but the family system as a whole is tough and resilient.



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## THE FAMILY: VARIOUS VIEWS

The intense emotional meaning of family relations for almost everyone has been observed throughout history. Philosophers and social analysts have noted that any society is a structure made up of families linked together. Both travelers and anthropologists often describe the peculiarities of a given society by outlining its family relations.

The earliest moral and ethical writings of many cultures assert the significance of the family. Within those commentaries, the view is often expressed that a society loses its strength if people do not fulfill family obligations. Confucius thought that happiness and prosperity would prevail if everyone would behave "correctly" as a family member. This meant primarily that no one should fail in his filial obligations. That is, the proper relationship between ruler and subjects was like that between a father and his children. The cultural importance of the family is also emphasized in the Old Testament. The books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Proverbs, for example, proclaim the importance of obeying family rules. The earliest codified literature in India, the Rig-Veda, which dates from about the last half of the second millennium B.C., and the Law of Manu, which dates from about the beginning of the Christian era, devote much attention to the family. Poetry, plays, novels, and short stories typically seize upon family relationships as the primary focus of human passion, and their ideas and themes often grow from family conflict. Even the great epic poems of war have subthemes focusing on problems in family relations.[1]

From time to time, social analysts and philosophers have presented plans for societies that *might* be created (these are called utopias) in which new family roles (rights and obligations of individual members) are offered as solutions to traditional social problems. Plato's *Republic* is one such attempt. Plato was probably the first to urge the creation of a society in which all members, men and women alike, would have an equal opportunity to develop their talents to the utmost, and to achieve a position in society solely through merit. Since family patterns in all societies prevent selection based entirely on individual worth, to Plato's utopia the tie between parents and children would play no part, because knowledge of that link would be erased. Approved conception would take place at the same time each year at certain hymeneal festivals; children born out of season would be eliminated (along with those born defective). All children would be taken from their parents at birth and reared by specially designated people.

Experimental or utopian communities like Oneida, the Shakers, the Mormons, and modern communes have typically insisted that changes in family relations were necessary to achieve their goals. Every fundamental political upheaval since the French Revolution of 1789 has offered a program that included profound changes in family relations. Since World War II, most countries of the world have written new constitutions. In perhaps all of them, but especially in all the less developed nations, these new laws have been far more advanced than public opinion in those countries. They have aimed at creating new family patterns more in conformity with the leaders' views of equality and justice, and often antagonistic to traditional family systems. This wide range of commentary, analysis,

1. See in this connection Nicholas Tavuchis and William J. Goode (eds.), *The Family through Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1973).

and political action, over a period of twenty-five hundred years, suggests that throughout history we have been at least implicitly aware of the importance of family patterns as a central element in human societies.

## THE CENTRAL POSITION OF THE FAMILY IN SOCIETY

In most tribal societies, kinship patterns form the major part of the whole social structure. By contrast, the family is only a small part of the social structure of modern industrial societies. It is nevertheless a key element in them, specifically linking individuals with other social institutions, such as the church, the state, or the economy. Indeed modern society, with its complex advanced technology and its highly trained bureaucracy, would collapse without the contributions of this seemingly primitive social agency. The class system, too, including its restrictions on education and opportunity, its high or low social mobility rates, and its initial social placement by birth, is founded on the family.

Most important, it is within the family that the child is first socialized to serve the needs of the society, and not only its own needs. A society will not survive unless its needs are met, such as the production and distribution of commodities, protection of the young and old or the sick and the pregnant, conformity to the law, and so on. Only if individuals are motivated to serve these needs will the society continue to operate, and the foundation for that motivation is laid by the family. Family members also participate in informal social control processes. Socialization at early ages makes most of us wish to conform, but throughout each day, both as children and as adults, we are often tempted to deviate. The formal agencies of social control (such as the police) are not enough to do more than force the extreme deviant to conform. What is needed is a set of social pressures that provide feedback to the individual whenever he or she does well or poorly and thus support internal controls as well as the controls of the formal agencies. Effectively or not, the family usually takes on this task.

The family, then, is made up of individuals, but it is also a social unit, and part of a larger social network. Families are not isolated, self-enclosed social systems; and the other institutions of society, such as the military, the church, or the school system, continually rediscover that they are not dealing with individuals, but with members of families. Even in the most industrialized and urban of societies, where it is sometimes supposed that people lead rootless and anonymous lives, most people are in continual interaction with other family members. Men and women who achieve high social position usually find that even as adults they still respond to their parents' criticisms, are still angered or hurt by a sibling's scorn. Corporations that offer substantial opportunities to rising executives often find that their proposals are turned down because of objections from family members.

So it is through the family that the society is able to elicit from the individual his or her contributions. The family, in turn, can continue to exist only if it is supported by the larger society. If these two, the smaller and the larger social system, furnish each other the conditions necessary for their survival, they must be interrelated in many important

ways. Thus, the two main themes in this [reading] will be the relations among family members, and the relations between the family and the society.

## PRECONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE FAMILY

The task of understanding the family presents many difficulties, and one of the greatest barriers is found in ourselves. We are likely to have strong emotions about the family. Because of our own deep involvement in family relationships, objective analysis is not easy. When we read about other types of family behavior, in other classes or societies, we are likely to feel that they are odd or improper. We are tempted to argue that this or that type of family behavior is wrong or right, rather than to analyze it. Second, although we have observed many people in some of their family behavior, usually we have had very limited experience with what goes on behind the walls of other homes. This means that our sample of observations is very narrow. It also means that for almost any generalization we create or read about, we can often find some specific experience that refutes it, or fits it. Since we feel we "already know," we may not feel motivated to look for further data against which to test generalizations.

However, many supposedly well-known beliefs about the family are not well grounded in fact. Others are only partly true and must be studied more precisely if they are to be understood. One such belief is that "children hold the family together." Despite repeated attempts to affirm it, this generalization does not seem to be very strong. A more correct view seems to be that there is a modest association between divorce and not having children, but it is mostly caused by the fact that people who do not become well adjusted, and who may for some reasons be prone to divorce, are also less likely to have children.

Another way of checking whether the findings of family sociology are obvious is to present some research findings, and ask whether it was worth the bother of discovering them since "everybody knew them all along." Consider the following set of facts. Suppose a researcher had demonstrated those facts. Was it worthwhile to carry out the study, or were the facts already known?

1. Because modern industrial society breaks down traditional family systems, one result is that the age of marriage in Western nations (which was low among farmers) has risen greatly over many generations.
2. Because of the importance of the extended family in China and India, the average size of the household has always been large, with many generations living under one roof.
3. In polygynous societies, most men have several wives, and the fertility rate is higher than in monogamous societies.

Although these statements sound plausible to many people, and impressive arguments have been presented to support them, in fact they are all false. For hundreds of years, the age at marriage among farmers in Western nations has been relatively high (25–27 years), and though it rises and falls somewhat over time, there seems to be no

important trend in any particular direction. With reference to multifamily households, every survey of Chinese and Indian households has shown that even generations ago they were relatively modest in size (from four to six persons, varying by region and time period). Only under special historical circumstances will large, extended households be common. As to polygyny, the fact is that except under special circumstances, almost all men in all societies must be content with only one wife, and the fertility rate of polygynous marriages (one man married to several wives) is lower than that for monogamous marriages. Thus we see that with reference to the incorrect findings just cited, common beliefs did require testing, and they were wrong.

On the other hand, of course, many popular beliefs about how families work *are* correct. We cannot assume their correctness, however. Instead, we have to examine our observations, and make studies on our own to see how well these data fit in order to improve our understanding of the dynamics of family processes in our own or in other societies. If we emphasize the problems of obtaining facts, we should not lose sight of the central truth of any science: vast quantities of figures may be entirely meaningless, unless the search is guided by fruitful hypotheses or broad conceptions of social behavior. What we seek is organized facts, a structure of propositions, in which theory and fact illuminate one another. If we do not seek actual observation, we are engaged in blind speculation. If we seek facts without theoretical guidance, our search is random and often yields findings that have no bearing on anything. Understanding the family, then, requires the same sort of careful investigation as any other scientific endeavor.

## WHY THE FAMILY IS THEORETICALLY SIGNIFICANT

Because the family is so much taken for granted, we do not often stop to consider the many traits that make it theoretically interesting. A brief consideration of certain peculiarities of the family will suggest why it is worthwhile exploring this social unit.

The family is the only social institution other than religion that is formally developed in all societies: a specific social agency is in charge of a great variety of social behaviors and activities. Some have argued that legal systems did not exist in preliterate or technologically less developed tribes or societies because there was no formally organized legislative body or judiciary. Of course, it is possible to abstract from concrete behavior the legal *aspects* of action, or the economic aspects, or the political dynamics, even when there are no explicitly labeled agencies formally in control of these areas in the society. However, kinship statuses and their responsibilities are the object of both formal and informal attention in societies at a high or a low technological level.

Family duties are the direct role responsibility of everyone in the society, with rare exceptions. Almost everyone is both born into a family and founds one of his or her own. Each individual is kin to many others. Many people, by contrast, may escape the religious duties others take for granted, or military or political burdens. Moreover, many family role responsibilities cannot usually be delegated to others, while in a work situation specialized obligations can be delegated.

Taking part in family activities has the further interesting quality that though it is not backed by the formal punishments supporting many other obligations, almost everyone takes part nonetheless. We must, for example, engage in economic or productive acts, or face starvation. We must enter the army, pay taxes, and appear before courts, or face money penalties and force. Such punishments do not usually confront the individual who does not wish to marry, or refuses to talk with his father or brother. Nevertheless, so pervasive are the social pressures, and so intertwined with indirect or direct rewards and punishments, that almost everyone conforms, or claims to conform, to family demands.

Although the family is usually thought of as an *expressive* or emotional social unit, it serves as an *instrumental* agency for the larger social structures, and all other institutions and agencies depend upon its contributions. For example, the role behavior learned within the family becomes the model or prototype for behavior required in other segments of the society. Inside the family, the content of the *socialization* process is the cultural tradition of the larger society. Families are also themselves *economic* units with respect to production and allocation. With reference to *social control*, each person's total range of behavior, and how his or her time and energies are budgeted, is more easily visible to family members than to outsiders. They can evaluate how the individual is allocating his or her time and money, and how well he or she is carrying out various duties. Consequently, the family acts as a source of pressure on the individual to adjust—to work harder and play less, or go to church less and study more. In all these ways, the family is partly an instrument or agent of the larger society. If it fails to perform adequately, the goals of the larger society may not be effectively achieved.

Perhaps more interesting theoretically is the fact that the various *tasks of the family are all separable* from one another, but in fact are not separated in almost all known family systems. We shall discuss these functions or tasks in various contexts in this book, so no great elaboration is needed at this point. Here are some of the contributions of the family to the larger society: reproduction of young, physical maintenance of family members, social placement of the child, socialization, and social control.

Let us consider how these activities could be separated. For example, the mother could send her child to be fed in a neighborhood mess hall, and of course some harassed mothers do send their children to buy lunch in a local snack bar. Those who give birth to a child need not socialize the child. They might send the child to specialists, and indeed specialists do take more responsibility for this task as the child grows older. Parents might, as some eugenicists have suggested, be selected for their breeding qualities, but these might not include any great talent for training the young. Status placement might be accomplished by random drawing of lots, by IQ tests or periodic examinations in physical and intellectual skills, or by popularity polls. This assignment of children to various social positions could be done without regard to an individual's parents, those who socialized or fed the child, or others who might supervise the child's daily behavior.

Separations of this kind have been suggested from time to time, and a few hesitant attempts have been made here and there in the world to put them into operation. However, three conclusions relevant to this kind of division can be drawn: (1) In all known societies, the *ideal* (with certain qualifications to be noted) is that the family be entrusted with all these functions. (2) When one or more family tasks are entrusted to another agency by a revolutionary or utopian society, the change can be made only with

the support of much ideological fervor, and usually political pressure as well. (3) These experiments are also characterized by a gradual return to the more traditional type of family. In both the Israeli *kibbutzim* and the Russian experiments in relieving parents of child care, the ideal of completely communal living was once urged. Husband and wife were to have only a personal and emotional tie with one another: divorce would be easy. The children were to see their parents at regular intervals but look to their nursery attendants and mother surrogates for affection and direction during work hours. Each individual was to contribute his or her best skills to the cooperative unit without regard to family ties or sex status (there would be few or no "female" or "male" tasks). That ideal was attempted in a modest way, but behavior gradually dropped away from the ideal. The only other country in which the pattern has been attempted on a large scale is China. Already Chinese communes have retreated from their high ambitions, following the path of the *kibbutz* and the Russian *kolkhoz*.

Various factors contribute to these deviations from attempts to create a new type of family, and the two most important sets of pressures cannot easily be separated from each other. First is the problem, also noted by Plato, that individuals who develop their own attitudes and behaviors in the usual Western (European and European-based) family system do not easily adjust to the communal "family" even when they believe it is the right way. The second is the likelihood that when the family is radically changed, the various relations between it and the larger society are changed. New strains are created, demanding new kinds of adjustments on the part of the individuals in the society. Perhaps the planners must develop somewhat different agencies, or a different blueprint, to transform the family.

These comments have nothing to do with "capitalism" in its current political and economic argument with "communism." They merely describe the historical fact that though various experiments in separating the major functions of the family from one another have been conducted, none of these evolved from a previously existing family system. In addition, the several modern important attempts at such a separation, including the smaller communes that were created in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, mostly exhibit a common pattern, a movement *away* from the utopian blueprint of separating the various family activities and giving each of them to a different social unit.

It is possible that some of these activities (meals) can be more easily separated than others; or that some family systems (for example, matrilineal systems) might lend themselves to such a separation more easily than others. On the other hand, we have to begin with the data that are now available. Even cautiously interpreted, they suggest that the family is a rather stable institution. On the other hand, we have not yet analyzed what this particular institution is. In the next section we discuss this question.

## DEFINING THE FAMILY: A MATTER OF MORE OR LESS

Since thousands of publications have presented research findings on the family, one might suppose that there must be agreement on what this social unit is. In fact, sociologists and

anthropologists have argued for decades about how to define it. Indeed, creating a clear, formal definition of any object of study is sometimes more difficult than making a study of that object. If we use a *concrete* definition, and assert that "a family is a social unit made up of father, mother, and children," then only about 35 percent of all U.S. households can be classed as a family. Much of the research on the family would have to exclude a majority of residential units. In addition, in some societies, one wife may be married to several husbands, or one husband to several wives. The definition would exclude such units. In a few societies there have been "families" in which the "husband" was a woman; and in some, certain "husbands" were not expected to live with their "wives." In the United States, millions of households contain at least one child, but only one parent. In a few communes, every adult male is married to all other adult females. That is, there are many kinds of social units that seem to be like a family, but do not fit almost any concrete definition that we might formulate.

We can escape such criticisms in part by claiming that most adults eventually go through such a *phase* of family life; that is, almost all men and women in the United States marry at some time during their lives, and most of them eventually have children. Nevertheless, analysis of the family would be much thinner if we focused only on that one kind of household. In ordinary language usage, people are most likely to agree that a social unit made up of father, mother, and child or children is a genuine family. They will begin to disagree more and more, as one or more of those persons or social roles is missing. Few people would agree that, at the other extremes, a household with only a single person in it is a family. Far more would think of a household as a family if it comprised a widow and her several children. Most people would agree that a husband-wife household is a family if they have children, even if their children are now living somewhere else. However, many would not be willing to class a childless couple as a family, especially if that couple planned never to have children. Very few people would be willing to accept a homosexual couple as a family.

What can we learn from such ordinary language usage? First, that *family* is not a single thing, to be captured by a neat verbal formula. Second, many social units can be thought of as "more or less" families, as they are more or less similar to the traditional type of family. Third, much of this graded similarity can be traced to the different kinds of role relations to be found in that traditional unit. Doubtless the following list is not comprehensive, but it includes most of those relationships: (1) At least two adult persons of opposite sex reside together. (2) They engage in some kind of division of labor; that is, they do not both perform exactly the same tasks. (3) They engage in many types of economic and social exchanges; that is, they do things for one another. (4) They share many things in common, such as food, sex, residence, and both goods and social activities. (5) The adults have parental relations with their children, as their children have filial relations with them; the parents have some authority over their children, and both share with one another, while also assuming some obligation for protection, cooperation, and nurturance. (6) There are sibling relations among the children themselves, with, once more, a range of obligations to share, protect, and help one another. When all these conditions exist, few people would deny that the unit is a family. As we consider households in which more are missing, a larger number of people would express some doubt as to whether it really is a family. Thus, if two adults live together, but do nothing for each

other, few people would agree that it is a family. If they do not even live together, fewer still would call the couple a family.

Individuals create all sorts of relations with each other, but others are more or less likely to view them as a family to the extent that their continuing social relations exhibit some or all of the role patterns noted above. Most important for our understanding of the family is that in all known societies, and under a wide range of social conditions, some kinds of familistic living arrangements seem to emerge, with some or all of these traits. These arrangements can emerge in prisons (with homosexual couples as units), under the disorganized conditions of revolution, conquest, or epidemic; or even when political attempts are made to reduce the importance of the family, and instead to press people to live in a more communal fashion. That is, people create and re-create some forms of familistic social patterns even when some of those traditional elements are missing.

This raises the inevitable question: Why does this happen? Why do people continue to form familistic relations, even when they are not convinced that it is the ideal social arrangement? Why is *this* and not some *other* social pattern so widespread? Of course, this is not an argument for the *universality* of the conjugal family. Many other kinds of relations between individuals are created. Nevertheless, some approximation of these familistic relationships do continue to occur in the face of many alternative temptations and opportunities as well as counterpressures. Unless we are willing to assert that people are irrational, we must conclude that these relationships must offer some *advantages.* What are they?

## ADVANTAGES OF THE "FAMILISTIC PACKAGE"

We suppose that the most fundamental set of advantages is found in the division of labor and the resulting possibility of social exchanges between husband and wife (or members of a homosexual couple), as well as between children and parents. This includes not only economic goods, but help, nurturance, protection, and affection. It is often forgotten that the modern domestic household is very much an *economic* unit even if it is no longer a farming unit. People are actually producing goods and services for one another. They are buying objects in one place, and transporting them to the household. They are transforming food into meals. They are engaged in cleaning, mowing lawns, repairing, transporting, counseling—a wide array of services that would have to be paid for in money if some member of the family did not do them.

Families of all types also enjoy some small economies of scale. When there are two or more members of the household, various kinds of activities can be done almost as easily for everyone as for a single person; it is almost as easy to prepare one meal for three or four people as it is to prepare a similar meal for one person. Thus, the cost of a meal is less per person within a family. Families can cooperate to achieve what an individual cannot, from building a mountain cabin to creating a certain style of life. Help from all members will make it much easier to achieve that goal than it would be for one person.

All the historic forms of the family that we know, including communal group marriages, are also attractive because they offer *continuity*. Thus, whatever the members produce together, they expect to be able to enjoy together later. Continuity has several

implications. One is that members do not have to bear the costs of continually searching for new partners, or for new members who might be "better" at various family tasks. In addition, husband and wife, as well as children, enjoy a much longer line of social credit than they would have if they were making exchanges with people outside the family. This means that an individual can give more at one time to someone in the family, knowing that in the longer run this will not be a loss: the other person will remain long enough to reciprocate at some point, or perhaps still another member will offer help at a later time.

Next, the familistic mode of living offers several of the advantages of any informal group.[2] It exhibits, for example, a very short line of communication; everyone is close by, and members need not communicate through intermediaries. Thus they can respond quickly in case of need. A short line of communication makes cooperation much easier. Second, everyone has many idiosyncratic needs and wishes. In day to day interaction with outsiders, we need not adjust to these very much, and they may be a nuisance; others, in turn, are likely not to adjust to our own idiosyncracies. However, within the familistic mode of social interaction, people learn what each other's idiosyncratic needs are. Learning such needs can and does make life together somewhat more attractive because adjusting to them may not be a great burden, but does give pleasure to the other. These include such trivia as how strong the tea or coffee should be, how much talk there will be at meals, sleep and work schedules, levels of noise, and so on. Of course with that knowledge we can more easily make others miserable, too, if we wish to do so.

Domestic tasks typically do not require high expertise, and as a consequence most members of the family can learn to do them eventually. Because they do learn, members derive many benefits from one another, without having to go outside the family unit. Again, this makes a familistic mode of living more attractive than it would be otherwise. In addition, with reference to many such tasks, there are no outside experts anyway (throughout most of world history, there have been no experts in childrearing, taking care of small cuts or bruises, murmuring consoling words in response to some distress, and so on). That is, the tasks within a family setting are likely to be tasks at which insiders are at least as good as outsiders, and typically better.

No other social institutions offer this range of complementarities, sharing, and closely linked, interwoven advantages. The closest possible exception might be some ascribed, ritual friendships in a few societies, but even these do not offer the range of exchanges that are to be found in the familistic processes.

We have focused on advantages that the *members* of families obtain from living under this type of arrangement. However, when we survey the wide range of family patterns in hundreds of societies, we are struck by the fact that this social unit is strongly supported by *outsiders*—that is, members of the larger society.

It is supported by a structure of norms, values, laws, and a wide range of social pressures. More concretely, other members of the society believe such units are necessary, and they are concerned about how people discharge their obligations within the family.

2. For further comparisons of bureaucracy and informal groups, see Eugene Litwak, "Technical Innovation and Theoretical Functions of Primary Groups and Bureaucratic Structures," *American Journal of Sociology*, *73* (1968), 468–481.

They punish members of the family who do not conform to ideal behavior, and praise those who do conform. These intrusions are not simply whimsical, or a matter of oppression. Other members of the society do in fact have a stake in how families discharge their various tasks. More broadly, it is widely believed that the collective needs of the whole society are served by some of the activities individual families carry out. In short, it is characteristic of the varieties of the family that participants on an average enjoy more, and gain more comfort, pleasure, or advantage from being in a familistic arrangement than from living alone; and *other* members of the society view that arrangement as contributing in some measure to the survival of the society itself. Members of societies have usually supposed it important for most *other* individuals to form families, to rear children, to create the next generation, to support and help each other—whether or not individual members of specific families do in fact feel they gain real advantages from living in a familistic arrangement. For example, over many centuries, people opposed legal divorces, whether or not they themselves were happily married, and with little regard for the marital happiness of others.

This view of what makes up the "familistic social package" explains several kinds of widely observable social behavior. One is that people experiment with different kinds of arrangements, often guided by a new philosophy of how people ought to live. They do so because their own needs have not been adequately fulfilled in the traditional modes of family arrangements available to them in their own society. Since other people have a stake in the kinds of familistic arrangements people make, we can also expect that when some individuals or groups attempt to change or experiment with the established system, various members of the society will object, and may even persecute them for it. We can also see why it is that even in a high-divorce society such as our own, where millions of people have been dissatisfied or hurt by their marriages and their divorces, they nevertheless move back into a marital arrangement. That is, after examining various alternatives, the familistic social package still seems to offer a broader set of personal advantages, and the outside society supports that move. And, as noted earlier, even when there are strong political pressures to create new social units that give far less support for the individual family, as in China, Russia, and the Israeli *kibbutzim*, we can expect that people will continue to drift back toward some kind of familistic arrangement.

## A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO FAMILY RESEARCH

The unusual traits the family exhibits as a type of social subsystem require that some attention be paid to the analytic approach to be used in studying it. First, neither ideal nor reality can be excluded from our attention. It would, for example, be naive to suppose that because some 40 percent of all U.S. couples now marrying will eventually divorce, they do not cherish the ideal of remaining married to one person. Contemporary estimates suggest that about half of all married men engage in extramarital intercourse at some time, but public opinion surveys report that a large majority of both men and women in the United States, even in these permissive times, approve of the ideal of faithfulness. On

a more personal level, every reader of these lines has lied at some time, but nevertheless most believe in the ideal of telling the truth.

A sociologist ascertains the ideals of family systems partly because they are a rough guide to behavior. Knowing that people prefer to have their sons and daughters marry at least at the same class level, we can expect them to try to control their children's mate choices if they can do so. We can also specify some of the conditions under which they will have a greater or lesser success in reaching that goal. We also know that when a person violates the ideal, he or she is likely to conceal the violation if possible. If that is not possible, people will try to find some excuse for the violation, and are likely to be embarrassed if others find out about it.

The sociology of the family cannot confine itself only to contemporary urban (or suburban) American life. Conclusions of any substantial validity or scope must include data from other societies, whether these are past or present, industrial or nonindustrial, Asian or European. Data from the historical past, such as Periclean Athens or imperial Rome, are not often used because no sociologically adequate account of their family systems has as yet been written.[3] On the other hand, the last two decades have seen the appearance of many studies about family systems in various European cities of the last five centuries.

The study of customs and beliefs from the past yields a better understanding of the possible range of social behavior. Thereby, we are led to deny or at least to qualify a finding that might be correct if limited only to modern American life (such as the rise in divorce rates over several decades). The use of data from tribal societies of the past or present helps us in testing conclusions about family systems that are not found at all in Western society, such as matrilineal systems or polygyny. Or, an apparently simple relationship may take a different form in other societies. For example, in the United States most first marriages are based on a love relationship (whatever else they may be based on), and people are reluctant to admit that they have married someone with whom they were not in love. By contrast, though people fall in love in other societies, love may play a small or a large part in the marriage system. . . .

It is possible to study almost any phenomenon from a wide range of viewpoints. We may study the economic aspects of family behavior, or we may confine ourselves to the biological factors in family patterns. A full analysis of any concrete object is impossible. Everything can be analyzed from many vantage points, each of them yielding a somewhat different but still limited picture. Everything is infinitely complex. Each science limits its perspective to the range of processes that it considers important. Each such approach has its own justification. Here we examine the family mainly from a sociological perspective.

The sociological approach focuses on the family as a social institution, the peculiar and unique quality of family interaction as *social.* For example, family systems exhibit the characteristics of legitimacy and authority, which are not biological categories at all. The values and the prescribed behavior to be found in a family, or the rights and duties of family statuses such as father or daughter, are not psychological categories. They are peculiar to the theoretical approach of sociology. Personality theory is not very useful in

3. However, Keith Hopkins has published several specialized studies on various aspects of Roman families. See his *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge University Press, 1978).

explaining the particular position of the family in Chinese and Japanese social structures, although it may help us understand how individuals respond emotionally to those rights and obligations. If we use a consistently sociological approach, we will miss some important information about concrete family interaction. The possible gain when we stay on one theoretical level may be the achievement of some increased systematization, and some greater rigor.

At a minimum, however, when an analyst moves from the sociological to the psychological level of theory, he or she ought at least to be conscious of it. If the investigation turns to the impact of biological or psychological factors on the family, they should be examined with reference to their *social* meaning. For example, interracial marriage appears to be of little biological significance, but it has much social impact on those who take part in such a marriage. A sociologist who studies the family is not likely to be an expert in the *psychodynamics* of mental disease, but is interested in the effect of mental disease on the social relations in a particular family or type of family, or in the adjustment different family types make to it.

**READING 2**

# *The Global Revolution in Family and Personal Life*

Anthony Giddens

Among all the changes going on today, none are more important than those happening in our personal lives—in sexuality, emotional life, marriage and the family. There is a global revolution going on in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others. It is a revolution advancing unevenly in different regions and cultures, with many resistances.

As with other aspects of the runaway world, we don't know what the ratio of advantages and anxieties will turn out to be. In some ways, these are the most difficult and disturbing transformations of all. Most of us can tune out from larger problems for much of the time. We can't opt out, however, from the swirl of change reaching right into the heart of our emotional lives.

There are few countries in the world where there isn't intense discussion about sexual equality, the regulation of sexuality and the future of the family. And where there isn't open debate, this is mostly because it is actively repressed by authoritarian governments or fundamentalist groups. In many cases, these controversies are national or local—as are the social and political reactions to them. Politicians and pressure groups will suggest that if only family policy were modified, if only divorce were made harder or easier to get in their particular country, solutions to our problems could readily be found.

But the changes affecting the personal and emotional spheres go far beyond the borders of any particular country, even one as large as the United States. We find the same issues almost everywhere, differing only in degree and according to the cultural context in which they take place.

In China, for example, the state is considering making divorce more difficult. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, very liberal marriage laws were passed. Marriage is a working contract, that can be dissolved, I quote: “when husband and wife both desire it.”

Even if one partner objects, divorce can be granted when “mutual affection” has gone from the marriage. Only a two week wait is required, after which the two pay $4 and are henceforth independent. The Chinese divorce rate is still low as compared with Western countries, but it is rising rapidly—as is true in the other developing Asian societies. In Chinese cities, not only divorce, but cohabitation is becoming more frequent.

In the vast Chinese countryside, by contrast, everything is different. Marriage and the family are much more traditional—in spite of the official policy of limiting childbirth through a mixture of incentives and punishment. Marriage is an arrangement between two families, fixed by the parents rather than the individuals concerned.

A recent study in the province of Gansu, which has only a low level of economic development, found that 60% of marriages are still arranged by parents. As a Chinese saying has it: “meet once, nod your head and marry.” There is a twist in the tail in modernising China. Many of those currently divorcing in the urban centres were married in the traditional manner in the country.

In China there is much talk of protecting the family. In many Western countries the debate is even more shrill. The family is a site for the struggles between tradition and modernity, but also a metaphor for them. There is perhaps more nostalgia surrounding the lost haven of the family than for any other institution with its roots in the past. Politicians and activists routinely diagnose the breakdown of family life and call for a return to the traditional family.

Now the “traditional family” is very much a catch-all category. There have been many different types of family and kinship systems in different societies and cultures. The Chinese family, for instance, was always distinct from family forms in the West. Arranged marriage was never as common in most European countries, as in China, or India. Yet the family in non-modern cultures did, and does, have some features found more or less everywhere.

The traditional family was above all an economic unit. Agricultural production normally involved the whole family group, while among the gentry and aristocracy, transmission of property was the main basis of marriage. In mediaeval Europe, marriage was not contracted on the basis of sexual love, nor was it regarded as a place where such love should flourish. As the French historian, Georges Duby, puts it, marriage in the middle ages was not to involve “frivolity, passion, or fantasy.”

The inequality of men and women was intrinsic to the traditional family. I don’t think one could overstate the importance of this. In Europe, women were the property of their husbands or fathers—chattels as defined in law.

In the traditional family, it wasn’t only women who lacked rights—children did too. The idea of enshrining children’s rights in law is in historical terms relatively recent. In

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premodern periods, as in traditional cultures today, children weren't reared for their own sake, or for the satisfaction of the parents. One could almost say that children weren't recognised as individuals.

It wasn't that parents didn't love their children, but they cared about them more for the contribution they made to the common economic task than for themselves. Moreover, the death rate of children was frightening. In Colonial America nearly one in four infants died in their first year. Almost 50% didn't live to age 10.

Except for certain courtly or elite groups, in the traditional family sexuality was always dominated by reproduction. This was a matter of tradition and nature combined. The absence of effective contraception meant that for most women sexuality was inevitably closely connected with childbirth. In many traditional cultures, including in Western Europe up to the threshold of the 20th Century, a woman might have 10 or more pregnancies during the course of her life.

Sexuality was regulated by the idea of female virtue. The sexual double standard is often thought of as a creation of the Victorian period. In fact, in one version or another it was central to almost all non-modern societies. It involved a dualistic view of female sexuality—a clear cut division between the virtuous woman on the one hand and the libertine on the other.

Sexual promiscuity in many cultures has been taken as a positive defining feature of masculinity. James Bond is, or was, admired for his sexual as well as his physical heroism. Sexually adventurous women, by contrast, have nearly always been beyond the pale, no matter how much influence the mistresses of some prominent figures might have achieved.

Attitudes towards homosexuality were also governed by a mix of tradition and nature. Anthropological surveys show that homosexuality—or male homosexuality at any rate—has been tolerated, or openly approved of, in more cultures than it has been outlawed.

Those societies that have been hostile to homosexuality have usually condemned it as specifically unnatural. Western attitudes have been more extreme than most; less than half a century ago homosexuality was still widely regarded as a perversion and written up as such in manuals of psychiatry.

Antagonism towards homosexuality is still widespread and the dualistic view of women continues to be held by many—of both sexes. But over the past few decades the main elements of people's sexual lives in the West have changed in an absolutely basic way. The separation of sexuality from reproduction is in principle complete. Sexuality is for the first time something to be discovered, moulded, altered. Sexuality, which used to be defined so strictly in relation to marriage and legitimacy, now has little connection to them at all. We should see the increasing acceptance of homosexuality not just as a tribute to liberal tolerance. It is a logical outcome of the severance of sexuality from reproduction. Sexuality which has no content is by definition no longer dominated by heterosexuality.

What most of its defenders in Western countries call the traditional family was in fact a late, transitional phase in family development in the 1950's. This was a time at which the proportion of women out at work was still relatively low and when it was still difficult, especially for women, to obtain divorce without stigma. On the other hand, men

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and women by this time were more equal than they had been previously, both in fact and in law. The family had ceased to be an economic entity and the idea of romantic love as basis for marriage had replaced marriage as an economic contract.

Since then, the family has changed much further. The details vary from society to society, but the same trends are visible almost everywhere in the industrialised world. Only a minority of people now live in what might be called the standard 1950's family—both parents living together with their children of the marriage, where the mother is a full time housewife, and the father the breadwinner. In some countries, more than a third of all births happen outside wedlock, while the proportion of people living alone has gone up steeply and looks likely to rise even more.

In most societies, like the U.S., marriage remains popular—the U.S. has aptly been called a high divorce, high marriage society. In Scandinavia, on the other hand, a large proportion of people living together, including where children are involved, remain unmarried. Moreover, up to a quarter of women aged between 18 and 35 in the U.S. and Europe say they do not intend to have children—and they appear to mean it.

Of course in all countries older family forms continue to exist. In the U.S., many people, recent immigrants particularly, still live according to traditional values. Most family life, however, has been transformed by the rise of the couple and coupledom. Marriage and the family have become what I termed in an earlier lecture shell institutions. They are still called the same, but inside their basic character has changed.

In the traditional family, the married couple was only one part, and often not the main part, of the family system. Ties with children and other relatives tended to be equally or even more important in the day to day conduct of social life. Today the couple, married or unmarried, is at the core of what the family is. The couple came to be at the centre of family life as the economic role of the family dwindled and love, or love plus sexual attraction, became the basis of forming marriage ties.

A couple once constituted has its own exclusive history, its own biography. It is a unit based upon emotional communication or intimacy. The idea of intimacy, like so many other familiar notions I've discussed in these lectures, sounds old but in fact is very new. Marriage was never in the past based upon intimacy—emotional communication. No doubt this was important to a good marriage but it was not the foundation of it. For the couple, it is. Communication is the means of establishing the tie in the first place and it is the chief rationale for its continuation.

We should recognise what a major transition this is. "Coupling" and "uncoupling" provide a more accurate description of the arena of personal life now than do "marriage and the family." A more important question for us than "are you married?" is "how good is your relationship?"

The idea of a relationship is also surprisingly recent. Only 30 or so years ago, no one spoke of "relationships." They didn't need to, nor did they need to speak in terms of intimacy and commitment. Marriage at that time was the commitment, as the existence of shotgun marriages bore witness. While statistically marriage is still the normal condition, for most people its meaning has more or less completely changed. Marriage signifies that a couple is in a stable relationship, and may indeed promote that stability, since it makes a public declaration of commitment. However, marriage is no longer the chief defining basis of coupledom.

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The position of children in all this is interesting and somewhat paradoxical. Our attitudes towards children and their protection have altered radically over the past several generations. We prize children so much partly because they have become so much rarer, and partly because the decision to have a child is very different from what it was for previous generations. In the traditional family, children were an economic benefit. Today in Western countries a child, on the contrary, puts a large financial burden on the parents. Having a child is more of a distinct and specific decision than it used to be, and it is a decision guided by psychological and emotional needs. The worries we have about the effects of divorce upon children, and the existence of many fatherless families, have to be understood against the background of our much higher expectations about how children should be cared for and protected.

There are three areas in which emotional communication, and therefore intimacy, are replacing the old ties that used to bind together people's personal lives—in sexual and love relations, parent-child relations and in friendship.

To analyse these, I want to use the idea of what I call the "pure relationship." I mean by this a relationship based upon emotional communication, where the rewards derived from such communication are the main basis for the relationship to continue.

I don't mean a sexually pure relationship. Also I don't mean anything that exists in reality. I'm talking of an abstract idea that helps us understand changes going on in the world. Each of the three areas just mentioned—sexual relationships, parent-child relations and friendship—is tending to approximate to this model. Emotional communication or intimacy, in other words, are becoming the key to what they are all about.

The pure relationship has quite different dynamics from more traditional social ties. It depends upon processes of active trust—opening oneself up to the other. Self-disclosure is the basic condition of intimacy.

The pure relationship is also implicitly democratic. When I was originally working on the study of intimate relationships, I read a great deal of therapeutic and self-help literature on the subject. I was struck by something I don't believe has been widely noticed or remarked upon. If one looks at how a therapist sees a good relationship—in any of the three spheres just mentioned—it is striking how direct a parallel there is with public democracy.

A good relationship, of course, is an ideal—most ordinary relationships don't come even close. I'm not suggesting that our relations with spouses, lovers, children or friends aren't often messy, conflictful and unsatisfying. But the principles of public democracy are ideals too, that also often stand at some large distance from reality.

A good relationship is a relationship of equals, where each party has equal rights and obligations. In such a relationship, each person has respect, and wants the best, for the other. The pure relationship is based upon communication, so that understanding the other person's point of view is essential.

Talk, or dialogue, are the basis of making the relationship work. Relationships function best if people don't hide too much from each other—there has to be mutual trust. And trust has to be worked at, it can't just be taken for granted.

Finally, a good relationship is one free from arbitrary power, coercion or violence.

Every one of these qualities conforms to the values of democratic politics. In a democracy, all are in principle equal, and with equality of rights and responsibilities comes

mutual respect. Open dialogue is a core property of democracy. Democratic systems substitute open discussion of issues—a public space of dialogue—for authoritarian power, or for the sedimented power of tradition. No democracy can work without trust. And democracy is undermined if it gives way to authoritarianism or violence.

When we apply these principles—as ideals, I would stress again—to relationships, we are talking of something very important—the possible emergence of what I shall call, a democracy of the emotions in everyday life. A democracy of the emotions, it seems to me, is as important as public democracy in improving the quality of our lives.

This holds as much in parent-child relations as in other areas. These can't, and shouldn't, be materially equal. Parents must have authority over children, in everyone's interests. Yet they should presume an in-principle equality. In a democratic family, the authority of parents should be based upon an implicit contract. The parent in effect says to the child: "If you were an adult, and knew what I know, you would agree that what I ask you to do is legitimate."

Children in traditional families were—and are—supposed to be seen and not heard. Many parents, perhaps despairing of their children's rebelliousness, would dearly like to resurrect that rule. But there isn't any going back to it, nor should there be. In a democracy of the emotions, children can and should be able to answer back.

An emotional democracy doesn't imply lack of discipline, or absence of authority. It simply seeks to put them on a different footing.

Something very similar happened in the public sphere, when democracy began to replace arbitrary government and the rule of force. And like public democracy the democratic family must be anchored in a stable, yet open, civil society. If I may coin a phrase—"It takes a village."

A democracy of the emotions would draw no distinctions of principle between heterosexual and same-sex relationships. Gays, rather than heterosexuals, have actually been pioneers in discovering the new world of relationships and exploring its possibilities. They have had to be, because when homosexuality came out of the closet, gays weren't able to depend upon the normal supports of traditional marriage. They have had to be innovators, often in a hostile environment.

To speak of fostering an emotional democracy doesn't mean being weak about family duties, or about public policy towards the family. Democracy, after all, means the acceptance of obligations, as well as rights sanctioned in law. The protection of children has to be the primary feature of legislation and public policy. Parents should be legally obliged to provide for their children until adulthood, no matter what living arrangements they enter into. Marriage is no longer an economic institution, yet as a ritual commitment it can help stabilise otherwise fragile relationships. If this applies to heterosexual relationships, I don't see why it shouldn't apply to homosexual ones too.

There are many questions to be asked of all this—too many to answer in a short lecture. I have concentrated mainly upon trends affecting the family in Western countries. What about areas where the traditional family remains largely intact, as in the example of China with which I began? Will the changes observed in the West become more and more global?

I think they will—indeed that they are. It isn't a question of whether existing forms of the traditional family will become modified, but when and how. I would venture even

further. What I have described as an emerging democracy of the emotions is on the front line in the struggle between cosmopolitanism and fundamentalism that I described in the last lecture. Equality of the sexes, and the sexual freedom of women, which are incompatible with the traditional family, are anathema to fundamentalist groups. Opposition to them, indeed, is one of the defining features of religious fundamentalism across the world.

There is plenty to be worried about in the state of the family, in Western countries and elsewhere. It is just as mistaken to say that every family form is as good as any other, as to argue that the decline of the traditional family is a disaster.

I would turn the argument of the political and fundamentalist right on its head. The persistence of the traditional family—or aspects of it—in many parts of the world is more worrisome than its decline. For what are the most important forces promoting democracy and economic development in poorer countries? Well, they are the equality and education of women. And what must be changed to make these possible? Most importantly, what must be changed is the traditional family.

In conclusion, I should emphasise that sexual equality is not just a core principle of democracy. It is also relevant to happiness and fulfilment.

Many of the changes happening to the family are problematic and difficult. But surveys in the U.S. and Europe show that few want to go back to traditional male and female roles, much less to legally defined inequality.

If ever I were tempted to think that the traditional family might be best after all, I remember what my great aunt said. She must have had one of the longest marriages of anyone. She married young, and was with her husband for over 60 years. She once confided to me that she had been deeply unhappy with him the whole of that time. In her day there was no escape.

**READING 3**

# *The Life Course Revolution*

Arlene Skolnick

Many of us, in moments of nostalgia, imagine the past as a kind of Disneyland—a quaint setting we might step back into with our sense of ourselves intact, yet free of the stresses of modern life. But in yearning for the golden past we imagine we have lost, we are unaware of what we have escaped.

In our time, for example, dying before reaching old age has become a rare event; about three-quarters of all people die after their sixty-fifth birthday. It is hard for us to appreciate what a novelty this is in human experience. In 1850, only 2 percent of the population lived past sixty-five. "We place dying in what we take to be its logical position," observes the social historian Ronald Blythe, "which is at the close of a long life,

whereas our ancestors accepted the futility of placing it in any position at all. In the midst of life we are in death, they said, and they meant it. To them it was a fact; to us it is a metaphor."

This longevity revolution is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. Astonishingly, two-thirds of the total increase in human longevity since prehistoric times has taken place since 1900—and a good deal of that increase has occurred in recent decades. Mortality rates in previous centuries were several times higher than today, and death commonly struck at any age. Infancy was particularly hazardous; "it took two babies to make one adult," as one demographer put it. A white baby girl today has a greater chance of living to be sixty than her counterpart born in 1870 would have had of reaching her first birthday. And after infancy, death still hovered as an ever-present possibility. It was not unusual for young and middle-aged adults to die of tuberculosis, pneumonia, or other infectious diseases. (Keats died at twenty-five, Schubert at thirty-one, Mozart at thirty-five.)

These simple changes in mortality have had profound, yet little-appreciated effects on family life; they have encouraged stronger emotional bonds between parents and children, lengthened the duration of marriage and parent-child relationships, made grandparenthood an expectable stage of the life course, and increased the number of grandparents whom children actually know. More and more families have four or even five generations alive at the same time. And for the first time in history, the average couple has more parents living than it has children. It is also the first era when most of the parent-child relationship takes place after the child becomes an adult.

In a paper entitled "Death and the Family," the demographer Peter Uhlenberg has examined some of these repercussions by contrasting conditions in 1900 with those in 1976. In 1900, for example, half of all parents would have experienced the death of a child; by 1976 only 6 percent would. And more than half of all children who lived to the age of fifteen in 1900 would have experienced the death of a parent or sibling, compared with less than 9 percent in 1976. Another outcome of the lower death rates was a decline in the number of orphans and orphanages. Current discussions of divorce rarely take into account the almost constant family disruption children experienced in "the good old days." In 1900, 1 out of 4 children under the age of fifteen lost a parent; 1 out of 62 lost both. The corresponding figures for 1976 are, respectively, 1 out of 20 and 1 out of 1,800.

Because being orphaned used to be so common, the chances of a child's not living with either parent was much greater at the turn of the century than it is now. Indeed, some of the current growth in single-parent families is offset by a decline in the number of children raised in institutions, in foster homes, or by relatives. This fact does not diminish the stresses of divorce and other serious family problems of today, but it does help correct the tendency to contrast the terrible Present with an idealized Past.

Today's children rarely experience the death of a close relative, except for elderly grandparents. And it is possible to grow into adulthood without experiencing even that loss. "We never had any deaths in my family," a friend recently told me, explaining that none of her relatives had died until she was in her twenties. In earlier times, children were made aware of the constant possibility of death, attended deathbed scenes, and were even encouraged to examine the decaying corpses of family members.

One psychological result of our escape from the daily presence of death is that we are ill prepared for it when it comes. For most of us, the first time we feel a heightened concern with our own mortality is in our thirties and forties when we realize that the years we have already lived outnumber those we have left.

Another result is that the death of a child is no longer a sad but normal hazard of parenthood. Rather, it has become a devastating, life-shattering loss from which a parent may never fully recover. The intense emotional bonding between parents and infants that we see as a sociobiological given did not become the norm until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The privileged classes created the concept of the "emotionally priceless" child, a powerful ideal that gradually filtered down through the rest of society.

The high infant mortality rates of premodern times were partly due to neglect, and often to lethal child-rearing practices such as sending infants off to a wet nurse* or, worse, infanticide. It now appears that in all societies lacking reliable contraception, the careless treatment and neglect of unwanted children acted as a major form of birth control. This does not necessarily imply that parents were uncaring toward all their children; rather, they seem to have practiced "selective neglect" of sickly infants in favor of sturdy ones, or of later children in favor of earlier ones.† In 1801 a writer observed of Bavarian peasants:

> The peasant has joy when his wife brings forth the first fruit of their love, he has joy with the second and third as well, but not with the fourth. . . . He sees all children coming thereafter as hostile creatures, which take the bread from his mouth and the mouths of his family. Even the heart of the most gentle mother becomes cold with the birth of the fifth child, and the sixth, she unashamedly wishes death, that the child should pass to heaven.

Declining fertility rates are another major result of falling death rates. Until the baby boom of the 1940s and 1950s, fertility rates had been dropping continuously since the eighteenth century. By taking away parents' fear that some of their children would not survive to adulthood, lowered early-childhood mortality rates encouraged careful planning of births and smaller families. The combination of longer lives and fewer, more closely spaced children created a still-lengthening empty-nest stage in the family. This

*Wet-nursing—the breastfeeding of an infant by a woman other than the mother—was widely practiced in pre-modern Europe and colonial America. Writing of a two-thousand-year-old "war of the breast," the developmental psychologist William Kessen notes that the most persistent theme in the history of childhood is the reluctance of mothers to suckle their babies, and the urgings of philosophers and physicians that they do so. Infants were typically sent away from home for a year and a half or two years to be raised by poor country women, in squalid conditions. When they took in more babies than they had milk enough to suckle, the babies would die of malnutrition.

The reluctance to breast-feed may not have reflected maternal indifference so much as other demands in premodern, precontraceptive times—the need to take part in the family economy, the unwillingness of husbands to abstain from sex for a year and a half or two. (Her milk would dry up if a mother became pregnant.) Although in France and elsewhere the custom persisted into the twentieth century, large-scale wet-nursing symbolizes the gulf between modern and premodern sensibilities about infants and their care.

†The anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes how impoverished mothers in northeastern Brazil select which infants to nurture.

in turn has encouraged the companionate style of marriage, since husband and wife can expect to live together for many years after their children have moved out.

Many demographers have suggested that falling mortality rates are directly linked to rising divorce rates. In 1891 W. F. Willcox of Cornell University made one of the most accurate social science predictions ever. Looking at the high and steadily rising divorce rates of the time, along with falling mortality rates, he predicted that around 1980, the two curves would cross and the number of marriages ended by divorce would equal those ended by death. In the late 1970s, it all happened as Willcox had predicted. Then divorce rates continued to increase before leveling off in the 1980s, while mortality rates continued to decline. As a result, a couple marrying today is more likely to celebrate a fortieth wedding anniversary than were couples around the turn of the century.

In statistical terms, then, it looks as if divorce has restored a level of instability to marriage that had existed earlier due to the high mortality rate. But as Lawrence Stone observes, "it would be rash to claim that the psychological effects of the termination of marriage by divorce, that is by an act of will, bear a close resemblance to its termination by the inexorable accident of death."

## THE NEW STAGES OF LIFE

In recent years it has become clear that the stages of life we usually think of as built into human development are, to a large degree, social and cultural inventions. Although people everywhere may pass through infancy, childhood, adulthood, and old age, the facts of nature are "doctored," as Ruth Benedict once put it, in different ways by different cultures.

### *The Favorite Age*

In 1962 Phillipe Ariès made the startling claim that "in medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist." Ariès argued not that parents then neglected their children, but that they did not think of children as having a special nature that required special treatment; after the age of around five to seven, children simply joined the adult world of work and play. This "small adult" conception of childhood has been observed by many anthropologists in preindustrial societies. In Europe, according to Ariès and others, childhood was discovered, or invented, in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, with the emergence of the private, domestic, companionate family and formal schooling. These institutions created distinct roles for children, enabling childhood to emerge as a distinct stage of life.

Despite challenges to Ariès's work, the bulk of historical and cross-cultural evidence supports the contention that childhood as we know it today is a relatively recent cultural invention; our ideas about children, child-rearing practices, and the conditions of children's lives are dramatically different from those of earlier centuries. The same is true of adolescence. Teenagers, such a conspicuous and noisy presence in modern life, and their stage of life, known for its turmoil and soul searching, are not universal features of life in other times and places.

Of course, the physical changes of puberty—sexual maturation and spurt in growth—happen to everyone everywhere. Yet, even here, there is cultural and historical variation. In the past hundred years, the age of first menstruation has declined from the mid-teens to twelve, and the age young men reach their full height has declined from twenty-five to under twenty. Both changes are believed to be due to improvements in nutrition and health care, and these average ages are not expected to continue dropping.

Some societies have puberty rites, but they bring about a transition from childhood not to adolescence but to adulthood. Other societies take no note at all of the changes, and the transition from childhood to adulthood takes place simply and without social recognition. Adolescence as we know it today appears to have evolved late in the nineteenth century; there is virtual consensus among social scientists that it is "a creature of the industrial revolution and it continues to be shaped by the forces which defined that revolution: industrialization, specialization, urbanization . . . and bureaucratization of human organizations and institutions, and continuing technological development."

In America before the second half of the nineteenth century, youth was an ill-defined category. Puberty did not mark any new status or life experience. For the majority of young people who lived on farms, work life began early, at seven or eight years old or even younger. As they grew older, their responsibility would increase, and they would gradually move toward maturity. Adults were not ignorant of the differences between children and adults, but distinctions of age meant relatively little. As had been the practice in Europe, young people could be sent away to become apprentices or servants in other households. As late as the early years of this century, working-class children went to work at the age of ten or twelve.

A second condition leading to a distinct stage of adolescence was the founding of mass education systems, particularly the large public high school. Compulsory education helped define adolescence by setting a precise age for it; high schools brought large numbers of teenagers together to create their own society for a good part of their daily lives. So the complete set of conditions for adolescence on a mass scale did not exist until the end of the nineteenth century.

The changed family situations of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century youth also helped make this life stage more psychologically problematic. Along with the increasing array of options to choose from, rapid social change was making one generation's experience increasingly different from that of the next. Among the immigrants who were flooding into the country at around the time adolescence was emerging, the generation gap was particularly acute. But no parents were immune to the rapid shifts in society and culture that were transforming America in the decades around the turn of the century.

Further, the structure and emotional atmosphere of middle-class family life was changing also, creating a more intimate and emotionally intense family life. Contrary to the view that industrialization had weakened parent-child relations, the evidence is that family ties between parents and adolescents intensified at this time: adolescents lived at home until they married, and depended more completely, and for a longer time, on their parents than in the past. Demographic change had cut family size in half over the course of the century. Mothers were encouraged to devote themselves to the careful nurturing of fewer children.

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This more intensive family life seems likely to have increased the emotional strain of adolescence. Smaller households and a more nurturing style of child rearing, combined with the increased contact between parents, especially mothers, and adolescent children, may have created a kind of " 'Oedipal family' in middle class America."

The young person's awakening sexuality, particularly the young male's, is likely to have been more disturbing to both himself and his parents than during the era when young men commonly lived away from home. . . . There is evidence that during the Victorian era, fears of adolescent male sexuality, and of masturbation in particular, were remarkably intense and widespread.

Family conflict in general may have been intensified by the peculiar combination of teenagers' increased dependence on parents and increased autonomy in making their own life choices. Despite its tensions, the new emotionally intense middle-class home made it more difficult than ever for adolescents to leave home for the heartless, indifferent world outside.

By the end of the nineteenth century, conceptions of adolescence took on modern form, and by the first decades of the twentieth century, *adolescence* had become a household word. As articulated forcefully by the psychologist G. Stanley Hall in his 1904 treatise, adolescence was a biological process—not simply the onset of sexual maturity but a turbulent, transitional stage in the evolution of the human species: "some ancient period of storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained."

Hall seemed to provide the answers to questions people were asking about the troublesome young. His public influence eventually faded, but his conception of adolescence as a time of storm and stress lived on. Adolescence continued to be seen as a period of both great promise and great peril: "every step of the upward way is strewn with the wreckage of body, mind and morals." The youth problem—whether the lower-class problem of delinquency, or the identity crises and other psychological problems of middle-class youth—has continued to haunt America, and other modern societies, ever since.

Ironically, then, the institutions that had developed to organize and control a problematic age ended by heightening adolescent self-awareness, isolating youth from the rest of society, and creating a youth culture, making the transition to adulthood still more problematic and risky. Institutional recognition in turn made adolescents a more distinct part of the population, and being adolescent a more distinct and self-conscious experience. As it became part of the social structure of modern society, adolescence also became an important stage of the individual's biography—an indeterminate period of being neither child nor adult that created its own problems. Any society that excludes youth from adult work, and offers them what Erikson calls a "moratorium"—time and space to try out identities and lifestyles—and at the same time demands extended schooling as the route to success is likely to turn adolescence into a "struggle for self." It is also likely to run the risk of increasing numbers of mixed-up, rebellious youth.

But, in fact, the classic picture of adolescent storm and stress is not universal. Studies of adolescents in America and other industrialized societies suggest that extreme rebellion and rejection of parents, flamboyant behavior, and psychological turmoil do not describe most adolescents, even today. Media images of the youth of the 1980s and 1990s as a deeply troubled, lost generation beset by crime, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy are also largely mistaken.

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Although sexual activity and experimenting with drugs and alcohol have become common among middle-class young people, drug use has actually declined in recent years. Disturbing as these practices are for parents and other adults, they apparently do not interfere with normal development for most adolescents. Nevertheless, for a significant minority, sex and drugs add complications to a period of development during which a young person's life can easily go awry—temporarily or for good.

More typically, for most young people, the teen years are marked by mild rebelliousness and moodiness—enough to make it a difficult period for parents but not one of a profound parent-child generation gap or of deep alienation from conventional values. These ordinary tensions of family living through adolescence are exacerbated in times of rapid social change, when the world adolescents confront is vastly different from the one in which their parents came of age. Always at the forefront of social change, adolescents in industrial societies inevitably bring discomfort to their elders, who "wish to see their children's adolescence as an enactment of the retrospectively distorted memory of their own. . . . But such intergenerational continuity can occur only in the rapidly disappearing isolation of the desert or the rain forest."

If adolescence is a creation of modern culture, that culture has also been shaped by adolescence. Adolescents, with their music, fads, fashions, and conflicts, not only are conspicuous, but reflect a state of mind that often extends beyond the years designated for them. The adolescent mode of experience—accessible to people of any age—is marked by "exploration, becoming, growth, and pain."

Since the nineteenth century, for example, the coming-of-age novel has become a familiar literary genre. Patricia Spacks observes that while Victorian authors looked back at adolescence from the perspective of adulthood, twentieth-century novelists since James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence have become more intensely identified with their young heroes, writing not from a distance but from "deep inside the adolescence experience." The novelist's use of the adolescent to symbolize the artist as romantic outsider mirrors a more general cultural tendency. As Phillipe Ariès observes, "Our society has passed from a period which was ignorant of adolescence to a period in which adolescence is the favorite age. We now want to come to it early and linger in it as long as possible."

### *The Discovery of Adulthood*

Middle age is the latest life stage to be discovered, and the notion of mid-life crisis recapitulates the storm-and-stress conception of adolescence. Over the course of the twentieth century, especially during the years after World War II, a developmental conception of childhood became institutionalized in public thought. Parents took it for granted that children passed through ages, stages, and phases: the terrible twos, the teenage rebel. In recent years the idea of development has been increasingly applied to adults, as new stages of adult life are discovered. Indeed much of the psychological revolution of recent years—the tendency to look at life through psychological lenses—can be understood in part as the extension of the developmental approach to adulthood.

In 1976 Gail Sheehy's best-selling *Passages* popularized the concept of mid-life crisis. Sheehy argued that every individual must pass through such a watershed, a time when we reevaluate our sense of self, undergo a crisis, and emerge with a new identity. Failure

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to do so, she warned, can have dire consequences. The book was the most influential popular attempt to apply to adults the ages-and-stages approach to development that had long been applied to children. Ironically, this came about just as historians were raising questions about the universality of those stages.

Despite its popularity, Sheehy's book, and the research she reported in it, have come under increasing criticism. "Is the mid-life crisis, if it exists, more than a warmed-over identity crisis?" asked one review of the research literature on mid-life. In fact, there is little or no evidence for the notion that adults pass through a series of sharply defined stages, or a series of crises that must be resolved before passing from one stage to the next.

Nevertheless, the notion of a mid-life crisis caught on because it reflected shifts in adult experience across the life course. Most people's decisions about marriage and work are no longer irrevocably made at one fateful turning point on the brink of adulthood. The choices made at twenty-one may no longer fit at forty or fifty—the world has changed; parents, children, and spouses have changed; working life has changed. The kind of issue that makes adolescence problematic—the array of choices and the need to fashion a coherent, continuous sense of self in the midst of all this change—recurs throughout adulthood. As a Jules Feiffer cartoon concludes, "Maturity is a phase, but adolescence is forever."

Like the identity crisis of adolescence, the concept of mid-life crisis appears to reflect the experience of the more educated and advantaged. Those with more options in life are more likely to engage in the kind of introspection and reappraisal of previous choices that make up the core of the mid-life crisis. Such people realize that they will never fulfill their earlier dreams, or that they have gotten what they wanted and find they are still not happy. But as the Berkeley longitudinal data show, even in that segment of the population, mid-life crisis is far from the norm. People who have experienced fewer choices in the past, and have fewer options for charting new directions in the future, are less likely to encounter a mid-life crisis. Among middle Americans, life is dominated by making ends meet, coping with everyday events, and managing unexpected crises.

While there may be no fixed series of stages or crises adults must pass through, middle age or mid-life in our time does have some unique features that make it an unsettled time, different from other periods in the life course as well as from mid-life in earlier eras. First, as we saw earlier, middle age is the first period in which most people today confront death, illness, and physical decline. It is also an uneasy age because of the increased importance of sexuality in modern life. Sexuality has come to be seen as the core of our sense of self, and sexual fulfillment as the center of the couple relationship. In mid-life, people confront the decline of their physical attractiveness, if not of their sexuality.

There is more than a passing resemblance between the identity problems of adolescence and the issues that fall under the rubric of "mid-life crisis." In a list of themes recurring in the literature on the experience of identity crisis, particularly in adolescence, the psychologist Roy Baumeister includes: feelings of emptiness, feelings of vagueness, generalized malaise, anxiety, self-consciousness. These symptoms describe not only adolescent and mid-life crises but what Erikson has labeled identity problems—or what has, of late, been considered narcissism.

Consider, for example, Heinz Kohut's description of patients suffering from what he calls narcissistic personality disorders. They come to the analyst with vague symptoms, but

eventually focus on feelings about the self—emptiness, vague depression, being drained of energy, having no "zest" for work or anything else, shifts in self-esteem, heightened sensitivity to the opinions and reactions of others, feeling unfulfilled, a sense of uncertainty and purposelessness. "It seems on the face of it," observes the literary critic Steven Marcus, "as if these people are actually suffering from what was once called unhappiness."

## *The New Aging*

Because of the extraordinary revolution in longevity, the proportion of elderly people in modern industrial societies is higher than it has ever been. This little-noticed but profound transformation affects not just the old but families, an individual's life course, and society as a whole. We have no cultural precedents for the mass of the population reaching old age. Further, the meaning of *old age* has changed—indeed, it is a life stage still in process, its boundaries unclear. When he came into office at the age of sixty-four, George [H. W.] Bush did not seem like an old man. Yet when Franklin Roosevelt died at the same age, he did seem to be "old."

President Bush illustrates why gerontologists in recent years have had to revise the meaning of "old." He is a good example of what they have termed the "young old" or the "new elders"; the social historian Peter Laslett uses the term "the third age." Whatever it is called, it represents a new stage of life created by the extension of the life course in industrialized countries. Recent decades have witnessed the first generations of people who live past sixty-five and remain healthy, vigorous, alert, and, mostly due to retirement plans, financially independent. These people are "pioneers on the frontier of age," observed the journalist Frances Fitzgerald, in her study of Sun City, a retirement community near Tampa, Florida, "people for whom society had as yet no set of expectations and no vision."

The meaning of the later stages of life remains unsettled. Just after gerontologists had marked off the "young old"—people who seemed more middle-aged than old—they had to devise a third category, the "oldest old," to describe the fastest-growing group in the population, people over eighty-five. Many if not most of these people are like Tithonus, the mythical figure who asked the gods for eternal life but forgot to ask for eternal youth as well. For them, the gift of long life has come at the cost of chronic disease and disability.

The psychological impact of this unheralded longevity revolution has largely been ignored, except when misconstrued. The fear of age, according to Christopher Lasch, is one of the chief symptoms of this culture's alleged narcissism. But when people expected to die in their forties or fifties, they didn't have to face the problem of aging. Alzheimer's disease, for example, now approaching epidemic proportions, is an ironic by-product of the extension of the average life span. When living to seventy or eighty is a realistic prospect, it makes sense to diet and exercise, to eat healthy foods, and to make other "narcissistic" investments in the self.

Further, "the gift of mass longevity," the anthropologist David Plath argues, has been so recent, dramatic, and rapid that it has become profoundly unsettling in all post industrial societies: "If the essential cultural nightmare of the nineteenth century was to be in poverty, perhaps ours is to be old and alone or afflicted with terminal disease."

Many people thus find themselves in life stages for which cultural scripts have not yet been written; family members face one another in relationships for which tradition provides little guidance. "We are stuck with awkward-sounding terms like 'adult children' and . . . 'grandson-in-law.'" And when cultural rules are ambiguous, emotional relationships can become tense or at least ambivalent.

A study of five-generation families in Germany reveals the confusion and strain that result when children and parents are both in advanced old age—for example, a great-great-grandmother and her daughter, who is herself a great-grandmother. Who has the right to be old? Who should take care of whom? Similarly, Plath, who has studied the problems of mass longevity in Japan, finds that even in that familistic society the traditional meaning of family roles has been put into question by the stretching out of the life span. In the United States, some observers note that people moving into retirement communities sometimes bring their parents to live with them. Said one disappointed retiree: "I want to enjoy my grandchildren; I never expected that when I was a grandparent I'd have to look after my parents."

## READING 4

# *The Family in Trouble: Since When? For Whom?*

Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout

Thinking about the family and the religions of the book brings to mind the stories of family trouble that fill the Bible. For example, Adam and Eve become homeless because they irritate the Landlord, and then one of their sons kills the other. Lot, in a drunken stupor, impregnates his daughters. Sarah is infertile into old age and in her jealousy gets Abraham to banish his concubine and his son to the desert. The twin sons of Isaac quarrel, and their mother connives with one to usurp the position of the other. And so on, from Genesis to King David and beyond. Families in trouble—indeed, dysfunctional families—are hardly new. Although in this chapter we do not deal with millennia, we do seek to put family troubles into a historical context.

In the effort to answer the questions of why American households are changing and what difference it makes, we see our responsibility as addressing a prior and fundamental question: *How* are American forms and norms of marriage and the family changing? In answering these questions, we shall suggest that some widespread worries about the family today may be founded on misunderstandings.

Many misunderstandings arise from false memories about American history, memories that credit an earlier time with more settled family life. In fact, with the exception of a brief period after World War II, Americans often fell short of their family ideal—the

ideal of a happily married couple with children. Early in the twentieth century, numerous circumstances, from premature death to infertility, interfered with reaching that ideal. More recently, Americans have departed again from that ideal, many because they found new options and made alternative choices, options such as living longer and choices such as having fewer children or leaving bad marriages. How many of these choices should be considered "trouble" depends on one's perspective. We can value some of them as moral alternatives and valid aspirations—for example, to choose the way we live and with whom, and how to love and care responsibly for these people. Other Americans today have departed from the family ideal less from choice and more from constraint as a consequence of poverty and limited opportunities. In any case, the history of the family tells a story more complex than many appreciate.

In particular, a key concern we have is that discussion of family change often misses the questions "Since when?" and "For whom?" Consider the trend displayed in Figure 4.1: It is consistent with the descriptions of "family trouble" in showing that the proportion of Americans age thirty to forty-four years who were living as single adults rose rapidly between 1960 and 2000.[1] These Americans were not married, nor in an extended family, but instead were living alone, or as single parents, or in a group situation, like roommates. The singles rose from 10 percent of their age group in 1960 to 30 percent in 2000. But if we look back to 1900 in Figure 4.2, we see that this recent trend is a reversal of an older one. Moreover, if we were to correct the trend line's last two points, 1990 and 2000, for the fact that many of these supposed single people were actually cohabiting in a quasi-marriage, the end of the line would fall to about 20 percent, not much different than the percentages for 1900 and 1910. Indeed, we have reason to suspect that in 1900 some couples that reported themselves as married were, by modern definitions, really cohabiting. In many ways, it is the middle of the last century that is

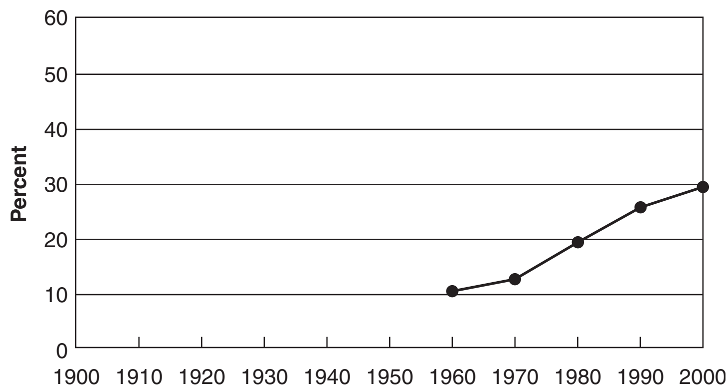


**FIGURE 4.1** ***Percent of 30- to 44-Year-Olds Living as Singles, 1960–2000***

*Note:* Singles are adults living alone, as single parents, or as nonrelatives in another's household.

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

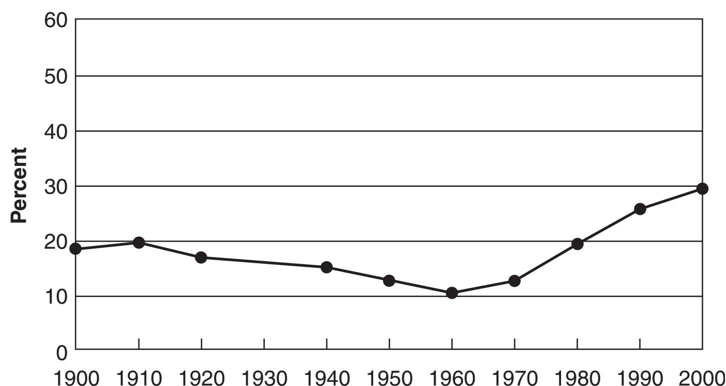


**FIGURE 4.2** ***Percent of 30- to 44-Year-Olds Living as Singles, 1900–2000***

*Note:* Singles are adults living alone, as single parents, or as nonrelatives in another's household.

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

the aberrant period, not the last third of the century. This illustrates our concern about the question "Since when?"

Next, we address the question "For whom?" in Figure 4.3. Here the gross pattern displayed in Figure 4.2 is split by race, and we see a divergence between blacks and whites from 1900 to 2000. For African Americans, the percentage of thirty- to forty-four-year-olds living on their own went up 17 points over the century, from 25 to 42 percent, but

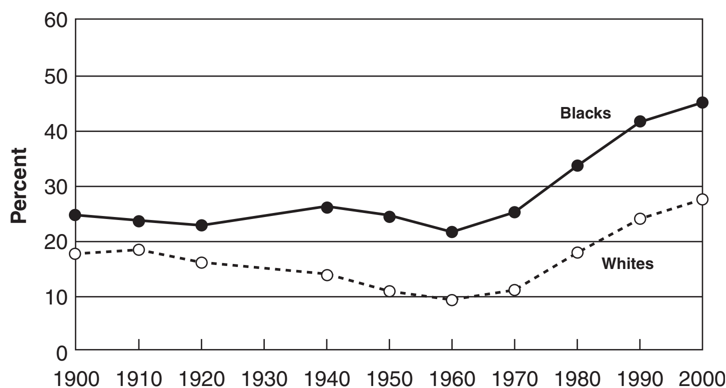


**FIGURE 4.3** ***Percent of 30- to 44-Year-Olds Living as Singles, by Race, 1900–2000***

*Note:* Singles are adults living alone, as single parents, or as nonrelatives in another's household.

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

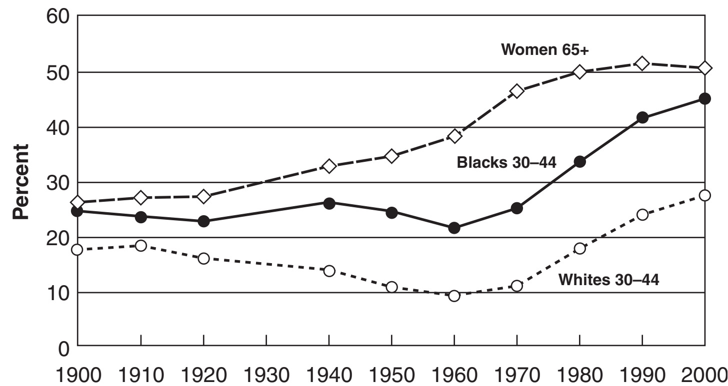


**FIGURE 4.4** ***Percent of 30- to 44-Year-Olds Living as Singles, by Race, and Elderly Women, 1900–2000***

*Note:* Singles are adults living alone, as single parents, or as nonrelatives in another's household.

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

it only went up eight points, from 18 to 26 percent, for whites. To add a further twist on the "For whom?" question, consider that the group that really expanded single living into a lifestyle was that of elderly women: Figure 4.4 shows that the percentage of elderly women living as singles almost doubled, from 26 percent in 1900 to 50 percent in 2000.

We have tried in this opening exercise to underline the point that simple impressions of family change may miss underlying complexities. We will return to the themes of "Since when?" and "For whom?" below. Before that, however, it is important to put those changes—changes in living out of marriage, in unwed motherhood, and in other statuses considered troubling—into a wider context of family change. We next discuss some of the major and less major changes in the American family recognized by demographers.

## OVERVIEW OF FAMILY CHANGES

American family life changed in many ways in the twentieth century, but the severity of a change and the severity of the conversations about that change did not often match. As we shall see, some of the greatest changes involved the demography of the family and affected the elderly, while the much-discussed matters, such as family dissolution and family intimacy, were much more stable.

### *Major Changes*

Let us highlight the "big" changes in the American family over the century. The first one to note is basic and critical: Americans live a lot longer than they used to. Figure 4.5 shows the average life expectancy of white women and men who had already made it to

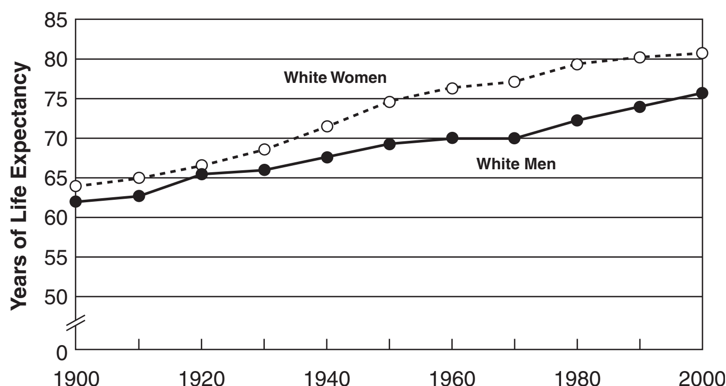


**FIGURE 4.5** ***Years of Life Expected at Age 20, White Men and Women, 1900–2000***

*Source:* National Center for Health Statistics via http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005140.html.

the age of twenty.[2] A twenty-year-old white woman in 2000 could expect seventeen more years of life than could her ancestor in 1900; a twenty-year-old white man today could expect thirteen years more than a twenty-year-old man a century ago. (In addition to this change, there was an even greater expansion in the life expectancy of infants.) There are, as we shall see, profound implications to this greater longevity.

Add to this another major change—the reduction in the birthrate. The average number of births per woman, dated at the age she turned thirty, dropped steeply from 1900 to the 1940s, as shown in Figure 4.6; if we could push back the view here to 1800, we would

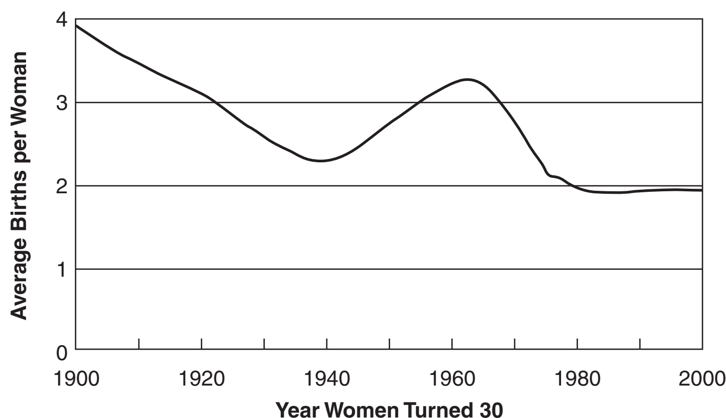


**FIGURE 4.6** ***Number of Births over a Woman's Lifetime by Year of Her 30th Birthday, for Women Born 1870–1970***

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

see a tilted line starting from about seven or eight births per woman in 1800 down to about two in 1940.[3] Again, the 1950s and early 1960s were unusual. Take out the anomalies—the drop in births during the Depression and World War II and the Baby Boom afterward—and we would see a smoothly declining curve from 1800 on; the last thirty years are right on track. Women who were thirty years old around 1900 averaged four children apiece; women who were thirty years old around 2000 averaged two children apiece.

Extensions of life and reductions in births drove two other major changes: A large increase in the proportion of people fifty and older living in an "empty nest" (with just a spouse) and an increasing proportion of elderly, Americans living alone. In 1900, about one in four of the elderly lived in one of these two circumstances; in 2000, more than three in four elderly people did so. These are enormous reversals in family life, shown in Figure 4.7. Note that the biggest changes in family life, in Americans' living arrangements, during the twentieth century occurred for the elderly. The elderly today end their parenting much earlier in life, they have fewer children, and they live longer than the elderly a few generations ago. They also have more money and better health. They may also cherish their independence more than did the elderly of earlier eras.[4] Consequently, the elderly now live on their own instead of with their children. Ironically, during the past thirty years, Americans have increasingly told pollsters that they think the aged should not live independently but should live with their children, but that trend emerged only because younger generations, not the elderly themselves, endorsed co-living.[5]

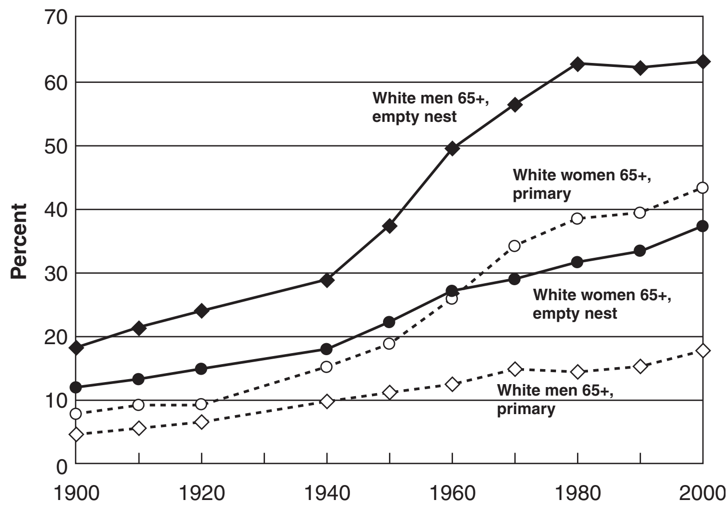


**FIGURE 4.7** ***Percent of Elderly Who Live Either as "Primary Individuals" (dashed lines) or in an "Empty Nest" (solid lines), for White Men (diamonds) and White Women (circles), 1900–1998***

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/; Current Population Survey.

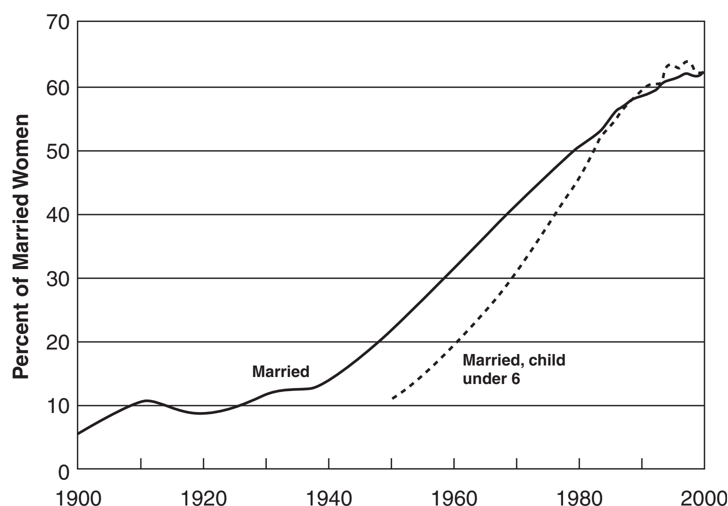


**FIGURE 4.8** ***Percent of Married Women (and Married Women with a Child under 6) in the Labor Force, 1900–2000***

*Source:* U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics and Statistical Abstracts.*

The next big change is the enormous increase in the proportion of married women, and the proportion of mothers with children under six, working outside the home, shown in Figure 4.8. In 1920, about 10 percent of married women officially worked; in 2000, more than 60 percent did. Note that the low percentages in the early part of the century are serious underestimates.[6] Nonetheless, the "real" trend is still a fundamental and sharp change. This trend, by the way, accelerated through the 1950s without pause. This transformation, too, had immense ramifications for our families, our children, and our culture—ramifications we have not yet fully absorbed.

These family changes, we submit, were the greatest in scale and probably in consequence. But there were also other noteworthy changes.

## *Modest Changes*

One such change is the fluctuation in the age at which Americans married. First it dropped. American women marrying around 1900 tended to be about twenty-two years old; those marrying around 1950 tended to be about twenty, meaning that in the 1950s, about half of all brides were teenagers. This helps to explain the baby boom. Those marrying at the end of the century averaged twenty-four years of age on their wedding day, and a growing subgroup was marrying in their thirties.

Also, of course, the divorce rate increased. At the beginning of the century, there was roughly one divorce issued for every ten marriages performed. By the early 1990s, it was about one for every two, although the divorce rate has been dropping since roughly 1980.[7] This is a fivefold increase in divorce, but we do not call it a "big change." One

reason is that rates of marriage dissolution did not change nearly as much. Early in the century, marriages broke up because a spouse died. If one combines dissolution by death with dissolution by divorce, the total stayed pretty constant to 1970, as rising divorce balanced out declining mortality. By 1980, rising divorce pushed the total dissolution rate about one-fourth over its historical level, but it has subsided some since then.[8] Another reason we do not stress divorce is that most divorced people remarry. As we saw above, in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, the proportion of adults living unmarried did not increase nearly as much as the dramatic rise in the divorce rate would suggest. Many of those who do not remarry, it turns out, cohabit instead.

The increasing delay of marriage, in turn, contributed to higher rates of premarital sex. So, for example, about half of women who were teenagers in the 1950s were virgins at marriage, compared with under one-third of women who were teens in the 1970s.[9] The drop in virgin brides is, in part, simply the result of a longer time between puberty, which is now arriving earlier, and marriage, which is now arriving later. This change, by the way, also stopped or reversed in the 1990s.

Cohabitation, both before and after the first marriage, has increased significantly in the last few decades, as has popular tolerance of it. The proportion of American households at any one time with a cohabiting couple rose from under 1 percent in 1960 to a still low 5 percent in 2000. More important, half of married couples now begin their conjugal lives by cohabiting.[10]

A consequence of both delaying marriage and increasing divorce is the increase in children living with a single parent. We shall look more closely at this below, but the simple fact is that for the first half of the century, about 5 percent of American children were recorded as living with only a single parent, and more than 20 percent were doing so in 2000.

Finally in this list, survey data, which do not go back further than about 1960, show that Americans became in recent decades increasingly tolerant of these and related changes—of smaller families, of women working, of premarital sex, of cohabitation, and of single-parent families. That is, Americans increasingly accepted wider ranges of individual choices in how to form a family.

### *Minor or Minimal Changes*

Many other aspects of the family changed little, as far as we can tell. Both marriage and children continue to be valued. Americans still say they want to marry. For example, in a 2001 Gallup survey, more than nine in ten teenagers said that they wanted to marry and to have children, an increase over a generation.[11] Single adults age twenty through twenty-nine fully endorsed marriage; 78 percent said that being married was a very important life goal, 88 percent said that they were confident of finding a suitable spouse when they are ready to marry, and 88 percent answered yes when asked if there was a unique "soul mate" for them "out there."[12]

Moreover, Americans do get married. The latest estimates are that 90 percent of women now about forty years old have married or will eventually marry, even if later in life. This is a marriage rate notably higher than that in the early part of the twentieth century or, for that matter, the mid–nineteenth century.[13] Another indicator of how

Americans value marriage is that, despite increasingly tolerating premarital sex, Americans in recent decades have become less tolerant of extramarital sex. The thread connecting American attitudes on these subjects seems to be an increasing emphasis on freedom of choice combined with insistence on personal responsibility: Have premarital sex as you wish, marry as you wish, but if you marry, stay faithful.[14]

Finally, sociologists and historians have perused as many tea leaves as possible to see if they can spot a trend in familial intimacy, affection, and commitment. We can make no solid case one way or the other. What scholars can say with some confidence is that the standards and expectations for intimacy, affection, and commitment have increased. Whether in responses to survey data or in the complaints people list when in filing for divorce, Americans during the twentieth century demanded more companionship, warmth, and happiness in marriage.

What can we generalize about family change over the century? Here are a few defensible statements:

- Americans always preferred the household of a married couple with children.
- During the twentieth century, it became increasingly possible to have such a nuclear family. In the earlier years, many external events blocked that goal: premature death, ill health, economic dislocation, unplanned pregnancies, and infertility. These disturbances became less important. People have more control now. So more people spend more of their lives in marriage than was true a few generations ago.
- The second choice after a married-couple household has changed. In the first half of the century, people who could not—because they were spinsters or widows or orphans—be in a married-couple household lived instead with other relatives, or in institutional settings like poor-houses and orphanages. In recent decades, this has changed. People have been more able and perhaps more willing to choose other alternatives—if the married-couple arrangement was not available—to live alone, cohabit, or be a single parent.
- Other values such as personal attainment and independence, especially for women, increasingly competed with the goal of the married-couple household. Women's alternatives have expanded. Standards for a good marriage rose, and escapes from bad ones became easier. As a result, marriages are increasingly delayed or broken by choice rather than by external disruptions.

One consequence of these decisions can be trouble for the children. Children increasingly are living with a single parent outside a nuclear or an extended household. This is what we will look at more closely now.

## FAMILY TROUBLE: THE SINGLE-PARENTED CHILD

It is generally understood that children have easier lives and do somewhat better when they live with two parents instead of one.[15] Figure 4.9 shows the distribution of children,

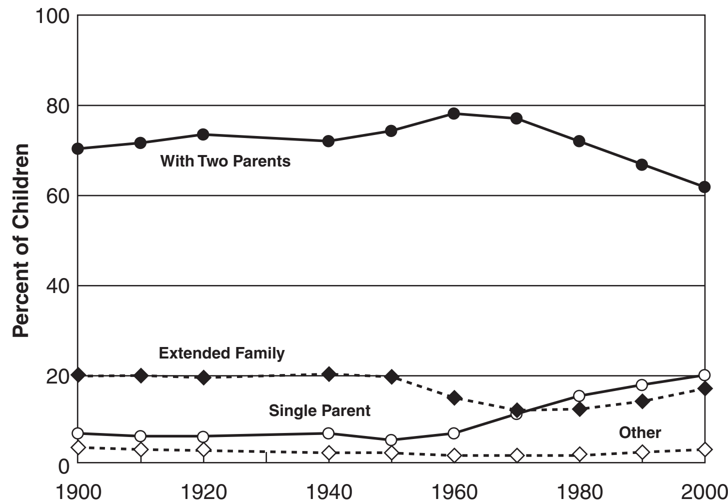


**FIGURE 4.9** ***Percent of Children (Birth to Age 17), by Living Arrangement, 1900–2000***

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

age birth to seventeen years, by their living arrangements across the century.[16] On top, we see the percentage who lived just with two parents and siblings (if any), the ideal nuclear family. In 1900, about 70 percent of children lived that way; another roughly 20 percent lived in an extended family that often included both parents.[17] The proportion in the nuclear family then rose to 78 percent by 1960 and then dropped down to 64 percent at the end of the century, a bit lower than it was 100 years before. (If we add cohabiting parents to married parents, then the 2000 figure is 66 percent.) These numbers unfortunately do not distinguish between children living with their original parents from those living in a stepfamily, and some literature suggests that stepparent families are less conducive to child welfare than having both original parents.[18] The long-term data we draw upon cannot distinguish biological from stepparents, but stepparents surely formed a larger portion of two-parent households recently than they did in the 1950s; whether stepparents were more common recently than in the early part of the century is not clear.

Until thirty years ago, children who were not in a nuclear family were likely to be in extended-family households, perhaps with a grandparent, uncle, or cousins—shown in Figure 4.9 by a dashed line. Most of those households included both the child's two parents, at least early in the century, or one parent, more often now. Whether the extended household experience was better, the same, or worse than the two-parent household can be argued. The category of "other," shown at the bottom, refers to children living on their own or in some kind of group setting. Finally, we see—along a line connecting circles—the rise since 1960 in the proportion of children living with only one parent and no other relatives besides siblings. It had been under 10 percent for most of the century,

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took off in 1970, and reached 20 percent in 2000. This group and this last period is the subject of greatest public concern.[19]

The first question we have been raising is "Since when?" And we see here that the "when" is the 1950s. Indeed, if we were to push our view before 1900 back into the nineteenth century, we would quite likely see the bottom line, "other," keep going up and up as we move backward—backward into the era of when children under eighteen, even many under twelve, were sent out of their homes to be farmhands, apprentices, and servants in other people's homes and thus lived with neither parent nor extended kin but with "others." The 1950s may have been the decade with the least disruption to Victorian ideals of childhood in American history:

If comparing a couple of centuries is too long a period to make the point that we need to be specific about "when," then consider the last decade alone. The proportion of children living with fewer than two parents topped out at 32 percent in the mid-1990s (67 percent in 1995 for blacks) and dropped to 31 percent in 2002 (61 percent for blacks).[20] Other data also point to a recent decline in the behaviors that produce single-parent families, such as teen pregnancy and divorce, suggesting that we may have already seen the peak of one-parent households. So, again, we need to ask what we are using as historical comparisons and what is a reasonable comparison. Since when?

The other question we have been asking is "For whom?" Figure 4.10 focuses on the category of children living with only a single parent only or in one of those anomalous "other" settings. Then Figure 4.11 shows us that the rise in such children is disproportionately among black children. The black/white differential opened up in 1940 and then widened. Before 1940, white children were about 60 percent as likely as black children to be in a single-parent household; by the 1990s, they were about 40 percent as likely.[21] Single parenting has become disproportionately a "trouble" of the black community.

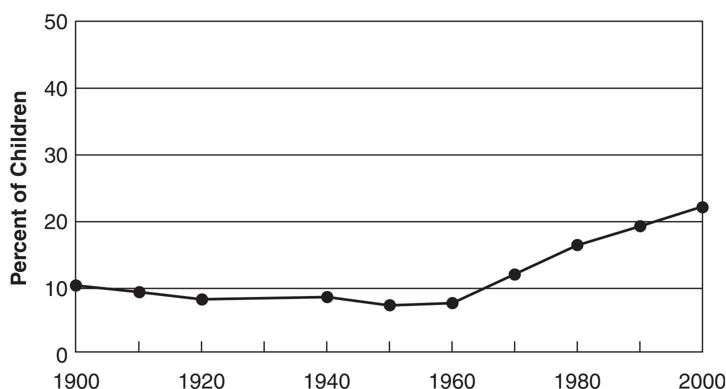


**FIGURE 4.10** ***Percent of Children (Birth to Age 17), Living with One Parent Only or in "Other" Nonfamily Arrangement, 1900–2000***

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

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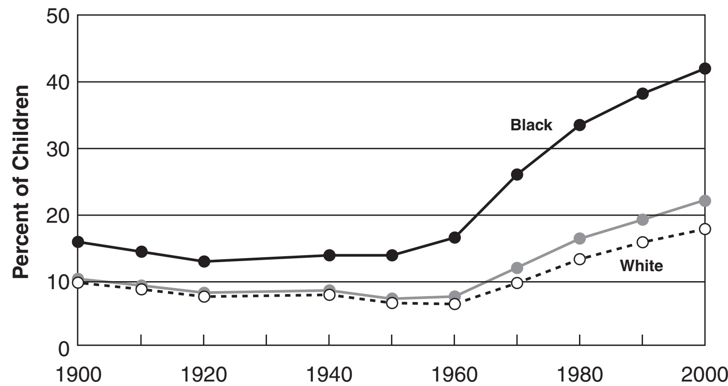


**FIGURE 4.11** ***Percent of Children (Birth to Age 17), Living with One Parent Only or in "Other" Nonfamily Arrangement, by Race, 1900–2000***

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

Sociologists believe that the trouble for black children, which accelerated in the 1950s and 1960s, coincides with increasing difficulties of black men in northern cities, which began with the loss of well-paying blue-collar jobs and then were compounded by rising drug use and crime. The result is that, though blacks and whites equally value the aspiration of getting married, blacks have become more disappointed with or even cynical about marriage.[22] That response may have taken on a life of its own, although there were signs in the late 1990s of marriage starting to rebound among African Americans.

Even among whites, there is a question "For whom?" Figure 4.12 divides white children up by the educational level of the head of their households, information available only since 1940. (For simplicity, the category of "some college" is not shown; their children fall in between the college and high school graduates.) It shows that children of college graduates have been affected only modestly by expanding single parenthood; the trend is specific to those without college educations. In another approach to the same question, David Ellwood and Christopher Jencks have shown that young white women with relatively little education tripled their propensity to be a single parent between the 1960s and 2000, while young white women with relatively much education saw no change—5 percent of the well-educated women were single mothers in the 1960s and 5 percent were single mothers in the 1990s.[23]

As in the case of African Americans, we suspect that this pattern is connected to the more difficult economic situation faced since the 1970s by couples with limited educations. Ironically, better-educated Americans are (slightly) more likely to resist the ideology that says that any marriage is better than none, but they are nonetheless more likely to achieve it.[24] Joshua Goldstein and Catherine Kenny found that these days, in a reversal of historical patterns, college-graduate women have a better chance of marrying than do women without a diploma.[25]

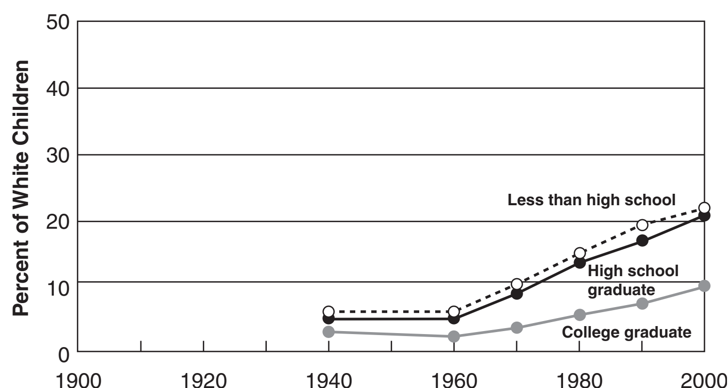


**FIGURE 4.12** ***Percent of White Children (Birth to Age 17), Living with Single Parent, by Education of Parent, 1940–2000***

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

For African American children, the educational pattern is somewhat different. In Figure 4.13, we see that black children of college graduates have been less likely to be in single-parent homes than other black children, but that the rates of all educational groups increased steeply. The percentage of black children of college graduates who lived in a single-parent household increased eightfold, almost 30 points, between 1940 and 2000, while the increase for white children of college graduates was threefold, 7 points.) Conversely, Ellwood and Jencks found that the one-third most-educated black women were not much more likely to be single parents in the late 1990s than in the late 1960s, which contradicts the story of Figure 4.13.[26] Our data reinforce suggestions that middle-class black families have difficulty protecting their children from the spillover of social problems from lower-income black communities.

Economics is not all that is involved in the growth of single parenting. Changes in the specifics of single parenthood—the who and the when—parallel both cultural as well as material changes; they thereby tell us something about the “why.” The 1960s as a cultural phenomenon shaped family life through rapid ideological shifts concerning gender, sex, and rights of personal fulfillment. That helps account for some of the timing and the growth in single parenting even among white elites; it happened quickly around 1970, a pattern consistent with a change in preferences. For example, in just the four years between July 1969 and July 1973, the percentage of Americans who said that premarital sex was “wrong” dropped 21 points; in the subsequent nearly three decades, it dropped only another 9 points.[27]

Yet material conditions also matter. For example, in the early 1970s, college graduates were notably more liberal on premarital sex than were high school graduates or high school dropouts; but, as we saw, it is not the children of college graduates who ended up in one-parent homes. At the same time, blacks’ attitudes about premarital sex became

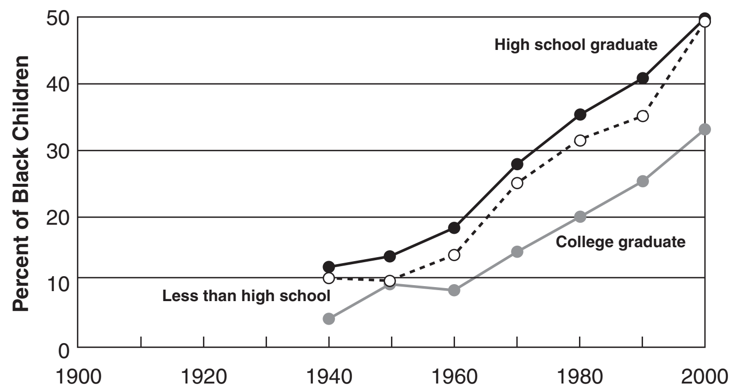


**FIGURE 4.13** ***Percent of Black Children (Birth to Age 17), Living with Single Parent, by Education of Parent, 1940–2000***

*Source:* Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.

more conservative; yet it was black children who increasingly ended up in one-parent homes.[28] We know that blacks and whites without college degrees suffered from stagnating or even declining men's incomes in this same period, even as women's earnings grew. And we know that economically marginal men tend to leave fatherless children behind. That economic strain must be part of the "why." And it reminds us of the strains that disrupted many families in the early part of the century.

## CONCLUSION

The effort we have gone through to look at who was affected when by family troubles is more than an accounting exercise. The numbers help us understand why these changes occurred and, potentially, what levers of influence exist. For example, the historical data going back to the early part of the twentieth century make it difficult to explain family change as a linear consequence of "modernity." Classic sociological theories of the family, notably those of the 1950s, claim that the family lost its functions to the state and other institutions and therefore became weaker. But the nonlinear changes in the family cast doubt on such an explanation; for example, people are as or more likely to marry now as they were a century ago. The internal variations we have tracked also lead us to question such explanations. It is, after all, the most advantaged among us who have most embraced nonfamilial opportunities, sending children off to college and purchasing family services such as food, cleaning, child care, and parenting advice. Yet the most advantaged have been the least affected by family troubles. The data also cast doubt on simple economic explanations of family patterns. For example, the notion that people have children to serve as their old-age insurance runs up against the contradiction that Americans indulged in a

huge baby boom just after the U.S. government set up public old-age insurance.[29] History speaks to us.

When we put "family troubles" in historical perspective, we learn a few broad lessons. One is that troubles with marriage and parenting are concentrated among Americans with disadvantages. These Americans would live the 1950s ideal if they could, but they often cannot. In this way, they are like many Americans a century ago, whose family aspirations were blocked by death, disease, and disaster. Not many advantaged Americans have such problems. As we saw, in 2000, only one in ten white children with a college-educated parent as head of household lived in a single-parent home.

Another lesson is that, for more advantaged Americans, being unwed, childless, or divorced is less a matter of malign fate and more a matter of new opportunities. Increasing influence and improving health have made more choices more available to more people. These people choose to delay marriage, to have fewer children, and to live apart from those children when they age. These choices are not "family troubles," except insofar as one assumes that people not living in a nuclear family are ipso facto troubled. To be sure, trouble in the form of divorce or single parenting does occasionally visit such people these days. We might best understand the family troubles that some of the advantaged face as a by-product of cultural shifts, such as the increasing freedom that individuals have to make personal, self-expressive choices in sex, marriage, and the family. And these are cultural shifts we typically approve. For example, vastly more wives work than before and vastly more Americans approve. In 1938, about one in four Americans said that it was okay for a wife to work if her husband could support her; by the 1990s, more than three in four did.[30] Yet such expansions of personal autonomy for the well-off can carry costs, one of which is increasing divorce and another is increasing numbers of children being single parented. Our moral burden, then, is to deal with the side effects, such as single parenting, of the changes we desire such as more options for women.

Finally we learn that American's social history is more complex and nuanced than many a simple gloss would have it. For example, every year the Bureau of the Census announces and newspapers report that percentage of American homes are occupied by nuclear families. True, but what does that mean? It largely means that more homes are occupied by still-vibrant older couples or singles whose youngest child left home before the parents turned fifty and who have thirty years of life to go. Increasing life spans have also meant that Americans spend more years knowing their aging parents, watching their children grow up, and sharing the company of a spouse.[31] So with regard to family troubles, we do need to ask "Since when?" and "For whom?"

## Notes

1. Our data largely come from the U.S. censuses for 1900 through 2000—except for 1930, which has only just been released. These raw files have been compiled and made available as the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series; see Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3*, machine-readable database (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2004), available at http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/.
2. These numbers are from the National Center for Health Statistics, available at http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005140.html.

3. That longer line is unavailable because earlier data use the number of children under five per the number of women age fifteen to forty-four. See U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 54; and subsequent *Statistical Abstracts*.
4. Frances E. Kobrin, "The Fall in Household Size and the Rise of the Primary Individual in the United States since 1940," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 38 (May 1976): 233–39.
5. Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey (GSS) item AGED," http://csa.berkeley.edu:75o2/archive.htm.
6. For one, many wives worked informally in family businesses—farms, in particular. Others "took in" work, such as laundry, that they may not have reported. Also, we have reason to suspect that "respectable" families underreported the wives' work.
7. The gross divorce rate in 1979 was 5.3 per 1,000 Americans; it was 4.1 in 2000 (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs). Joshua R. Goldstein, "The Leveling of Divorce in the United States," *Demography* 36 (August 1999): 409–14, finds that this was a meaningful social change, not a statistical fluke.
8. These calculations are summarized in Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage*, *Divorce*, *Remarriage*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 25. The rate of dissolution from the 1860s through 1970 was about 33 to 34 dissolutions per 1,000 marriages; it rose to a peak of 41 around 1980 and declined to 39 by 1989.
9. Edward Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 197–99, 213–14; see also Sandra L. Hofferth, Joan R. Kahn, and Wendy Baldwin, "Premarital Sexual Activity among American Teenage Women over the Past Three Decades," *Family Planning Perspectives* 19 (March 1987): 46–53. On early twentieth-century premarital sexuality, see, e.g., Daniel Scott Smith, "The Dating of the American Sexual Revolution" in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 2nd edition, ed. Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 426–38; Amara Bachu, "Trends in Marital Status of U.S. Women at First Birth: 1930 to 1994," *Current Population Reports*, Special Studies (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999), 23–197; and Stuart N. Seidman and Ronald O. Rieder, "A Review of Sexual Behavior in the United States," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 151 (March 1994): 330–41.
10. Lynne M. Casper and Suzanne M. Bianchi, *Continuity and Change in the American Family* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2002), chap. 1.
11. Linda Lyons, "Kids and Divorce," Gallup Online, http://www.gallup.com.
12. Kelley Maybury, "I Do? Marriage in Uncertain Times," Gallup Online, http://www.gallup.com.
13. Joshua R. Goldstein and Catherine T. Kenny, "Marriage Delayed or Marriage Forgone? New Cohort Forecasts of First Marriage for U.S. Women,"*American Sociological Review* 66 (August 2001): 506–19. Goldstein and Kenny project current women's experiences into the twenty-first century. On longer historical comparisons, see Catherine A. Fitch and Steven Ruggles, "Historical Trends in Marriage Formation: The United States 1850–1990," in *The Ties That Bind: Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation*, ed. Linda J. Waite (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000), 59–89. The percentage of never-married women in Charleston and Boston circa 1845 was higher than now; see Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *Ladies*, *Women*, *and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
14. On this and other attitude items, see Arland Thornton and Linda Young-Demarco, "Four Decades of Trends in Attitudes toward Family Issues in the United States," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63 (November 2001): 1009–38.
15. Sara McLanahan, "Life without Father: What Happens to the Children?" *Contexts* 1 (spring 2002): 35–44, provides an overview. The literature is large and controversial, but we assume that, other things being equal, a one-parent family as less desirable for children.
16. The numbers exclude from the base the few zero- to seventeen-year-olds who were in married couples with no children households—i.e., young brides and grooms. "Other" includes the very tiny fraction who were on their own and a small percentage who were in some form of "shared quarters."
17. Census data show that 84 percent of children in 1900 lived with two parents, suggesting that most of the children in extended households (seven of ten) had both parents there. U.S. Bureau

of the Census, "Historical Living Arrangements of Children," http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/child/p70-74/tabo2.xls.

18. E.g., Andrew J. Cherlin and Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., "Stepfamilies in the United States: A Reconsideration," *Annual Review of Sociology* 20 (1994): 359–81; McLanahan, "Life without Father."
19. Census Bureau calculations show that the percentage of children living with one or neither parent was 13 to 17 percent from 1900 through 1970, then rose to 31 percent by 2000. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Historical Living Arrangements of Children"; plus 2000 Current Population Survey.
20. These figures are based on slightly different data, "Table CH-1: Living Arrangements of Children under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present," http://www.census.gov, drawn from the *Current Population Survey* and more recent data from the same source. These data count children living in extended households with a parent or two as living with a parent or both.
21. On this point, see also Fitch and Ruggles, "Historical Trends," 65.
22. This summary statement is supported by the many ethnographies of poor African Americans. It also shows up in survey data. The GSS asked unmarried people in the 1990s, "If the right person came along, would you like to be married?" There was no difference between blacks and whites (either a raw difference, or after statistical controls). Blacks were even slightly more likely to say that a bad marriage was better than no marriage. But on questions such as whether married people were happier than unmarried people, whether personal freedom was more important than marriage, whether people who want children should wait to get married, and whether single mothers can raise children as well as married couples, blacks were noticeably more skeptical about the marriage option. Authors' analysis of the GSS.
23. David T. Ellwood and Christopher Jencks, "The Growing Differences in Family Structure: What Do We Know? Where Do We Look for Answers?" John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, July 2001, fig. 1.
24. In GSS data, educational attainment is positively associated (controlling for race, age, and gender) with saying that one would not marry even if the right person came along and with denying that a bad marriage is better than no marriage (authors' analysis).
25. Goldstein and Kenny, "Marriage Delayed."
26. Ellwood and Jencks, "Growing Differences," fig. 2.
27. In 1969, 68 percent said it was wrong for "a man and a woman to have sexual relations before marriage"; in 1973, 47 percent did; in 2001, 38 percent did. Similarly, Americans' ideal family size dropped sharply in those few years. Between 1936 and 1967, the percentage of Americans who said that three or more children was ideal ranged from 61 to 77 percent; in 1967, it was 70 percent. But in 1973, it was 43 percent, a 27-point drop in six years. After 1973, that percentage ranged from 28 to 42; Lydia Saad, "Majority Considers Sex before Marriage Morally Okay," http://www.gallup.com.
28. Authors' analysis of the GSS item "PREMARSX": Among whites under sixty-five years of age, the percentage who said that premarital sex was "not wrong at all" was, in the early 1970s, 39 percent for college graduates, 31 percent for high school graduates, and 25 percent for high school dropouts. (By the late 1990s, the percentages were virtually identical, at 51, 48, and 49.) Similarly, white attitudes toward premarital sex became more liberal between 1970 and 2000. Among white women under sixty-five, "not wrong at all" answers increased steadily from 25 percent in the early 1970s to 46 percent in the late 1990s. Conversely, black women under sixty-five hit a high point of 54 percent "not wrong at all" in the late 1970s and dropped to 36 percent in the late 1990s. Yet black rates of single-parented children increased until the mid-1990s.
29. Similarly, scholars of the fertility decline that began in the nineteenth century have found simple economic explanations insufficient.
30. The GSS asked Americans whether the women's movement had improved, worsened, or not affected the lives of particular groups. Moderate pluralities to large majorities said "improved" in answers referring to questions about effects on "homemakers," working-class women, professional women, and even children. People were evenly split as to whether men benefited or lost from the women's movement (authors' analysis).
31. Susan Cotts Watkins, Jane A. Menken, and John Bongaarts, "Demographic Foundations of Family Change," *American Sociological Review* 52 (June 1987): 346–58.