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Dimensions of Diversity

■ READING 32

Diversity within African American Families

Ronald L. Taylor

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

My interest in African American families as a topic of research was inspired more than two decades ago by my observation and growing dismay over the stereotypical portrayal of these families presented by the media and in much of the social science literature. Most of the African American families I knew in the large southern city in which I grew up were barely represented in the various “authoritative” accounts I read and other scholars frequently referred to in their characterizations and analyses of such families. Few such accounts have acknowledged the regional, ethnic, class, and behavioral diversity within the African American community and among families. As a result, a highly fragmented and distorted public image of African American family life has been perpetuated that encourages perceptions of African American families as a monolith. The 1986 television documentary *A CBS Report: The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America*, hosted by Bill Moyers, was fairly typical of this emphasis. It focused almost exclusively on low-income, single-parent households in inner cities, characterized them as “vanishing” non-families, and implied that such families represented the majority of African American families in urban America. It mattered little that poor, single-parent households in the inner cities made up less than a quarter of all African American families at the time the documentary was aired.

As an African American reared in the segregated South, I was keenly aware of the tremendous variety of African American families in composition, lifestyle, and socio-economic status. Racial segregation ensured that African American families, regardless of means or circumstances, were constrained to live and work in close proximity to one another. Travel outside the South made me aware of important regional differences among African American families as well. For example, African American families in

the Northeast appeared far more segregated by socioeconomic status than did families in many parts of the South with which I was familiar. As a graduate student at Boston University during the late 1960s, I recall the shock I experienced upon seeing the level of concentrated poverty among African American families in Roxbury, Massachusetts, an experience duplicated in travels to New York, Philadelphia, and Newark. To be sure, poverty of a similar magnitude was prevalent throughout the South, but was far less concentrated and, from my perception, far less pernicious.

As I became more familiar with the growing body of research on African American families, it became increasingly clear to me that the source of a major distortion in the portrayal of African American families in the social science literature and the media was the overwhelming concentration on impoverished inner-city communities of the Northeast and Midwest to the near exclusion of the South, where more than half the African American families are found and differences among them in family patterns, lifestyles, and socioeconomic characteristics are more apparent.

In approaching the study of African American families in my work, I have adopted a *holistic* perspective. This perspective, outlined first by DuBois (1898) and more recently by Billingsley (1992) and Hill (1993), emphasizes the influence of historical, cultural, social, economic, and political forces in shaping contemporary patterns of family life among African Americans of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Although the impact of these external forces is routinely taken into account in assessing stability and change among white families, their effects on the structure and functioning of African American families are often minimized. In short, a holistic approach undertakes to study African American families *in context*. My definition of the *family*, akin to the definition offered by Billingsley (1992), views it as an intimate association of two or more persons related to each other by blood, marriage, formal or informal adoption, or appropriation. The latter term refers to the incorporation of persons in the family who are unrelated by blood or marital ties but are treated as though they are family. This definition is broader than other dominant definitions of families that emphasize biological or marital ties as defining characteristics.

This [reading] is divided into three parts. The first part reviews the treatment of African American families in the historical and social sciences literatures. It provides a historical overview of African American families, informed by recent historical scholarship, that corrects many of the misconceptions about the nature and quality of family life during and following the experience of slavery. The second part examines contemporary patterns of marriage, family, and household composition among African Americans in response to recent social, economic, and political developments in the larger society. The third part explores some of the long-term implications of current trends in marriage and family behavior for community functioning and individual well-being, together with implications for social policy.

THE TREATMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES IN AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP

As an area of scientific investigation, the study of African American family life is of recent vintage. As recently as 1968, Billingsley, in his classic work *Black Families in White America*, observed that African American family life had been virtually ignored in family studies and

studies of race and ethnic relations. He attributed the general lack of interest among white social scientists, in part, to their “ethnocentrism and intellectual commitment to peoples and values transplanted from Europe” (p. 214). Content analyses of key journals in sociology, social work, and family studies during the period supported Billingsley’s contention. For example, a content analysis of 10 leading journals in sociology and social work by Johnson (1981) disclosed that articles on African American families constituted only 3% of 3,547 empirical studies of American families published between 1965 and 1975. Moreover, in the two major journals in social work, only one article on African American families was published from 1965 to 1978. In fact, a 1978 special issue of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* devoted to African American families accounted for 40% of all articles on these families published in the 10 major journals between 1965 and 1978.

Although the past two decades have seen a significant increase in the quantity and quality of research on the family lives of African Americans, certain features and limitations associated with earlier studies in this area persist (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990). In a review of recent research on African American families, Hill (1993) concluded that many studies continue to treat such families in superficial terms; that is, African American families are not considered to be an important unit of focus and, consequently, are treated peripherally or omitted altogether. The assumption is that African American families are automatically treated in all analyses that focus on African Americans as individuals; thus, they are not treated in their own right. Hill noted that a major impediment to understanding the functioning of African American families has been the failure of most analysts to use a theoretical or conceptual framework that took account of the totality of African American family life. Overall, he found that the preponderance of recent studies of African American families are

(a) fragmented, in that they exclude the bulk of Black families by focusing on only a subgroup; (b) ad hoc, in that they apply arbitrary explanations that are not derived from systematic theoretical formulations that have been empirically substantiated; (c) negative, in that they focus exclusively on the perceived weaknesses of Black families; and (d) internally oriented, in that they exclude any systematic consideration of the role of forces in the wider society on Black family life. (p. 5)

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The study of African American families, like the study of American families in general, has evolved through successive theoretical formulations. Using white family structure as the norm, the earliest studies characterized African American families as impoverished versions of white families in which the experiences of slavery, economic deprivation, and racial discrimination had induced pathogenic and dysfunctional features (Billingsley, 1968). The classic statement of this perspective was presented by Frazier, whose study, *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), was the first comprehensive analysis of African American family life and its transformation under various historical conditions—slavery, emancipation, and urbanization (Edwards, 1968).

It was Frazier’s contention that slavery destroyed African familial structures and cultures and gave rise to a host of dysfunctional family features that continued to undermine

the stability and well-being of African American families well into the 20th century. Foremost among these features was the supposed emergence of the African American “matriarchal” or maternal family system, which weakened the economic position of African American men and their authority in the family. In his view, this family form was inherently unstable and produced pathological outcomes in the family unit, including high rates of poverty, illegitimacy, crime, delinquency, and other problems associated with the socialization of children. Frazier concluded that the female-headed family had become a common tradition among large segments of lower-class African American migrants to the North during the early 20th century. The two-parent male-headed household represented a second tradition among a minority of African Americans who enjoyed some of the freedoms during slavery, had independent artisan skills, and owned property.

Frazier saw an inextricable connection between economic resources and African American family structure and concluded that as the economic position of African Americans improved, their conformity to normative family patterns would increase. However, his important insight regarding the link between family structure and economic resources was obscured by the inordinate emphasis he placed on the instability and “self-perpetuating pathologies” of lower-class African American families, an emphasis that powerfully contributed to the pejorative tradition of scholarship that emerged in this area. Nonetheless, Frazier recognized the diversity of African American families and in his analyses, “consistently attributed the primary sources of family instability to external forces (such as racism, urbanization, technological changes and recession) and not to internal characteristics of Black families” (Hill, 1993, pp. 7–8).

During the 1960s, Frazier’s characterization of African American families gained wider currency with the publication of Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), in which weaknesses in family structure were identified as a major source of social problems in African American communities. Moynihan attributed high rates of welfare dependence, out-of-wedlock births, educational failure, and other problems to the “unnatural” dominance of women in African American families. Relying largely on the work of Frazier as a source of reference, Moynihan traced the alleged “tangle of pathology” that characterized urban African American families to the experience of slavery and 300 years of racial oppression, which, he concluded, had caused “deep-seated structural distortions” in the family and community life of African Americans.

Although much of the Moynihan report, as the book was called, largely restated what had become conventional academic wisdom on African American families during the 1960s, its generalized indictment of all African American families ignited a firestorm of criticism and debate and inspired a wealth of new research and writings on the nature and quality of African American family life in the United States (Staples & Mirande, 1980). In fact, the 1970s saw the beginning of the most prolific period of research on African American families, with more than 50 books and 500 articles published during that decade alone, representing a fivefold increase over the literature produced in all the years since the publication of DuBois’s (1909) pioneering study of African American family life (Staples & Mirande, 1980). To be sure, some of this work was polemical and defensively apologetic, but much of it sought to replace ideology with research and to provide alternative perspectives for interpreting observed differences in the characteristics of African American and white families (Allen, 1978).

Critics of the deficit or pathology approach to African American family life (Scanzoni, 1977; Staples, 1971) called attention to the tendency in the literature to ignore family patterns among the majority of African Americans and to overemphasize findings derived from studies of low-income and typically problem-ridden families. Such findings were often generalized and accepted as descriptive of the family life of all African American families, with the result that popular but erroneous images of African American family life were perpetuated. Scrutinizing the research literature of the 1960s, Billingsley (1968) concluded that when the majority of African American families was considered, evidence refuted the characterization of African American family life as unstable, dependent on welfare, and matriarchal. In his view, and in the view of a growing number of scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s, observed differences between white and African American families were largely the result of differences in socioeconomic position and of differential access to economic resources (Allen, 1978; Scanzoni, 1977).

Thus, the 1970s witnessed not only a significant increase in the diversity, breadth, and quantity of research on African American families, but a shift away from a social pathology perspective to one emphasizing the resilience and adaptiveness of African American families under a variety of social and economic conditions. The new emphasis reflected what Allen (1978) referred to as the “cultural variant” perspective, which treats African American families as different but legitimate functional forms. From this perspective, “Black and White family differences [are] taken as given, without the presumption of one family form as normative and the other as deviant” (Farley & Allen, 1987, p. 162). In accounting for observed racial differences in family patterns, some researchers have taken a *structural perspective*, emphasizing poverty and other socioeconomic factors as key processes (Billingsley, 1968). Other scholars have taken a *cultural approach*, stressing elements of the West African cultural heritage, together with distinctive experiences, values, and behavioral modes of adaptation developed in this country, as major determinants (Nobles, 1978; Young, 1970). Still others (Collins, 1990; Sudarkasa, 1988) have pointed to evidence supporting both interpretations and have argued for a more comprehensive approach.

Efforts to demythologize negative images of African American families have continued during the past two decades, marked by the development of the first national sample of adult African Americans, drawn to reflect their distribution throughout the United States (Jackson, 1991), and by the use of a variety of conceptualizations, approaches, and methodologies in the study of African American family life (Collins, 1990; McAdoo, 1997). Moreover, the emphasis in much of the recent work

has not been the defense of African American family forms, but rather the identification of forces that have altered long-standing traditions. The ideological paradigms identified by Allen (1978) to describe the earlier thrust of Black family research—cultural equivalence, cultural deviance, and cultural variation—do not fully capture the foci of this new genre of work as a whole. (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995, p. 17)

Researchers have sought to stress balance in their analyses, that is, to assess the strengths and weaknesses of African American family organizations at various socioeconomic levels, and the need for solution-oriented studies (Hill, 1993). At the same time, recent

historical scholarship has shed new light on the relationship of changing historical circumstances to characteristics of African American family organization and has underscored the relevance of historical experiences to contemporary patterns of family life.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Until the 1970s, it was conventional academic wisdom that the experience of slavery decimated African American culture and created the foundation for unstable female-dominated households and other familial aberrations that continued into the 20th century. This thesis, advanced by Frazier (1939) and restated by Moynihan (1965), was seriously challenged by the pioneering historical research of Blassingame (1972), Furstenberg, Hershberg, and Modell (1975), and Gutman (1976), among others. These works provide compelling documentation of the centrality of family and kinship among African Americans during the long years of bondage and how African Americans created and sustained a rich cultural and family life despite the brutal reality of slavery.

In his examination of more than two centuries of slave letters, autobiographies, plantation records, and other materials, Blassingame (1972) meticulously documented the nature of community, family organization, and culture among American slaves. He concluded that slavery was not “an all-powerful, monolithic institution which strip[ped] the slave of any meaningful and distinctive culture, family life, religion or manhood” (p. vii). To the contrary, the relative freedom from white control that slaves enjoyed in their quarters enabled them to create and sustain a complex social organization that incorporated “norms of conduct, defined roles and behavioral patterns” and provided for the traditional functions of group solidarity, defense, mutual assistance, and family organization. Although the family had no legal standing in slavery and was frequently disrupted, Blassingame noted its major role as a source of survival for slaves and as a mechanism of social control for slaveholders, many of whom encouraged “monogamous mating arrangements” as insurance against runaways and rebellion. In fashioning familial and community organization, slaves drew upon the many remnants of their African heritage (e.g., courtship rituals, kinship networks, and religious beliefs), merging those elements with American forms to create a distinctive culture, features of which persist in the contemporary social organization of African American family life and community.

Genovese’s (1974) analysis of plantation records and slave testimony led him to similar conclusions regarding the nature of family life and community among African Americans under slavery. Genovese noted that, although chattel bondage played havoc with the domestic lives of slaves and imposed severe constraints on their ability to enact and sustain normative family roles and functions, the slaves “created impressive norms of family, including as much of a nuclear family norm as conditions permitted and . . . entered the postwar social system with a remarkably stable base” (p. 452). He attributed this stability to the extraordinary resourcefulness and commitment of slaves to marital relations and to what he called a “paternalistic compromise,” or bargain between masters and slaves that recognized certain reciprocal obligations and rights, including recognition of slaves’ marital and family ties. Although slavery undermined the role of African

American men as husbands and fathers, their function as role models for their children and as providers for their families was considerably greater than has generally been supposed. Nonetheless, the tenuous position of male slaves as husbands and fathers and the more visible and nontraditional roles assumed by female slaves gave rise to legends of matriarchy and emasculated men. However, Genovese contended that the relationship between slave men and women came closer to approximating gender equality than was possible for white families.

Perhaps the most significant historical work that forced revisions in scholarship on African American family life and culture during slavery was Gutman's (1976) landmark study, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*. Inspired by the controversy surrounding the Moynihan report and its thesis that African American family disorganization was a legacy of slavery, Gutman made ingenious use of quantifiable data derived from plantation birth registers and marriage applications to re-create family and kinship structures among African Americans during slavery and after emancipation. Moreover, he marshaled compelling evidence to explain how African Americans developed an autonomous and complex culture that enabled them to cope with the harshness of enslavement, the massive relocation from relatively small economic units in the upper South to vast plantations in the lower South between 1790 and 1860, the experience of legal freedom in the rural and urban South, and the transition to northern urban communities before 1930.

Gutman reasoned that, if family disorganization (fatherless, matrifocal families) among African Americans was a legacy of slavery, then such a condition should have been more common among urban African Americans closer in time to slavery—in 1850 and 1860—than in 1950 and 1960. Through careful examination of census data, marriage licenses, and personal documents for the period after 1860, he found that stable, two-parent households predominated during slavery and after emancipation and that families headed by African American women at the turn of the century were hardly more prevalent than among comparable white families. Thus “[a]t all moments in time between 1860 and 1925 . . . the typical Afro-American family was lower class in status and headed by two parents. That was so in the urban and rural South in 1880 and 1900 and in New York City in 1905 and 1925” (p. 456). Gutman found that the two-parent family was just as common among the poor as among the more advantaged, and as common among southerners as those in the Northeast. For Gutman, the key to understanding the durability of African American families during and after slavery lay in the distinctive African American culture that evolved from the cumulative slave experiences that provided a defense against some of the more destructive and dehumanizing aspects of that system. Among the more enduring and important aspects of that culture are the enlarged kinship network and certain domestic arrangements (e.g., the sharing of family households with nonrelatives and the informal adoption of children) that, during slavery, formed the core of evolving African American communities and the collective sense of interdependence.

Additional support for the conclusion that the two-parent household was the norm among slaves and their descendants was provided by Furstenberg et al. (1975) from their study of the family composition of African Americans, native-born whites, and immigrants to Philadelphia from 1850 to 1880. From their analysis of census data, Furstenberg et al. found that most African American families, like those of other ethnic groups, were headed by two parents (75% for African Americans versus 73% for native whites).

Similar results are reported by Pleck (1973) from her study of African American family structure in late 19th-century Boston. As these and other studies (Jones, 1985; White, 1985) have shown, although female-headed households were common among African Americans during and following slavery, such households were by no means typical. In fact, as late as the 1960s, three fourths of African American households were headed by married couples (Jaynes & Williams, 1989; Moynihan, 1965).

However, more recent historical research would appear to modify, if not challenge, several of the contentions of the revisionist scholars of slavery. Manfra and Dykstra (1985) and Stevenson (1995), among others, found evidence of considerably greater variability in slave family structure and in household composition than was reported in previous works. In her study of Virginia slave families from 1830 to 1860, Stevenson (1995) discovered evidence of widespread matrifocality, as well as other marital and household arrangements, among antebellum slaves. Her analysis of the family histories of slaves in colonial and antebellum Virginia revealed that many slaves did not have a nuclear “core” in their families. Rather, the “most discernible ideal for their principal kinship organization was a malleable extended family that provided its members with nurture, education, socialization, material support, and recreation in the face of the potential social chaos the slavemasters’ power imposed” (1995, p. 36).

A variety of conditions affected the family configurations of slaves, including cultural differences among the slaves themselves, the state or territory in which they lived, and the size of the plantation on which they resided. Thus, Stevenson concluded that

the slave family was not a static, imitative institution that necessarily favored one form of family organization over another. Rather, it was a diverse phenomenon, sometimes assuming several forms even among the slaves of one community. . . . Far from having a negative impact, the diversity of slave marriage and family norms, as a measure of the slave family’s enormous adaptive potential, allowed the slave and the slave family to survive. (p. 29)

Hence, “postrevisionist” historiography emphasizes the great diversity of familial arrangements among African Americans during slavery. Although nuclear, matrifocal, and extended families were prevalent, none dominated slave family forms. These postrevisionist amendments notwithstanding, there is compelling historical evidence that African American nuclear families and kin-related households remained relatively intact and survived the experiences of slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, and the transition to northern urban communities. Such evidence underscores the importance of considering recent developments and conditions in accounting for changes in family patterns among African Americans in the contemporary period.

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY PATTERNS

Substantial changes have occurred in patterns of marriage, family, and household composition in the United States during the past three decades, accompanied by significant alterations in the family lives of men, women, and children. During this period, divorce

rates have more than doubled, marriage rates have declined, fertility rates have fallen to record levels, the proportion of “traditional” families (nuclear families in which children live with both biological parents) as a percentage of all family groups has declined, and the proportion of children reared in single-parent households has risen dramatically (Taylor, 1997).

Some of the changes in family patterns have been more rapid and dramatic among African Americans than among the population as a whole. For example, while declining rates of marriage and remarriage, high levels of separation and divorce, and higher proportions of children living in single-parent households are trends that have characterized the U.S. population as a whole during the past 30 years, these trends have been more pronounced among African Americans and, in some respects, represent marked departures from earlier African American family patterns. A growing body of research has implicated demographic and economic factors as causes of the divergent marital and family experiences of African Americans and other populations.

In the following section, I examine diverse patterns and evolving trends in family structure and household composition among African Americans, together with those demographic, economic, and social factors that have been identified as sources of change in patterns of family formation.

Diversity of Family Structure

Since 1960, the number of African American households has increased at more than twice the rate of white households. By 1995, African American households numbered 11.6 million, compared with 83.7 million white households. Of these households, 58.4 million white and 8.0 million African American ones were classified as family households by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1996), which defines a *household* as the person or persons occupying a housing unit and a *family* as consisting of two or more persons who live in the same household and are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. Thus, family households are households maintained by individuals who share their residence with one or more relatives, whereas nonfamily households are maintained by individuals with no relatives in the housing unit. In 1995, 70% of the 11.6 million African American households were family households, the same proportion as among white households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). However, nonfamily households have been increasing at a faster rate than family households among African Americans because of delayed marriages among young adults, higher rates of family disruption (divorce and separation), and sharp increases in the number of unmarried cohabiting couples (Cherlin, 1995; Glick, 1997).

Family households vary by type and composition. Although the U.S. Bureau of the Census recognizes the wide diversity of families in this country, it differentiates between three broad and basic types of family households: married-couple or husband-wife families, families with female householders (no husband present), and families with male householders (no wife present). Family composition refers to whether the household is *nuclear*; that is, contains parents and children only, or *extended*, that is, nuclear plus other relatives.

To take account of the diversity in types and composition of African American families, Billingsley (1968; 1992) added to these conventional categories *augmented* families

(nuclear plus nonrelated persons), and modified the definition of nuclear family to include *incipient* (a married couple without children), *simple* (a couple with children), and *attenuated* (a single parent with children) families. He also added three combinations of augmented families: *incipient extended augmented* (a couple with relatives and nonrelatives), *nuclear extended augmented* (a couple with children, relatives, and nonrelatives), and *attenuated extended augmented* (a single parent with children, relatives, and nonrelatives). With these modifications, Billingsley identified 32 different kinds of nuclear, extended, and augmented family households among African Americans. His typology has been widely used and modified by other scholars (see, for example, Shimkin, Shimkin, & Frate, 1978; Stack, 1974). For example, on the basis of Billingsley's typology, Dressler, Haworth-Hoepfner, and Pitts (1985) developed a four-way typology with 12 subtypes for their study of household structures in a southern African American community and found a variety of types of female-headed households, less than a fourth of them consisting of a mother and her children or grandchildren.

However, as Staples (1971) pointed out, Billingsley's typology emphasized the household and ignored an important characteristic of such families—their “extendedness.” African Americans are significantly more likely than whites to live in extended families that “transcend and link several different households, each containing a separate . . . family” (Farley & Allen, 1987, p. 168). In 1992, approximately 1 in 5 African American families was extended, compared to 1 in 10 white families (Glick, 1997). The greater proportion of extended households among African Americans has been linked to the extended family tradition of West African cultures (Nobles, 1978; Sudarkasa, 1988) and to the economic marginality of many African American families, which has encouraged the sharing and exchange of resources, services, and emotional support among family units spread across a number of households (Stack, 1974).

In comparative research on West African, Caribbean, and African American family patterns some anthropologists (Herskovits, 1958; Sudarkasa, 1997) found evidence of cultural continuities in the significance attached to coresidence, formal kinship relations, and nuclear families among black populations in these areas. Summarizing this work, Hill (1993, pp. 104–105) observed that, with respect to

co-residence, the African concept of family is not restricted to persons living in the same household, but includes key persons living in separate households. . . . As for defining kin relationships, the African concept of family is not confined to relations between formal kin, but includes networks of unrelated [i.e., “fictive kin”] as well as related persons living in separate households. . . . [According to] Herskovits (1941), the African nuclear family unit is not as central to its family organization as is the case for European nuclear families: “The African immediate family, consisting of a father, his wives, and their children, is but a part of a larger unit. This immediate family is generally recognized by Africanists as belonging to a local relationship group termed the ‘extended family.’”

Similarly, Sudarkasa (1988) found that unlike the European extended family, in which primacy is given to the conjugal unit (husband, wife, and children) as the basic building block, the African extended family is organized around blood ties (consanguineous relations).

In their analysis of data from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) on household composition and family structure, Hatchett, Cochran, and Jackson (1991) noted that the extended family perspective, especially kin networks, was valuable in describing the nature and functioning of African American families. They suggested that the “extended family can be viewed both as a family network in the physical-spatial sense and in terms of family relations or contact and exchanges. In this view of extendedness, family structure and function are interdependent concepts” (p. 49). Their examination of the composition of the 2,107 households in the NSBA resulted in the identification of 12 categories, 8 of which roughly captured the “dimensions of household family structure identified in Billingsley’s typology of Black families (1968)—the incipient nuclear family, the incipient nuclear extended and/or augmented nuclear family, the simple nuclear family, the simple extended and/or augmented nuclear family, the attenuated nuclear family, and the attenuated extended and/or augmented family, respectively” (p. 51). These households were examined with respect to their *actual kin networks*, defined as subjective feelings of emotional closeness to family members, frequency of contact, and patterns of mutual assistance, and their *potential kin networks*, defined as the availability or proximity of immediate family members and the density or concentration of family members within a given range.

Hatchett et al. (1991) found that approximately 1 in 5 African American households in the NSBA was an extended household (included other relatives—parents and siblings of the household head, grandchildren, grandparents, and nieces and nephews). Nearly 20% of the extended households with children contained minors who were not the head’s; most of these children were grandchildren, nieces, and nephews of the head. The authors suggested that “[t]hese are instances of informal fostering or adoption—absorption of minor children by the kin network” (p. 58).

In this sample, female-headed households were as likely to be extended as male-headed households. Hatchett et al. (1991) found little support for the possibility that economic hardship may account for the propensity among African Americans to incorporate other relatives in their households. That is, the inclusion of other relatives in the households did not substantially improve the overall economic situation of the households because the majority of other relatives were minor children, primarily grandchildren of heads who coresided with the household heads’ own minor and adult children. Moreover, they stated, “household extendedness at both the household and extra-household levels appears to be a characteristic of black families, regardless of socioeconomic level” (p. 81), and regardless of region of the country or rural or urban residence.

The households in the NSBA were also compared in terms of their potential and actual kin networks. The availability of potential kin networks varied by the age of the respondent, by the region and degree of urban development of the respondent’s place of residence, and by the type of household in which the respondent resided (Hatchett et al., 1991). For example, households with older heads and spouses were more isolated from kin than were younger households headed by single mothers, and female-headed households tended to have greater potential kin networks than did individuals in nuclear households. With respect to region and urbanicity, the respondents in the Southern and North Central regions and those in rural areas had a greater concentration of relatives closer at hand than did the respondents in other regions and those in urban areas.

However, proximity to relatives and their concentration nearby did not translate directly into actual kin networks or extended family functioning:

Complex relationships were found across age, income, and type of household. From these data came a picture of the Black elderly with high psychological connectedness to family in the midst of relative geographical and interactional isolation from them. The image of female single-parent households is, on the other hand, the reverse or negative of this picture. Female heads were geographically closer to kin, had more contact with them, and received more help from family but did not perceive as much family solidarity or psychological connectedness. (Hatchett et al., 1991, p. 81)

The nature and frequency of mutual aid among kin were also assessed in this survey. More than two thirds of the respondents reported receiving some assistance from family members, including financial support, child care, goods and services, and help during sickness and at death. Financial assistance and child care were the two most frequent types of support reported by the younger respondents, whereas goods and services were the major types reported by older family members. The type of support the respondents received from their families was determined, to some extent, by needs defined by the family life cycle.

In sum, the results of the NSBA document the wide variety of family configurations and households in which African Americans reside and suggest, along with other studies, that the diversity of structures represents adaptive responses to the variety of social, economic, and demographic conditions that African Americans have encountered over time (Billingsley, 1968; Farley & Allen, 1987).

Although Hatchett et al. (1991) focused on extended or augmented African American families in their analysis of the NSBA data, only 1 in 5 households in this survey contained persons outside the nuclear family. The majority of households was nuclear, containing one or both parents with their own children.

Between 1970 and 1990, the number of all U.S. married-couple families with children dropped by almost 1 million, and their share of all family households declined from 40% to 26% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). The proportion of married-couple families with children among African Americans also declined during this period, from 41% to 26% of all African American families. In addition, the percentage of African American families headed by women more than doubled, increasing from 33% in 1970 to 57% in 1990. By 1995, married-couple families with children constituted 36% of all African American families, while single-parent families represented 64% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). The year 1980 was the first time in history that African American female-headed families with children outnumbered married-couple families. This shift in the distribution of African American families by type is associated with a number of complex, interrelated social and economic developments, including increases in age at first marriage, high rates of separation and divorce, male joblessness, and out-of-wedlock births.

Marriage, Divorce, and Separation

In a reversal of a long-time trend, African Americans are now marrying at a much later age than are persons of other races. Thirty years ago, African American men and women

were far more likely to have married by ages 20–24 than were white Americans. In 1960, 56% of African American men and 36% of African American women aged 20–24 were never married; by 1993, 90% of all African American men and 81% of African American women in this age cohort were never married (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994).

The trend toward later marriages among African Americans has contributed to changes in the distribution of African American families by type. Delayed marriage tends to increase the risk of out-of-wedlock childbearing and single parenting (Hernandez, 1993). In fact, a large proportion of the increase in single-parent households in recent years is accounted for by never-married women maintaining families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990).

The growing proportion of never-married young African American adults is partly a result of a combination of factors, including continuing high rates of unemployment, especially among young men; college attendance; military service; and an extended period of cohabitation prior to marriage (Glick, 1997; Testa & Krogh, 1995; Wilson, 1987). In their investigation of the effect of employment on marriage among African American men in the inner city of Chicago, Testa and Krogh (1995) found that men in stable jobs were twice as likely to marry as were men who were unemployed, not in school, or in the military. Hence, it has been argued that the feasibility of marriage among African Americans in recent decades has decreased because the precarious economic position of African American men has made them less attractive as potential husbands and less interested in becoming husbands, given the difficulties they are likely to encounter in performing the provider role in marriage (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

However, other research has indicated that economic factors are only part of the story. Using census data from 1940 through the mid-1980s, Mare and Winship (1991) sought to determine the impact of declining employment opportunities on marriage rates among African Americans and found that although men who were employed were more likely to marry, recent declines in employment rates among young African American men were not large enough to account for a substantial part of the declining trend in their marriage rates. Similarly, in their analysis of data from a national survey of young African American adults, Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry (1992) found that lower employment rates among African American men were an important contributing factor to delayed marriage—and perhaps to nonmarriage—among African American women. However, even when marital opportunities were taken into account, the researchers found that the rate of marriage among young African American women in the survey was only 50% to 60% the rate of white women of similar ages.

In addition to recent declines in employment rates, an unbalanced sex ratio has been identified as an important contributing factor to declining marriage rates among African Americans. This shortage of men is due partly to high rates of mortality and incarceration of African American men (Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995; Wilson & Neckerman, 1986). Guttentag and Secord (1983) identified a number of major consequences of the shortage of men over time: higher rates of singlehood, out-of-wedlock births, divorce, and infidelity and less commitment among men to relationships. Among African Americans, they found that in 1980 the ratio of men to women was unusually low; in fact, few populations in the United States had sex ratios as low as those of African Americans. Because African American women outnumber men in each of the age categories 20 to 49,

the resulting “marriage squeeze” puts African American women at a significant disadvantage in the marriage market, causing an unusually large proportion of them to remain unmarried. However, Glick (1997) observed a reversal of the marriage squeeze among African Americans in the age categories 18 to 27 during the past decade: In 1995, there were 102 African American men for every 100 African American women in this age range. Thus, “[w]hereas the earlier marriage squeeze made it difficult for Black women to marry, the future marriage squeeze will make it harder for Black men” (Glick, 1997, p. 126). But, as Kiecolt and Fossett (1995) observed, the impact of the sex ratio on marital outcomes for African Americans may vary, depending on the nature of the local marriage market. Indeed, “marriage markets are local, as opposed to national, phenomena which may have different implications for different genders . . . [for example,] men and women residing near a military base face a different sex ratio than their counterparts attending a large university” (Smith, 1995, p. 137).

African American men and women are not only delaying marriage, but are spending fewer years in their first marriages and are slower to remarry than in decades past. Since 1960, a sharp decline has occurred in the number of years African American women spend with their first husbands and a corresponding rise in the interval of separation and divorce between the first and second marriages (Espenshade, 1985; Jaynes & Williams, 1989). Data from the National Fertility Surveys of 1965 and 1970 disclosed that twice as many African American couples as white couples (10% versus 5%) who reached their 5th wedding anniversaries ended their marriages before their 10th anniversaries (Thornton, 1978), and about half the African American and a quarter of the white marriages were dissolved within the first 15 years of marriage (McCarthy, 1978). Similarly, a comparison of the prevalence of marital disruption (defined as separation or divorce) among 13 racial-ethnic groups in the United States based on the 1980 census revealed that of the women who had married for the first time 10 to 14 years before 1980, 53% of the African American women, 48% of the Native American women, and 37% of the non-Hispanic white women were separated or divorced by the 1980 census (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987).

Although African American women have a higher likelihood of separating from their husbands than do non-Hispanic white women, they are slower to obtain legal divorces (Chertin, 1996). According to data from the 1980 census, within three years of separating from their husbands, only 55% of the African American women had obtained divorces, compared to 91% of the non-Hispanic white women (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). Cherlin speculated that, because of their lower expectations of remarrying, African American women may be less motivated to obtain legal divorces. Indeed, given the shortage of African American men in each of the age categories from 20 to 49, it is not surprising that the proportion of divorced women who remarry is lower among African American than among non-Hispanic white women (Glick, 1997). Overall, the remarriage rate among African Americans is about one fourth the rate of whites (Staples & Johnson, 1993).

Cherlin (1996) identified lower educational levels, high rates of unemployment, and low income as importance sources of differences in African American and white rates of marital dissolution. However, as he pointed out, these factors alone are insufficient to account for all the observed difference. At every level of educational attainment, African American women are more likely to be separated or divorced from their husbands than are non-Hispanic white women. Using data from the 1980 census, Jaynes and Williams

(1989) compared the actual marital-status distributions of African Americans and whites, controlling for differences in educational attainment for men and women and for income distribution for men. They found that when differences in educational attainment were taken into account, African American women were more likely to be “formerly married than White women and much less likely to be living with a husband” (p. 529). Moreover, income was an important factor in accounting for differences in the marital status of African American and white men. Overall, Jaynes and Williams found that socioeconomic differences explained a significant amount of the variance in marital status differences between African Americans and whites, although Bumpass, Sweet, and Martin (1990) noted that such differences rapidly diminish as income increases, especially for men. As Glick (1997) reported, African American men with high income levels are more likely to be in intact first marriages by middle age than are African American women with high earnings. This relationship between income and marital status, he stated, is strongest at the lower end of the income distribution, suggesting that marital permanence for men is less dependent on their being well-to-do than on their having the income to support a family.

As a result of sharp increases in marital disruption and relatively low remarriage rates, less than half (43%) the African American adults aged 18 and older were currently married in 1995, down from 64% in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). Moreover, although the vast majority of the 11.6 million African Americans households in 1995 were family households, less than half (47%) were headed by married couples, down from 56% in 1980. Some analysts expect the decline in marriage among African Americans to continue for some time, consistent with the movement away from marriage as a consequence of modernization and urbanization (Espenshade, 1985) and in response to continuing economic marginalization. But African American culture may also play a role. As a number of writers have noted (Billingsley, 1992; Cherlin, 1996), blood ties and extended families have traditionally been given primacy over other types of relationships, including marriage, among African Americans, and this emphasis may have influenced the way many African Americans responded to recent shifts in values in the larger society and the restructuring of the economy that struck the African American community especially hard.

Such is the interpretation of Cherlin (1992, p. 112), who argued that the institution of marriage has been weakened during the past few decades by the increasing economic independence of women and men and by a cultural drift “toward a more individualistic ethos, one which emphasized self-fulfillment in personal relations.” In addition, Wilson (1987) and others described structural shifts in the economy (from manufacturing to service industries as a source of the growth in employment) that have benefited African American women more than men, eroding men’s earning potential and their ability to support families. According to Cherlin, the way African Americans responded to such broad sociocultural and economic changes was conditioned by their history and culture:

Faced with difficult times economically, many Blacks responded by drawing upon a model of social support that was in their cultural repertoire. . . . This response relied heavily on extended kinship networks and deemphasized marriage. It is a response that taps a traditional source of strength in African-American society: cooperation and sharing among a large network of kin. (p. 113)

Thus, it seems likely that economic developments and cultural values have contributed independently and jointly to the explanation of declining rates of marriage among African Americans in recent years (Farley & Allen, 1987).

Single-Parent Families

Just as rates of divorce, separation, and out-of-wedlock childbearing have increased over the past few decades, so has the number of children living in single-parent households. For example, between 1970 and 1990, the number and proportion of all U.S. single-parent households increased threefold, from 1 in 10 to 3 in 10. There were 3.8 million single-parent families with children under 18 in 1970, compared to 11.4 million in 1994. The vast majority of single-parent households are maintained by women (86% in 1994), but the number of single-parent households headed by men has more than tripled: from 393,000 in 1970 to 1.5 million in 1994 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995).

Among the 58% of African American families with children at home in 1995, more were one-parent families (34%) than married-couple families (24%). In 1994, single-parent families accounted for 25% of all white family groups with children under age 18, 65% of all African American family groups, and 36% of Hispanic family groups (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995).

Single-parent families are created in a number of ways: through divorce, marital separation, out-of-wedlock births, or death of a parent. Among adult African American women aged 25–44, increases in the percentage of never-married women and disrupted marriages are significant contributors to the rise in female-headed households; for white women of the same age group, marital dissolution or divorce is the most important factor (Demo, 1992; Jaynes & Williams, 1989). Moreover, changes in the living arrangements of women who give birth outside marriage or experience marital disruption have also been significant factors in the rise of female-headed households among African American and white women. In the past, women who experienced separation or divorce, or bore children out of wedlock were more likely to move in with their parents or other relatives, creating subfamilies; as a result, they were not classified as female headed. In recent decades, however, more and more of these women have established their own households (Parish, Hao, & Hogan, 1991).

An increasing proportion of female-headed householders are unmarried teenage mothers with young children. In 1990, for example, 96% of all births to African American teenagers occurred outside marriage; for white teenagers, the figure was 55% (National Center for Health Statistics, 1991). Although overall fertility rates among teenage women declined steadily from the 1950s through the end of the 1980s, the share of births to unmarried women has risen sharply over time. In 1970, the proportion of all births to unmarried teenage women aged 15–19 was less than 1 in 3; by 1991, it had increased to 2 in 3.

Differences in fertility and births outside marriage among young African American and white women are accounted for, in part, by differences in sexual activity, use of contraceptives, the selection of adoption as an option, and the proportion of premarital pregnancies that are legitimated by marriage before the children's births (Trusell, 1988). Compared to their white counterparts, African American teenagers are more likely to be

sexually active and less likely to use contraceptives, to have abortions when pregnant, and to marry before the babies are born. In consequence, young African American women constitute a larger share of single mothers than they did in past decades. This development has serious social and economic consequences for children and adults because female-headed households have much higher rates of poverty and deprivation than do other families (Taylor, 1991b).

Family Structure and Family Dynamics

As a number of studies have shown, there is a strong correspondence between organization and economic status of families, regardless of race (Farley & Allen, 1987). For both African Americans and whites, the higher the income, the greater the percentage of families headed by married couples. In their analysis of 1980 census data on family income and structure, Farley and Allen (1987) found that “there were near linear decreases in the proportions of households headed by women, households where children reside with a single parent, and extended households with increases in economic status” (p. 185). Yet, socioeconomic factors, they concluded, explained only part of the observed differences in family organization between African Americans and whites. “Cultural factors—that is, family preferences, notions of the appropriate and established habits—also help explain race differences in family organization” (p. 186).

One such difference is the egalitarian mode of family functioning in African American families, characterized by complementarity and flexibility in family roles (Billingsley, 1992; Hill, 1971). Egalitarian modes of family functioning are common even among low-income African American families, where one might expect the more traditional patriarchal pattern of authority to prevail. Until recently, such modes of family functioning were interpreted as signs of weakness or pathology because they were counternormative to the gender-role division of labor in majority families (Collins, 1990). Some scholars have suggested that role reciprocity in African American families is a legacy of slavery, in which the traditional gender division of labor was largely ignored by slaveholders, and Black men and women were “equal in the sense that neither sex wielded economic power over the other” (Jones, 1985, p. 14). As a result of historical experiences and economic conditions, traditional gender distinctions in the homemaker and provider roles have been less rigid in African American families than in white families (Beckett & Smith, 1981). Moreover, since African American women have historically been involved in the paid labor force in greater numbers than have white women and because they have had a more significant economic role in families than their white counterparts, Scott-Jones and Nelson-LeGall (1986, p. 95) argued that African Americans “have not experienced as strong an economic basis for the subordination of women, either in marital roles or in the preparation of girls for schooling, jobs, and careers.”

In her analysis of data from the NSBA, Hatchett (1991) found strong support for an egalitarian division of family responsibilities and tasks. With respect to attitudes toward the sharing of familial roles, 88% of the African American adults agreed that women and men should share child care and housework equally, and 73% agreed that both men and women should have jobs to support their families. For African American men, support for an egalitarian division of labor in the family did not differ by education or

socioeconomic level, but education was related to attitudes toward the sharing of family responsibilities and roles among African American women. College-educated women were more likely than were women with less education to support the flexibility and interchangeability of family roles and tasks.

Egalitarian attitudes toward familial roles among African Americans are also reflected in child-rearing attitudes and practices (Taylor, 1991a). Studies have indicated that African American families tend to place less emphasis on differential gender-role socialization than do other families (Blau, 1981). In her analysis of gender-role socialization among southern African American families, Lewis (1975) found few patterned differences in parental attitudes toward male and female roles. Rather, age and relative birth order were found to be more important than gender as determinants of differential treatment and behavioral expectations for children. Through their socialization practices, African American parents seek to inculcate in both genders traits of assertiveness, independence, and self-confidence (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Lewis, 1975). However, as children mature, socialization practices are adapted to reflect “more closely the structure of expectations and opportunities provided for Black men and women by the dominant society” (Lewis, 1975, p. 237)—that is, geared to the macrostructural conditions that constrain familial role options for African American men and women.

However, such shifts in emphasis and expectations often lead to complications in the socialization process by inculcating in men and women components of gender-role definitions that are incompatible or noncomplementary, thereby engendering a potential source of conflict in their relationships. Franklin (1986) suggested that young African American men and women are frequently confronted with contradictory messages and dilemmas as a result of familial socialization. On the one hand, men are socialized to embrace an androgynous gender role within the African American community, but, on the other hand, they are expected to perform according to the white masculine gender-role paradigm in some contexts. According to Franklin, this dual orientation tends to foster confusion in some young men and difficulties developing an appropriate gender identity. Likewise, some young African American women may receive two different and contradictory messages: “One message states, ‘Because you will be a Black woman, it is imperative that you learn to take care of yourself because it is hard to find a Black man who will take care of you.’ A second message . . . that conflicts with the first . . . is ‘your ultimate achievement will occur when you have snared a Black man who will take care of you’” (Franklin, 1986, p. 109). Franklin contended that such contradictory expectations and mixed messages frequently lead to incompatible gender-based behaviors among African American men and women and conflicts in their relationships.

Despite the apparently greater acceptance of role flexibility and power sharing in African American families, conflict around these issues figures prominently in marital instability. In their study of marital instability among African American and white couples in early marriages, Hatchett, Veroff, and Douvan (1995) found young African American couples at odds over gender roles in the family. Anxiety over their ability to function in the provider role was found to be an important source of instability in the marriages for African American husbands, but not for white husbands. Hatchett (1991) observed that marital instability tended to be more common among young African American couples if the husbands felt that their wives had equal power in the family and if the wives felt

there was not enough sharing of family tasks and responsibilities. Hatchett et al. (1991) suggested that African American men's feelings of economic anxiety and self-doubt may be expressed in conflicts over decisional power and in the men's more tenuous commitment to their marriages vis-à-vis African American women. Although the results of their study relate to African American couples in the early stages of marriage, the findings may be predictive of major marital difficulties in the long term. These and other findings (see, for example, Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995) indicate that changing attitudes and definitions of familial roles among young African American couples are tied to social and economic trends (such as new and increased employment opportunities for women and new value orientations toward marriage and family) in the larger society.

African American Families, Social Change, and Public Policy

Over the past three decades, no change in the African American community has been more fundamental and dramatic than the restructuring of families and family relationships. Since the 1960s, unprecedented changes have occurred in rates of marriage, divorce, and separation; in the proportion of single and two-parent households and births to unmarried mothers; and in the number of children living in poverty. To be sure, these changes are consistent with trends for the U.S. population as a whole, but they are more pronounced among African Americans, largely because of a conflux of demographic and economic factors that are peculiar to the African American community.

In their summary of findings from a series of empirical studies that investigated the causes and correlates of recent changes in patterns of African American family formation, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1995) came to several conclusions that have implications for future research and social policy. One consistent finding is the critical role that sex ratios—the availability of mates—play in the formation of African American families. Analyzing aggregate-level data on African American sex ratios in 171 U.S. cities, Sampson (1995) found that these sex ratios were highly predictive of female headship, the percentage of married couples among families with school-age children, and the percentage of African American women who were single. In assessing the causal effect of sex ratios on the family structure of African Americans and whites, he showed that the effect is five times greater for the former than the latter. Similarly, Kiecolt and Fossett's (1995) analysis of African American sex ratios in Louisiana cities and counties disclosed that they had strong positive effects on the percentage of African American women who were married and had husbands present, the rate of marital births per thousand African American women aged 20–29, the percentage of married-couple families, and the percentage of children living in two-parent households.

Another consistent finding is the substantial and critical impact of economic factors on African American family formation, especially men's employment status. Analyses by Sampson (1995) and Darity and Myers (1995) provided persuasive evidence that economic factors play a major and unique role in the development and maintenance of African American families. Using aggregate data, Sampson found that low employment rates for African American men in cities across the United States were predictive of female headship, the percentage of women who were single, and the percentage of

married-couple families among family households with school-age children. Moreover, comparing the effect of men's employment on the family structure of African American and white families, he found that the effect was 20 times greater for African Americans than for whites. Similar results are reported by Darity and Myers, who investigated the effects of sex ratio and economic marriageability—Wilson and Neckerman's (1986) Male Marriageability Pool Index—on African American family structure. They found that, although both measures were independently predictive of female headship among African Americans, a composite measure of economic and demographic factors was a more stable and effective predictor. Moreover, Sampson found that the strongest independent effect of these factors on family structure was observed among African American families in poverty. That is, "the lower the sex ratio and the lower the male employment rate the higher the rate of female-headed families with children and in poverty" (p. 250). It should be noted that neither rates of white men's employment nor white sex ratios was found to have much influence on white family structure in these analyses, lending support to Wilson's (1987) hypothesis regarding the structural sources of family disruption among African Americans.

Although the findings reported here are not definitive, they substantiate the unique and powerful effects of sex ratios and men's employment on the marital behavior and family structure of African Americans and point to other problems related to the economic marginalization of men and family poverty in African American communities. Some analysts have predicted far-reaching consequences for African Americans and for society at large should current trends in marital disruption continue unabated. Darity and Myers (1996) predicted that the majority of African American families will be headed by women by the beginning of the next decade if violent crime, homicide, incarceration, and other problems associated with the economic marginalization of African American men are allowed to rob the next generation of fathers and husbands. Moreover, they contended, a large number of such families are likely to be poor and isolated from the mainstream of American society.

The growing economic marginalization of African American men and their ability to provide economic support to families have contributed to their increasing estrangement from family life (Bowman, 1989; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995) and are identified as pivotal factors in the development of other social problems, including drug abuse, crime, homicide, and imprisonment, which further erode their prospects as marriageable mates for African American women.

In addressing the structural sources of the disruption of African American families, researchers have advanced a number of short- and long-term proposals. There is considerable agreement that increasing the rate of marriage alone will not significantly improve the economic prospects of many poor African American families. As Ehrenreich (1986) observed, given the marginal economic position of poor African American men, impoverished African American women would have to be married to three such men—simultaneously—to achieve an average family income! Thus, for many African American women, increasing the prevalence of marriage will not address many of the problems they experience as single parents.

With respect to short-term policies designed to address some of the more deleterious effects of structural forces on African American families, Darity and Myers (1996)

proposed three policy initiatives that are likely to produce significant results for African American communities. First, because research has indicated that reductions in welfare benefits have failed to stem the rise in female-headed households, welfare policy should reinstate its earlier objective of lifting the poor out of poverty. In Darity and Myers's view, concerns about the alleged disincentives of transfer payments are "moot in light of the long-term evidence that Black families will sink deeper into a crisis of female headship with or without welfare. Better a world of welfare-dependent, near-poor families than one of welfare-free but desolate and permanently poor families" (p. 288). Second, programs are needed to improve the health care of poor women and their children. One major potential benefit of such a strategy is an improvement in the sex ratio because the quality of prenatal and child care is one of the determinants of sex ratios. "By assuring quality health care now, we may help stem the tide toward further depletion of young Black males in the future" (p. 288). A third strategy involves improvements in the quality of education provided to the poor, which are key to employment gains.

Although these are important initiatives with obvious benefits to African American communities, in the long term, the best strategy for addressing marital disruptions and other family-related issues is an economic-labor market strategy. Because much of current social policy is ideologically driven, rather than formulated on the basis of empirical evidence, it has failed to acknowledge or address the extent to which global and national changes in the economy have conspired to marginalize significant segments of the African American population, both male and female, and deprive them of the resources to form or support families. Although social policy analysts have repeatedly substantiated the link between the decline in marriages among African Americans and fundamental changes in the U.S. postindustrial economy, their insights have yet to be formulated into a meaningful and responsive policy agenda. Until these structural realities are incorporated into governmental policy, it is unlikely that marital disruption and other adverse trends associated with this development will be reversed.

There is no magic bullet for addressing the causes and consequences of marital decline among African Americans, but public policies that are designed to improve the economic and employment prospects of men and women at all socioeconomic levels have the greatest potential for improving the lot of African American families. Key elements of such policies would include raising the level of education and employment training among African American youth, and more vigorous enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, which would raise the level of employment and earnings and contribute to higher rates of marriage among African Americans (Burbridge, 1995). To be sure, many of the federally sponsored employment and training programs that were launched during the 1960s and 1970s were plagued by a variety of administrative and organizational problems, but the effectiveness of some of these programs in improving the long-term employment prospects and life chances of disadvantaged youth and adults has been well documented (Taylor et al., 1990).

African American families, like all families, exist not in a social vacuum but in communities, and programs that are designed to strengthen community institutions and provide social support to families are likely to have a significant impact on family functioning. Although the extended family and community institutions, such as the church, have been important sources of support to African American families in the past, these community

support systems have been overwhelmed by widespread joblessness, poverty, and a plethora of other problems that beset many African American communities. Thus, national efforts to rebuild the social and economic infrastructures of inner-city communities would make a major contribution toward improving the overall health and well-being of African American families and could encourage more young people to marry in the future.

Winning support for these and other policy initiatives will not be easy in a political environment that de-emphasizes the role of government in social policy and human welfare. But without such national efforts, it is difficult to see how many of the social conditions that adversely affect the structure and functioning of African American families will be eliminated or how the causes and consequences of marital decline can be ameliorated. If policy makers are serious about addressing conditions that destabilize families, undermine communities, and contribute to a host of other socially undesirable outcomes, new policy initiatives, such as those just outlined, must be given higher priority.

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■ READING 33

Diversity within Latino Families: New Lessons for Family Social Science

Maxine Baca Zinn and Barbara Wells

Who are Latinos? How will their growing presence in U.S. society affect the family field? These are vital questions for scholars who are seeking to understand the current social and demographic shifts that are reshaping society and its knowledge base. Understanding family diversity is a formidable task, not only because the field is poorly equipped to deal with differences at the theoretical level, but because many decentering efforts are themselves problematic. Even when diverse groups are included, family scholarship can distort and misrepresent by faulty emphasis and false generalizations.

Latinos are a population that can be understood only in terms of increasing heterogeneity. Latino families are unprecedented in terms of their diversity. In this [reading], we examine the ramifications of such diversity on the history, boundaries, and dynamics of family life. We begin with a brief look at the intellectual trends shaping Latino family research. We then place different Latino groups at center stage by providing a framework that situates them in specific and changing political and economic settings. Next, we apply our framework to each national origin group to draw out their different family experiences, especially as they are altered by global restructuring. We turn, then, to examine family structure issues and the interior dynamics of family living as they vary by gender and generation. We conclude with our reflections on studying Latino families and remaking family social science. In this [reading], we use interchangeably terms that are commonly used to describe Latino national-origin groups. For example, the terms Mexican American, Mexican, and Mexican-origin population will be used to refer to the same segment of the Latino population. Mexican-origin people may also be referred to as Chicanos.

INTELLECTUAL TRENDS, CRITIQUES, AND CHALLENGES

Origins

The formal academic study of Latino families originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with studies of Mexican immigrant families. As the new social scientists of the times focused their concerns on immigration and social disorganization, Mexican-origin and other ethnic families were the source of great concern. The influential Chicago School of Sociology led scholars to believe that Mexican immigration, settlement, and poverty created problems in developing urban centers. During this period, family study was emerging as a new field that sought to document, as well as ameliorate, social problems in urban settings (Thomas & Wilcox, 1987). Immigrant families became major targets of social reform.

Interwoven themes from race relations and family studies gave rise to the view of Mexicans as particularly disorganized. Furthermore, the family was implicated in their plight. As transplants from traditional societies, the immigrants and their children were thought to be at odds with social requirements in the new settings. Their family arrangements were treated as cultural exceptions to the rule of standard family development. Their slowness to acculturate and take on Western patterns of family development left them behind as other families modernized (Baca Zinn, 1995).

Dominant paradigms of assimilation and modernization guided and shaped research. Notions of “traditional” and “modern” forms of social organization joined the new family social science’s preoccupation with a standard family form. Compared to mainstream families, Mexican immigrant families were analyzed as traditional cultural forms. Studies of Mexican immigrants highlighted certain ethnic lifestyles that were said to produce social disorganization. Structural conditions that constrained families in the new society were rarely a concern. Instead, researchers examined (1) the families’ foreign patterns and habits, (2) the moral quality of family relationships, and (3) the prospects for their Americanization (Bogardus, 1934).

Cultural Preoccupations

Ideas drawn from early social science produced cultural caricatures of Mexican families that became more exaggerated during the 1950s, when structural functionalist theories took hold in American sociology. Like the previous theories, structural functionalism’s strategy for analyzing family life was to posit one family type (by no means the only family form, even then) and define it as “the normal family” (Boss & Thorne, 1989). With an emphasis on fixed family boundaries and a fixed division of roles, structural functionalists focused their attention on the group-specific characteristics that deviated from the normal or standard family and predisposed Mexican-origin families to deficiency. Mexican-origin families were analyzed in isolation from the rest of social life, described in simplistic terms of rigid male dominance and pathological clannishness. Although the earliest works on Mexican immigrant families reflected a concern for their eventual adjustment to American society, the new studies virtually abandoned the social realm.

They dealt with families as if they existed in a vacuum of backward Mexican traditionalism. Structural functionalism led scholars along a path of cultural reductionism in which differences became deficiencies.

The Mexican family of social science research (Heller, 1966; Madsen, 1964; Rubel, 1966) presented a stark contrast with the mythical “standard family.” Although some studies found that Mexican family traditionalism was fading as Mexicans became acculturated, Mexican families were stereotypically and inaccurately depicted as the chief cause of Mexican subordination in the United States.

New Directions

In the past 25 years, efforts to challenge myths and erroneous assumptions have produced important changes in the view of Mexican-origin families. Beginning with a critique of structural functionalist accounts of Mexican families, new studies have successfully challenged the old notions of family life as deviant, deficient, and disorganized.

The conceptual tools of Latino studies, women’s studies, and social history have infused the new scholarship to produce a notable shift away from cultural preoccupations. Like the family field in general, research on Mexican-origin families has begun to devote greater attention to the “social situations and contexts that affect Mexican families” (Vega, 1990, p. 1015). This “revisionist” strategy has moved much Latino family research to a different plane—one in which racial-ethnic families are understood to be constructed by powerful social forces and as settings in which different family members adapt in a variety of ways to changing social conditions.

Current Challenges

Despite important advances, notable problems and limitations remain in the study of Latino families. A significant portion of scholarship includes only Mexican-origin groups (Massey, Zambrana, & Bell, 1995) and claims to generalize the findings to other Latinos. This practice constructs a false social reality because there is no Latino population in the same sense that there is an African American population. However useful the terms *Latino* and *Hispanic* may be as political and census identifiers, they mask extraordinary diversity. The category Hispanic was created by federal statisticians to provide data on people of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and other Hispanic origins in the United States. There is no precise definition of group membership, and Latinos do not agree among themselves on an appropriate group label (Massey, 1993). While many prefer the term *Latino*, they may use it interchangeably with *Hispanic* to identify themselves (Romero, 1996). These terms are certainly useful for charting broad demographic changes in the United States, but when used as panethnic terms, they can contribute to misunderstandings about family life.

The labels Hispanic or Latino conceal variation in the family characteristics of Latino groups whose differences are often greater than the overall differences between Latinos and non-Latinos (Solis, 1995). To date, little comparative research has been conducted on Latino subgroups. The systematic disaggregation of family characteristics by national-origin groups remains a challenge, a necessary next step in the development of Latino family research.

We believe that the lack of a comprehensive knowledge base should not stand in the way of building a framework to analyze family life. We can use the burgeoning research on Latinos in U.S. social life to develop an analytical, rather than just a descriptive, account of families. The very complexity of Latino family arrangements begs for a unified (but not unitary) analysis. We believe that we can make good generalizations about Latino family diversity. In the sections that follow, we use a structural perspective grounded in intergroup differences. We make no pretense that this is an exhaustive review of research. Instead, our intent is to examine how Latino family experiences differ in relation to socially constructed conditions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conventional family frameworks, which have never applied well to racial-ethnic families, are even less useful in the current world of diversity and change. Incorporating multiplicity into family studies requires new approaches. A fundamental assumption guiding our analysis is that Latino families are not merely an expression of ethnic differences but, like all families, are the products of social forces.

Family diversity is an outgrowth of distinctive patterns in the way families and their members are embedded in environments with varying opportunities, resources, and rewards. Economic conditions and social inequalities associated with race, ethnicity, class, and gender place families in different “social locations.” These differences are the key to understanding family variation. They determine labor market status, education, marital relations, and other factors that are crucial to family formation.

Studying Latino family diversity means exposing the structural forces that impinge differently on families in specific social, material, and historical contexts. In other words, it means unpacking the structural arrangements that produce and often require a range of family configurations. It also requires analyzing the cross-cutting forms of difference that permeate society and penetrate families to produce divergent family experiences. Several macrostructural conditions produce widespread family variations across Latino groups: (1) the sociohistorical context; (2) the structure of economic opportunity; and (3) global reorganization, including economic restructuring and immigration.

The Sociohistorical Context

Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Latino groups have varied histories that distinguish them from each other. The timing and conditions of their arrival in the United States produced distinctive patterns of settlement that continue to affect their prospects for success. Cubans arrived largely between 1960 and 1980; a group of Mexicans indigenous to the Southwest was forcibly annexed into the United States in 1848, and another has been migrating continually since around 1890; Puerto Ricans came under U.S. control in 1898 and obtained citizenship in 1917; Salvadorans and Guatemalans began to migrate to the United States in substantial numbers during the past two decades.

The Structure of Economic Opportunity

Various forms of labor are needed to sustain family life. Labor status has always been the key factor in distinguishing the experiences of Latinos. Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others are located in different regions of the country where particular labor markets and a group's placement within them determine the kind of legal, political, and social supports available to families. Different levels of structural supports affect family life, often producing various domestic and household arrangements. Additional complexity stems from gendered labor markets. In a society in which men are still assumed to be the primary breadwinners, jobs generally held by women pay less than jobs usually held by men. Women's and men's differential labor market placement, rewards, and roles create contradictory work and family experiences.

Global Reorganization, Including Economic Restructuring and Immigration

Economic and demographic upheavals are redefining families throughout the world. Four factors are at work here: new technologies based primarily on the computer chip, global economic interdependence, the flight of capital, and the dominance of the information and service sectors over basic manufacturing industries (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1998). Latino families are profoundly affected as the environments in which they live are reshaped and they face economic and social marginalization because of underemployment and unemployment. Included in economic globalization are new demands for immigrant labor and the dramatic demographic transformations that are "Hispanicizing" the United States. Family flexibility has long been an important feature of the immigrant saga. Today, "Latino immigration is adding many varieties to family structure" (Moore & Vigil, 1993, p. 36).

The macrostructural conditions described earlier provide the context within which to examine the family experiences of different Latino groups. They set the foundation for comparing family life across Latino groups. These material and economic forces help explain the different family profiles of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others. In other words, they enable sociologists to understand how families are bound up with the unequal distribution of social opportunities and how the various national-origin groups develop broad differences in work opportunities, marital patterns, and household structures. However, they do not explain other important differences in family life that cut across national-origin groups. People of the same national origin may experience family differently, depending on their location in the class structure as unemployed, poor, working class or professional; their location in the gender structure as female or male; and their location in the sexual orientation system as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996). In addition to these differences, family life for Latinos is shaped by age, generation living in the United States, citizenship status, and even skin color. All these differences intersect to influence the shape and character of family and household relations.

While our framework emphasizes the social context and social forces that construct families, we do not conclude that families are molded from the "outside in." What

happens on a daily basis in family relations and domestic settings also constructs families. Latinos themselves—women, men, and children—have the ability actively to shape their family and household arrangements. Families should be seen as settings in which people are agents and actors, coping with, adapting to, and changing social structures to meet their needs (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1996).

Sociohistorical Context for Family Diversity among Mexicans

Families of Mexican descent have been incorporated into the United States by both conquest and migration. In 1848, at the end of the Mexican War, the United States acquired a large section of Mexico, which is now the southwestern United States. With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Mexican population in that region became residents of U.S. territory. Following the U.S. conquest, rapid economic growth in that region resulted in a shortage of labor that was resolved by recruiting workers from Mexico. So began the pattern of Mexican labor migration that continues to the present (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Some workers settled permanently in the United States, and others continued in cycles of migration, but migration from Mexico has been continuous since around 1890 (Massey et al., 1995).

Dramatic increases in the Mexican-origin population have been an important part of the trend toward greater racial and ethnic diversity in the United States. The Mexican population tripled in size in 20 years, from an estimated 4.5 million in 1970 to 8.7 million in 1990 to 13.5 million in 1990 (Rumbaut, 1995; Wilkinson, 1993). At present, approximately two thirds of Mexicans are native born, and the remainder are foreign born (Rumbaut, 1995). Important differences are consistently found between the social experiences and economic prospects of the native born and the foreign born (Morales & Ong, 1993; Ortiz, 1996). While some variation exists, the typical Mexican migrant to the United States has low socioeconomic status and rural origins (Ortiz, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Recent immigrants have a distinct disadvantage in the labor market because of a combination of low educational attainment, limited work skills, and limited English language proficiency. Social networks are vital for integrating immigrants into U.S. society and in placing them in the social class system (Fernandez-Kelly & Schaufliker, 1994). Mexicans are concentrated in barrios that have social networks in which vital information is shared, contacts are made, and job referrals are given. But the social-class context of these Mexican communities is overwhelmingly poor and working class. Mexicans remain overrepresented in low-wage occupations, especially service, manual labor, and low-end manufacturing. These homogeneous lower-class communities lack the high-quality resources that could facilitate upward mobility for either new immigrants or second- and later-generation Mexicans.

The common assumption that immigrants are assimilated economically by taking entry-level positions and advancing to better jobs has not been supported by the Mexican experience (Morales & Ong, 1993; Ortiz, 1996). Today's Mexican workers are as likely as ever to be trapped in low-wage unstable employment situations (Ortiz, 1996; Sassen, 1993). Studies (Aponte, 1993; Morales & Ong, 1993; Ortiz, 1996) have found that high labor force participation and low wages among Mexicans have created a large group of

working poor. Households adapt by holding multiple jobs and pooling wages (Velez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992).

Mexicans are the largest Latino group in the United States; 6 of 10 Latinos have Mexican origins. This group has low family incomes, but high labor force participation for men and increasing rates for women. Mexicans have the lowest educational attainments and the largest average household size of all Latino groups. (See Table 33.1 and Figure 33.1 for between-group comparisons.)

Puerto Ricans

The fortunes of Puerto Rico and the United States were joined in 1899 when Puerto Rico became a U.S. possession in the aftermath of Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens and, as such, have the right to migrate to the mainland without regulation. A small stream of migrants increased dramatically after World War II for three primary reasons: high unemployment in Puerto Rico, the availability of inexpensive air travel between Puerto Rico and the United States, and labor recruitment by U.S. companies (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Puerto Ricans were concentrated in or near their arrival point—New York City—although migrant laborers were scattered throughout the Northeast and parts of the Midwest. They engaged in a variety of blue-collar occupations; in New York City, they were particularly drawn into the textile and garment industries (Torres & Bonilla, 1993). The unique status of Puerto Rico as a commonwealth of the United States allows Puerto Ricans to engage in a circulating migration between Puerto Rico and the mainland (Feagin & Feagin, 1996).

TABLE 33.1 *Social and Economic Population Characteristics*

| | <i>Median Income</i> | <i>Poverty</i> | <i>Labor Force Participation</i> | | | | <i>Average Household</i> |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---|-------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | | | <i>% Female Head of Household</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>High School Graduate</i> | |
| Mexican | 23,609 | 29.6 | 19.9 | 80.9 | 51.8 | 46.5 | 3.86 |
| Puerto Rican | 20,929 | 33.2 | 41.2 | 70.6 | 47.4 | 61.3 | 2.91 |
| Cuban | 30,584 | 13.6 | 21.3 | 69.9 | 50.8 | 64.7 | 2.56 |
| Central/ South American | 28,558 | 23.9 | 25.4 | 79.5 | 57.5 | 64.2 | 3.54 |
| Other Hispanic | 28,658 | 21.4 | 29.5 | | | 68.4 | |
| All Hispanic | 24,313 | 27.8 | 24 | 79.1 | 52.6 | 53.4 | 2.99 |
| All U.S. | 38,782 | 11.6 | 12 | 75 | 58.9 | 81.7 | 2.65 |
| | 1994 | 1994 | 1995 | 1995 | 1995 | 1995 | 1995 |

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996 (116th ed.), Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996, Tables 53, 68, 241, 615, 622, 723, 738.

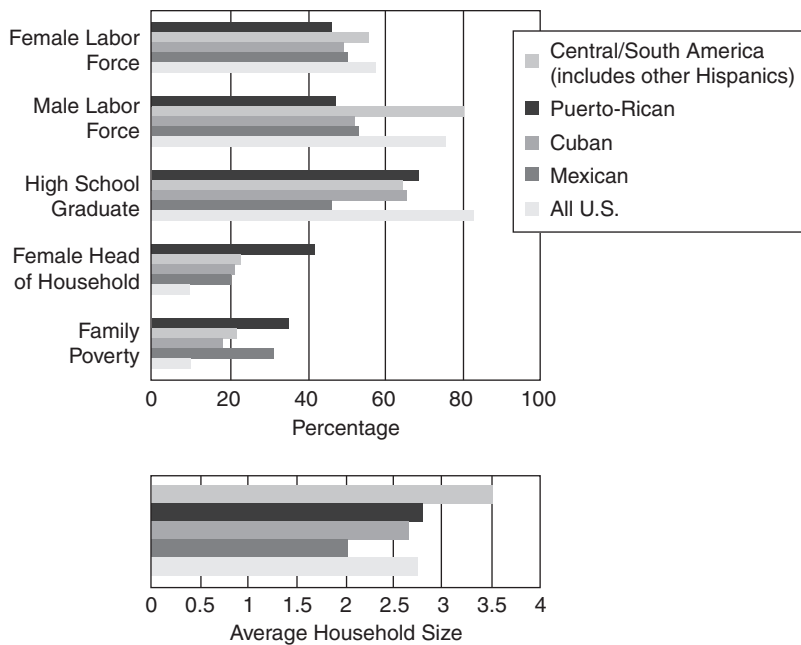


FIGURE 33.1 *Social and Economic Population Characteristics*

Puerto Ricans are the most economically disadvantaged of all major Latino groups. The particular context of Puerto Ricans' entry into the U.S. labor market helps explain this group's low economic status. Puerto Ricans with limited education and low occupational skills migrated to the eastern seaboard to fill manufacturing jobs (Ortiz, 1995); their economic well-being was dependent on opportunities for low-skill employment (Aponte, 1993). The region in which Puerto Ricans settled has experienced a major decline in its manufacturing base since the early 1970s. The restructuring of the economy means that, in essence, the jobs that Puerto Ricans came to the mainland to fill have largely disappeared. Latinos who have been displaced from manufacturing have generally been unable to gain access to higher-wage service sector employment (Carnoy, Daly, & Ojeda, 1993).

Compared to Mexicans and Cubans, Puerto Ricans have the lowest median family incomes and the highest unemployment and poverty rates. Puerto Ricans also have a high rate of female-headed households.

Cubans

The primary event that precipitated the migration of hundreds of thousands of Cubans to the United States was the revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power in 1959. This revolution set off several waves of immigration, beginning with the former economic and political elite and working progressively downward through the class structure. Early

Cuban immigrants entered the United States in a highly politicized cold-war context as political refugees from communism. The U.S. government sponsored the Cuban Refugee Program, which provided massive supports to Cuban immigrants, including resettlement assistance, job training, small-business loans, welfare payments, and health care (Dominguez, 1992; Perez-Stable & Uriarte, 1993). By the time this program was phased out after the mid-1970s, the United States had invested nearly \$1 billion in assistance to Cubans fleeing from communism (Perez-Stable & Uriarte, 1993, p. 155). Between 1960 and 1980, nearly 800,000 Cubans immigrated to the United States (Dominguez, 1992).

The Cuban population is concentrated in south Florida, primarily in the Miami area, where they have established a true ethnic enclave in which they own businesses; provide professional services; and control institutions, such as banks and newspapers (Perez, 1994). The unique circumstances surrounding their immigration help explain the experience of Cubans. U.S. government supports facilitated the economic successes of early Cuban immigrants (Aponte, 1993; Fernandez-Kelley & Schauflyer, 1994). High rates of entrepreneurship resulted in the eventual consolidation of an enclave economy (Portes & Truelove, 1987).

Immigrants, women, and minorities have generally supplied the low-wage, flexible labor on which the restructured economy depends (Morales & Bonilla, 1993). However, Cubans “embody a privileged migration” in comparison to other Latino groups (Morales & Bonilla, 1993, p. 17). Their social-class positions, occupational attainments, and public supports have insulated them from the effects of restructuring. Yet Cubans in Miami are not completely protected from the displacements of the new economic order. As Perez-Stable and Uriarte (1993) noted, the Cuban workforce is polarized, with one segment moving into higher-wage work and the other remaining locked in low-wage employment.

Cuban families have higher incomes and far lower poverty rates than do other major Latino groups. Cubans are the most educated major Latino group and have the smallest average household size.

Other Latinos

In each national-origin group discussed earlier, one finds unique socioeconomic, political and historical circumstances. But the diversity of Latinos extends beyond the differences between Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and mainland Puerto Ricans. One finds further variation when one considers the experiences of other Latino national-origin groups. Although research on “other Latinos” is less extensive than the literature cited earlier, we consider briefly contexts for diversity in Central American and Dominican families.

Central Americans. Political repression, civil war, and their accompanying economic dislocations have fueled the immigration of a substantial number of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans since the mid-1970s (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 1997). The U.S. population of Central Americans more than doubled between the 1980 and 1990 censuses and now outnumbers Cubans (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). These Latinos migrated under difficult circumstances and face a set of serious challenges in the United States (Dorrington, 1995). Three factors render this population highly vulnerable: (1) a high

percentage are undocumented (an estimated 49% of Salvadorans and 40% of Guatemalans), (2) they have marginal employment and high poverty rates, and (3) the U.S. government does not recognize them as political refugees (Lopez, Popkin, & Telles, 1996).

The two largest groups of Central Americans are Salvadorans and Guatemalans, the majority of whom live in the Los Angeles area. Lopez et al.'s (1996) study of Central Americans in Los Angeles illuminated the social and economic contexts in which these Latinos construct their family lives. In general, the women and men have little formal education and know little English, but have high rates of labor force participation. Salvadorans and Guatemalans are overrepresented in low-paying service and blue-collar occupations. Salvadoran and Guatemalan women occupy a low-wage niche in private service (as domestic workers in private homes). Central Americans, especially the undocumented who fear deportation and usually have no access to public support, are desperate enough to accept the poorest-quality, lowest-paying work that Los Angeles has to offer. These immigrants hold the most disadvantageous position in the regional economy (Scott, 1996). Lopez et al. predicted that in the current restructured economy, Central Americans will continue to do the worst of the “dirty work” necessary to support the lifestyles of the high-wage workforce.

Dominicans. A significant number of Dominicans began migrating to the U.S. in the mid-1960s. What Grasmuck and Pessar (1996) called the “massive displacement” of Dominicans from their homeland began with the end of Trujillo’s 30-year dictatorship and the political uncertainties that ensued. Dominican immigrant families did not fit the conventional image of the unskilled, underemployed peasant. They generally had employed breadwinners who were relatively well educated by Dominican standards; the majority described themselves as having urban middle-class origins (Mitchell, 1992).

The Dominican population is heavily concentrated in New York City. They entered a hostile labor market in which their middle class aspirations were to remain largely unfulfilled because the restructured New York economy offers low-wage, marginal, mostly dead-end employment for individuals without advanced education (Torres & Bonilla, 1993). Dominicans lacked the English language competence and educational credentials that might have facilitated their upward mobility (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1996). More than two thirds of the Dominican-origin population in the United States is Dominican born. As a group, Dominicans have high rates of poverty and female-headed families. Approximately 4 in 10 family households are headed by women.

THE STRUCTURE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Latino families remain outside the economic mainstream of U.S. society. Their median family income stands at less than two thirds the median family income of all U.S. families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). But the broad designation of “Latino” obscures important differences among national-origin groups. In this section, we explore variations in the structure of economic opportunity and consider how particular economic contexts shape the lives of different groups of Latino families.

Class, Work, and Family Life

A number of studies (see, for example, Cardenas, Chapa, & Burek, 1993; Grasmuck & Pessar, 1996; Lopez et al., 1996; Ortiz, 1995; Perez, 1994) have documented that diverse social and economic contexts produce multiple labor market outcomes for Latino families. The quality, availability, and stability of wage labor create a socioeconomic context in which family life is constructed and maintained. Cuban American families have fared far better socioeconomically than have other Latino families. Scholars consistently cite the role of the Cuban enclave in providing a favorable economic context with advantages that other groups have not enjoyed (Morales & Bonilla, 1993; Perez, 1994; Perez-Stable & Uriarte, 1993). Cuban families have the highest incomes, educational attainments, and levels of upper-white-collar employment. Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Central American families cluster below Cubans on these socioeconomic indicators, with Puerto Ricans the most disadvantaged group.

The structure of Mexican American economic opportunity stands in sharp contrast to that of Cubans. Betancur, Cordova, and Torres (1993) documented the systematic exclusion of Mexicans from upward-mobility ladders, tracing the incorporation of Mexican Americans into the Chicago economy to illustrate the historic roots of the concentration of Mexicans in unstable, poor-quality work. Throughout the 20th century Mexican migrants have constituted a transient workforce that has been continually vulnerable to fluctuations in the labor market and cycles of recruitment and deportation. Betancur et al.'s study highlighted the significance of the bracero program of contract labor migration in institutionalizing a segmented market for labor. The bracero program limited Mexican workers to specific low-status jobs and industries that prohibited promotion to skilled occupational categories. Mexicans were not allowed to compete for higher-status jobs, but were contracted to fill only the most undesirable jobs. Although formal bracero-era regulations have ended, similar occupational concentrations continue to be reproduced among Mexican American workers.

The effects of these diverging social-class and employment contexts on families are well illustrated by Fernandez-Kelly's (1990) study of female garment workers—Cubans in Miami and Mexicans in Los Angeles—both of whom placed a high value on marriage and family; however, contextual factors shaped differently their abilities to sustain marital relationships over time. Fernandez-Kelly contended that the conditions necessary for maintaining long-term stable unions were present in middle-class families but were absent in poor families. That is, the marriages of the poor women were threatened by unemployment and underemployment. Among these Mexican women, there was a high rate of poor female-headed households, and among the Cuban women, many were members of upwardly mobile families.

Women's Work

Several studies (Chavira-Prado, 1992; Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Lamphere, Zavella, Gonzales, & Evans, 1993; Stier & Tienda, 1992; Zavella, 1987) that have explored the intersection of work and family for Latinas have found that Latinas are increasingly likely to be employed. Labor force participation is the highest among Central

American women and the lowest among Puerto Rican women, with Mexican and Cuban women equally likely to be employed. Not only do labor force participation rates differ by national origin, but the meaning of women's work varies as well. For example, Fernandez-Kelly's (1990) study demonstrated that for Cuban women, employment was part of a broad family objective to reestablish middle-class status. Many Cuban immigrants initially experienced downward mobility, and the women took temporary jobs to generate income while their husbands cultivated fledgling businesses. These women often withdrew from the workforce when their families' economic positions had been secured. In contrast, Mexican women in Los Angeles worked because of dire economic necessity. They were drawn into employment to augment the earnings of partners who were confined to secondary-sector work that paid less than subsistence wages or worse, to provide the primary support for their households. Thus, whereas the Cuban women expected to work temporarily until their husbands could resume the role of middle-class breadwinner, the Mexican women worked either because their partners could not earn a family wage or because of the breakdown of family relationships by divorce or abandonment.

GLOBAL REORGANIZATION

Economic Restructuring

The economic challenges that Latinos face are enormous. A workforce that has always been vulnerable to exploitation can anticipate the decline of already limited mobility prospects. A recent body of scholarship (see, for example, Lopez et al., 1996; Morales & Bonilla, 1993; Ortiz, 1996) has demonstrated that the restructuring of the U.S. economy has reshaped economic opportunities for Latinos.

Torres and Bonilla's (1993) study of the restructuring of New York City's economy is particularly illustrative because it focused on Puerto Ricans, the Latino group hit hardest by economic transformations. That study found that restructuring in New York City is based on two processes that negatively affect Puerto Ricans. First, stable jobs in both the public and private sectors have eroded since the 1960s because many large corporations that had provided long-term, union jobs for minorities left the New York area and New York City's fiscal difficulties restricted the opportunities for municipal employment. Second, the reorganization of light manufacturing has meant that new jobs offer low wages and poor working conditions; new immigrants who are vulnerable to exploitation by employers generally fill these jobs. The restructuring of the economy has resulted in the exclusion or withdrawal of a substantial proportion of Puerto Ricans from the labor market (Morales & Bonilla, 1993).

Families are not insulated from the effects of social and economic dislocations. Research that has tracked this major social transformation has considered how such changes affect family processes and household composition (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1996; Lopez et al., 1996; Rodriguez & Hagan, 1997). What Sassen (1993) called the "informalization" and "casualization" of urban labor markets will, in the end, shape families in ways that deviate from the nuclear ideal. The marginalization of the Puerto Rican workforce is

related not only to high unemployment and poverty rates, but to high rates of nonmarital births and female-headed households (Fernandez-Kelly, 1990; Morrissey, 1987).

Contrasting the experience of Dominicans to that of Puerto Ricans indicates that it is impossible to generalize a unitary “Latino experience” even within a single labor market—New York City. Torres and Bonilla (1993) found that as Puerto Ricans were displaced from manufacturing jobs in the 1970s and 1980s, new Dominican immigrants came into the restructured manufacturing sector to fill low-wage jobs. Dominicans were part of a pool of immigrant labor that entered a depressed economy, was largely ineligible for public assistance, and was willing to accept exploitative employment. Grasmuck and Pessar (1991, 1996) showed how the incorporation of Dominicans into the restructured New York economy has affected families. Although the rate of divorce among early immigrants was high, relationships have become increasingly precarious as employment opportunities have become even more constrained. Currently, rates of poverty and female-headed households for Dominicans approximate those of Puerto Ricans (Rumbaut, 1995).

A Latino Underclass? Rising poverty rates among Latinos, together with the alarmist treatment of female-headed households among “minorities,” have led many policy makers and media analysts to conclude that Latinos have joined inner-city African Americans to form part of the “underclass.” According to the underclass model, inner-city men’s joblessness has encouraged nonmarital childbearing and undermined the economic foundations of the African American family (Wilson, 1987, 1996). Researchers have also been debating for some time whether increases in the incidence of female-headed households and poverty among Puerto Ricans are irreversible (Tienda, 1989). Recent thinking, however, suggests that applying the underclass theory to Latinos obscures more than it reveals and that a different analytical model is needed to understand poverty and family issues in each Latino group (Massey et al., 1995). Not only do the causes of poverty differ across Latino communities, but patterns of social organization at the community and family levels produce a wide range of responses to poverty. According to Moore and Pinderhughes (1993), the dynamics of poverty even in the poorest Latino barrios differ in fundamental ways from the conventional portrait of the under-class. Both African Americans and Puerto Ricans have high rates of female-headed households. However, Sullivan’s (1993) research in Brooklyn indicated that Puerto Ricans have high rates of cohabitation and that the family formation processes that lead to these household patterns are different from those of African Americans. Other case studies have underscored the importance of family organization. For example, Velez-Ibañez (1993) described a distinctive family form among poor Mexicans of South Tucson—cross-class household clusters surrounded by kinship networks that stretch beyond neighborhood boundaries and provide resources for coping with poverty.

Immigration

Families migrate for economic reasons, political reasons, or some combination of the two. Immigration offers potential and promise, but one of the costs is the need for families to adapt to their receiving community contexts. A growing body of scholarship has focused on two areas of family change: household composition and gender relations.

Household Composition. Immigration contributes to the proliferation of family forms and a variety of household arrangements among Latinos (Vega, 1995). Numerous studies have highlighted the flexibility of Latino family households. Chavez (1990, 1992) identified transnational families, binational families, extended families, multiple-family households, and other arrangements among Mexican and Central American immigrants. Landale and Fennelly (1992) found informal unions that resemble marriage more than cohabitation among mainland Puerto Ricans, and Guarnizo (1997) found binational households among Dominicans who live and work in both the United States and the Dominican Republic. Two processes are at work as families adapt their household structures. First, family change reflects, for many, desperate economic circumstances (Vega, 1995), which bring some families to the breaking point and lead others to expand their household boundaries. Second, the transnationalization of economies and labor has created new opportunities for successful Latino families; for example, Guarnizo noted that Dominican entrepreneurs sometimes live in binational households and have “de facto binational citizenship” (p. 171).

Immigration and Gender. Several important studies have considered the relationship between immigration and gender (Boyd, 1989; Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). In her study of undocumented Mexican immigrants, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) demonstrated that gender shapes migration and immigration shapes gender relations. She found that family stage migration, in which husbands migrate first and wives and children follow later, does not fit the household-strategy model. Often implied in this model is the assumption that migration reflects the unanimous and rational collective decision of all household members. However, as Hondagneu-Sotelo observed, gender hierarchies determined when and under what circumstances migration occurred; that is, men often decided spontaneously, independently, and unilaterally to migrate north to seek employment. When Mexican couples were finally reunited in the United States, they generally reconstructed more egalitarian gender relations. Variation in the form of gender relations in the United States is partially explained by the circumstances surrounding migration, such as the type and timing of migration, access to social networks, and U.S. immigration policy.

FAMILY DYNAMICS ACROSS LATINO GROUPS

Familism

Collectivist family arrangements are thought to be a defining feature of the Latino population. Presumably, a strong orientation and obligation to the family produces a kinship structure that is qualitatively different from that of all other groups. Latino familism, which is said to emphasize the family as opposed to the individual, “is linked to many of the pejorative images that have beset discussions of the Hispanic family” (Vega, 1990, p. 1018). Although themes of Latino familism figure prominently in the social science literature, this topic remains problematic owing to empirical limitations and conceptual confusion.

Popular and social science writing contain repeated descriptions of what amounts to a generic Latino kinship form. In reality, a Mexican-origin bias pervades the research on this topic. Not only is there a lack of comparative research on extended kinship structures among different national-origin groups, but there is little empirical evidence for all but Mexican-origin families. For Mexican-origin groups, studies are plentiful (for reviews, see Baca Zinn, 1983; Vega, 1990, 1995), although they have yielded inconsistent evidence about the prevalence of familism, the forms it takes, and the kinds of supportive relationships it serves.

Among the difficulties in assessing the evidence on extended family life are the inconsistent uses of terms like *familism* and *extended family system*. Seeking to clarify the multiple meanings of familism, Ramirez and Arce (1981) treated familism as a multidimensional concept comprised of such distinct aspects as structure, behavior, norms and attitudes, and social identity, each of which requires separate measurement and analysis. They proposed that familism contains four key components: (1) demographic familism, which involves such characteristics as family size; (2) structural familism, which measures the incidence of multigenerational (or extended) households; (3) normative families, which taps the value that Mexican-origin people place on family unity and solidarity; and (4) behavioral familism, which has to do with the level of interaction between family and kin networks.

Changes in regional and local economies and the resulting dislocations of Latinos have prompted questions about the ongoing viability of kinship networks. Analyzing a national sample of minority families, Rochelle (1997) argued that extended kinship networks are declining among Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans. On the other hand, a large body of research has documented various forms of network participation by Latinos. For three decades, studies have found that kinship networks are an important survival strategy in poor Mexican communities (Alvarez & Bean, 1976; Hoppe & Heller, 1975; Velez-Ibañez, 1996) and that these networks operate as a system of cultural, emotional, and mental support (Keefe, 1984; Mindel, 1980; Ramirez, 1980), as well as a system for coping with socioeconomic marginality (Angel & Tienda, 1982; Lamphere et al., 1993).

Research has suggested, however, that kinship networks are not maintained for socioeconomic reasons alone (Buriel & De Ment, 1997). Familistic orientation among Mexican-origin adults has been associated with high levels of education and income (Griffith & Villaviciencio, 1985). Familism has been viewed as a form of social capital that is linked with academic success among Mexican-heritage adolescents (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994).

The research on the involvement of extended families in the migration and settlement of Mexicans discussed earlier (Chavez, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997) is profoundly important. In contrast to the prevailing view that family extension is an artifact of culture, this research helps one understand that the structural flexibility of families is a social construction. Transnational families and their networks of kin are extended in space, time, and across national borders. They are quintessential adaptations—alternative arrangements for solving problems associated with immigration.

Despite the conceptual and empirical ambiguities surrounding the topic of familism, there is evidence that kinship networks are far from monolithic. Studies have revealed

that variations are rooted in distinctive social conditions, such as immigrant versus non-immigrant status and generational status. Thus, even though immigrants use kin for assistance, they have smaller social networks than do second-generation Mexican Americans who have broader social networks consisting of multigenerational kin (Vega, 1990). Studies have shown that regardless of class, Mexican extended families in the United States become stronger and more extensive with generational advancement, acculturation, and socioeconomic mobility (Velez-Ibañez, 1996). Although an assimilationist perspective suggests that familism fades in succeeding generations, Velez-Ibañez found that highly elaborated second- and third-generation extended family networks are actively maintained through frequent visits, ritual celebrations, and the exchange of goods and services. These networks are differentiated by the functions they perform, depending on the circumstances of the people involved.

Gender

Latino families are commonly viewed as settings of traditional patriarchy and as different from other families because of machismo, the cult of masculinity. In the past two decades, this cultural stereotype has been the impetus for corrective scholarship on Latino families. The flourishing of Latina feminist thought has shifted the focus from the determinism of culture to questions about how gender and power in families are connected with other structures and institutions in society. Although male dominance remains a central theme, it is understood as part of the ubiquitous social ordering of women and men. In the context of other forms of difference, gender exerts a powerful influence on Latino families.

New research is discovering gender dynamics among Latino families that are both similar to and different from those found in other groups. Similarities stem from social changes that are reshaping all families, whereas differences emerge from the varied locations of Latino families and the women and men in them. Like other branches of scholarship on Latino families, most studies have been conducted with Mexican-origin populations. The past two decades of research have shown that family life among all Latino groups is deeply gendered. Yet no simple generalizations sum up the essence of power relations.

Research has examined two interrelated areas: (1) family decision making and (2) the allocation of household labor. Since the first wave of “revisionist works” (Zavella, 1987) conducted in the 1970s and 1980s (Baca Zinn, 1980; Ybarra, 1982), researchers have found variation in these activities, ranging from patriarchal role-segregated patterns to egalitarian patterns, with many combinations in between. Studies have suggested that Latinas’ employment patterns, like those of women around the world, provide them with resources and autonomy that alter the balance of family power (Baca Zinn, 1980; Coltrane & Valdez, 1993; Pesquera, 1993; Repack, 1997; Williams, 1990; Ybarra, 1982; Zavella, 1987). But, as we discussed earlier, employment opportunities vary widely, and the variation produces multiple work and family patterns for Latinas. Furthermore, women’s employment, by itself, does not eradicate male dominance. This is one of the main lessons of Zavella’s (1987) study of Chicana cannery workers in California’s Santa Clara Valley. Women’s cannery work was circumscribed by inequalities of class, race, and

gender. As seasonal, part-time workers, the women gained some leverage in the home, thereby creating temporary shifts in their day-to-day family lives, but this leverage did not alter the balance of family power. Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia's (1990) comparative study of women's work and family patterns among Cubans and Mexican Americans found strikingly different configurations of power. Employed women's newfound rights are often contradictory. As Repack's study (1997) of Central American immigrants revealed, numerous costs and strains accompany women's new roles in a new landscape. Family relations often became contentious when women pressed partners to share domestic responsibilities. Migration produced a situation in which women worked longer and harder than in their countries of origin.

Other conditions associated with varying patterns in the division of domestic labor are women's and men's occupational statuses and relative economic contributions to their families. Studies by Pesquera (1993), Coltrane and Valdez (1993), and Coltrane (1996) found a general "inside/outside" dichotomy (wives doing most housework, husbands doing outside work and sharing some child care), but women in middle-class jobs received more "help" from their husbands than did women with lower earnings.

"Family power" research should not be limited to women's roles, but should study the social relations between women and men. Recent works on Latino men's family lives have made important strides in this regard (Coltrane & Valdez, 1993; Shelton & John, 1993). Still, there is little information about the range and variety of Latino men's family experiences (Mirande, 1997) or of their interplay with larger structural conditions. In a rare study of Mexican immigrant men, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (1994) discussed the diminution of patriarchy that comes with settling in the United States. They showed that the key to gender equality in immigrant families is women's and men's relative positions of power and status in the larger society. Mexican immigrant men's status is low owing to racism, economic marginality, and possible undocumented status. Meanwhile, as immigrant women move into wage labor, they develop autonomy and economic skills. These conditions combine to erode patriarchal authority.

The research discussed earlier suggested some convergences between Latinos and other groups in family power arrangements. But intertwined with the shape of domestic power are strongly held ideals about women's and men's family roles. Ethnic gender identities, values, and beliefs contribute to gender relations and constitute an important but little understood dimension of families. Gender may also be influenced by Latinos' extended family networks. As Lamphere et al. (1993) discovered, Hispanas in Albuquerque were living in a world made up largely of Hispana mothers, sisters, and other relatives. Social scientists have posited a relationship between dense social networks and gender segregation. If this relationship holds, familism could well impede egalitarian relations in Latino families (Coltrane, 1996; Hurtado, 1995).

Compulsory heterosexuality is an important component of both gender and family systems. By enforcing the dichotomy of opposite sexes, it is also a form of inequality in its own right, hence an important marker of social location. A growing literature on lesbian and gay identity among Latinas and Latinos has examined the conflicting challenges involved in negotiating a multiple minority status (Alarcon, Castillo, & Moraga, 1989; Almaguer, 1991; Anzaldúa, 1987; Carrier, 1992; Moraga, 1983; Morales, 1990). Unfortunately, family scholarship on Latinos has not pursued the implications of lesbian

and gay identities for understanding family diversity. In fact, there have been no studies in the social sciences in the area of sexual orientation and Latino families (Hurtado, 1995). But although the empirical base is virtually nonexistent and making *families* the unit of analysis no doubt introduces new questions (Demo & Allen, 1996), we can glean useful insights from the discourse on sexual identity. Writing about Chicanos, Almaguer (1991) identified the following obstacles to developing a safe space for forming a gay or lesbian identity: racial and class subordination and a context in which ethnicity remains a primary basis of group identity and survival. “Moreover Chicano *family life* [italics added] requires allegiance to patriarchal gender relations and to a system of sexual meanings that directly mitigate against the emergence of this alternative basis of self identity” (Almaguer, p. 88). Such repeated references to the constraints of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation imposed by Chicano families (Almaguer, 1991; Moraga, 1983) raise important questions. How do varied family contexts shape and differentiate the development of gay identities among Latinos? How do they affect the formation of lesbian and gay families among Latinas and Latinos? This area is wide open for research.

Children and Their Parents

Latinos have the highest concentration of children and adolescents of all major racial and ethnic groups. Nearly 40% of Latinos are aged 20 or younger, compared to about 26% of non-Hispanic whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). Among Latino subgroups, the highest proportions of children and adolescents are among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans and the lowest among Cubans (Solis, 1995).

Latino socialization patterns have long held the interest of family scholars (Martinez, 1993). Most studies have focused on the child-rearing practices of Mexican families. Researchers have questioned whether Mexican families have permissive or authoritarian styles of child rearing and the relationship of childrearing styles to social class and cultural factors (Martinez, 1993). Patterns of child rearing were expected to reveal the level of acculturation to U.S. norms and the degree of modernization among traditional immigrant families. The results of research spanning the 1970s and 1980s were mixed and sometimes contradictory.

Buriel's (1993) study brought some clarity to the subject of child-rearing practices by situating it in the broad social context in which such practices occur. This study of Mexican families found that child-rearing practices differ by generation. Parents who were born in Mexico had a “responsibility-oriented” style that was compatible with their own life experience as struggling immigrants. U.S.-born Mexican parents had a “concern-oriented” style of parenting that was associated with the higher levels of education and income found among this group and that may also indicate that parents compensate for their children's disadvantaged standing in U.S. schools.

Mainstream theorizing has generally assumed a middle-class European-American model for the socialization of the next generation (Segura & Pierce, 1993). But the diverse contexts in which Latino children are raised suggest that family studies must take into account multiple models of socialization. Latino children are less likely than Anglo children to live in isolated nuclear units in which parents have almost exclusive responsibility for rearing children and the mothers' role is primary. Segura and Pierce

contended that the pattern of nonexclusive mothering found in some Latino families shapes the gender identities of Latinos in ways that conventional thinking does not consider. Velez-Ibañez & Greenberg (1992) discussed how the extensive kinship networks of Mexican families influence child rearing and considered the ramifications for educational outcomes. Mexican children are socialized into a context of “thick” social relations. From infancy onward, these children experience far more social interaction than do children who are raised in more isolated contexts. The institution of education—second only to the family as an agent of socialization—is, in the United States, modeled after the dominant society and characterized by competition and individual achievement. Latino students who have been socialized into a more cooperative model of social relations often experience a disjuncture between their upbringing and the expectations of their schools (Velez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992).

Social location shapes the range of choices that parents have as they decide how best to provide for their children. Latino parents, who are disproportionately likely to occupy subordinate social locations in U.S. society, encounter severe obstacles to providing adequate material resources for their children. To date, little research has focused on Latino fathers (Powell, 1995). Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s (1997) study documented a broad range of mothering arrangements among Latinas. One such arrangement is transnational mothering, in which mothers work in the United States while their children remain in Mexico or Central America; it is accompanied by tremendous costs and undertaken when options are extremely limited. The researchers found that transnational mothering occurred among domestic workers, many of whom were live-in maids or child care providers who could not live with their children, as well as mothers who could better provide for their children in their countries of origin because U.S. dollars stretched further in Central America than in the United States. Other mothering arrangements chosen by Latinas in the study included migrating with their children, migrating alone and later sending for their children, and migrating alone and returning to their children after a period of work.

Intrafamily Diversity

Family scholars have increasingly recognized that family experience is differentiated along the lines of age and gender (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1996; Thorne, 1992). Members of particular families—parents and children, women and men—experience family life differently. Scholarship that considers the internal differentiation of Latino families is focused on the conditions surrounding and adaptations following immigration.

While immigration requires tremendous change of all family members, family adaptation to the new context is not a unitary phenomenon. Research has found patterns of differential adjustment as family members adapt unevenly to an unfamiliar social environment (Gold, 1989). Gil and Vega’s (1996) study of acculturative stress in Cuban and Nicaraguan families in the Miami area identified significant differences in the adjustment of parents and their children. For example, Nicaraguan adolescents reported more initial language conflicts than did their parents, but their conflicts diminished over time, whereas their parents’ language conflicts increased over time. This difference occurred because the adolescents were immediately confronted with their English language deficiency in

school, but their parents could initially manage well in the Miami area without a facility with English. The authors concluded that family members experience “the aversive impacts of culture change at different times and at variable levels of intensity” (p. 451).

Differential adjustment creates new contexts for parent-child relations. Immigrant children who are school-aged generally become competent in English more quickly than do their parents. Dorrington (1995) found that Salvadoran and Guatemalan children often assume adult roles as they help their parents negotiate the bureaucratic structure of their new social environment; for example, a young child may accompany her parents to a local utility company to act as their translator.

Immigration may also create formal legal distinctions among members of Latino families. Frequently, family members do not share the same immigration status. That is, undocumented Mexican and Central American couples are likely, over time, to have children born in the United States and hence are U.S. citizens; the presence of these children then renders the “undocumented family” label inaccurate. Chavez (1992, p. 129) used the term *binational family* to refer to a family with both members who are undocumented and those who are citizens or legal residents.

Not only do family members experience family life differently, but age and gender often produce diverging and even conflicting interests among them (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1996). Both Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (1994) and Grasmuck and Pessar’s (1991) studies of family immigration found that Latinas were generally far more interested in settling permanently in the United States than were their husbands. In both studies, the women had enhanced their status by migration, while the men had lost theirs. Hondagneu-Sotelo noted that Mexican women advanced the permanent settlement of their families by taking regular, nonseasonal employment; negotiating the use of public and private assistance; and forging strong community ties. Grasmuck and Pessar observed that Dominican women tried to postpone their families’ return to the Dominican Republic by extravagantly spending money that would otherwise be saved for their return and by establishing roots in the United States.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The key to understanding diversity in Latino families is the uneven distribution of constraints and opportunities among families, which affects the behaviors of family members and ultimately the forms that family units take (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1996). Our goal in this review was to call into question assumptions, beliefs, and false generalizations about the way “Latino families are.” We examined Latino families not as if they had some essential characteristics that set them apart from others, but as they are affected by a complex mix of structural features.

Our framework enabled us to see how diverse living arrangements among Latinos are situated and structured in the larger social world. Although this framework embraces the interplay of macro- and microlevels of analysis, we are mindful that this review devoted far too little attention to family experience, resistance, and voice. We do not mean to underestimate the importance of human agency in the social construction of Latino families, but we could not devote as much attention as we would have liked to the various

ways in which women, men, and children actively produce their family worlds. Given the sheer size of the literature, the “non-comparability of most contemporary findings and the lack of a consistent conceptual groundwork” (Vega, 1990, p. 102), we decided that what is most needed is a coherent framework within which to view and interpret diversity. Therefore, we chose to focus on the impact of social forces on family life.

The basic insights of our perspective are sociological. Yet a paradox of family sociology is that the field has tended to misrepresent Latino families and those of other racial-ethnic groups. Sociology has distorted Latino families by generalizing from the experience of dominant groups and ignoring the differences that make a difference. This is a great irony. Family sociology, the specialty whose task it is to describe and understand social diversity, has marginalized diversity, rather than treated it as a central feature of social life (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1993).

As sociologists, we wrote this [reading] fully aware of the directions in our discipline that hinder the ability to explain diversity. At the same time, we think the core insight of sociology should be applied to challenge conventional thinking about families. Reviewing the literature for this [reading] did not diminish our sociological convictions, but it did present us with some unforeseen challenges. We found a vast gulf between mainstream family sociology and the extraordinary amount of high-quality scholarship on Latino families. Our review took us far beyond the boundaries of our discipline, making us “cross disciplinary migrants” (Stacey, 1995). We found the new literature in diverse and unlikely locations, with important breakthroughs emerging in the “borderlands” between social science disciplines. We also found the project to be infinitely more complex than we anticipated. The extensive scholarship on three national-origin groups and “others” was complicated by widely varying analytic snapshots. We were, in short, confronted with a kaleidoscope of family diversity. Our shared perspective served us well in managing the task at hand. Although we have different family specializations and contrasting family experiences, we both seek to understand multiple family and household forms that emanate from structural arrangements.

What are the most important lessons our sociological analysis holds for the family field? Three themes offer new directions for building a better, more inclusive, family social science. First, understanding Latino family diversity does not mean simply appreciating the ways in which families are different; rather, it means analyzing how the formation of diverse families is based on and reproduces social inequalities. At the heart of many of the differences between Latino families and mainstream families and the different aggregate family patterns among Latino groups are structural forces that place families in different social environments. What is not often acknowledged is that the same social structures—race, class, and other hierarchies—affect *all* families, albeit in different ways. Instead of treating family variation as the property of group difference, recent sociological theorizing (Baca Zinn, 1994; Dill, 1994; Glenn, 1992; Hill Collins, 1990, 1997) has conceptualized diverse family arrangements in *relational* terms, that is, mutually dependent and sustained through interaction across racial and class boundaries. The point is not that family differences based on race, class, and gender simply coexist. Instead, many differences in family life involve relationships of domination and subordination and differential access to material resources. Patterns of privilege and subordination characterize the historical relationships between Anglo families and

Mexican families in the Southwest (Dill, 1994). Contemporary diversity among Latino families reveals *new* interdependences and inequalities. Emergent middle-class and professional lifestyles among Anglos and even some Latinos are interconnected with a new Latino servant class whose family arrangements, in turn, must accommodate to the demands of their labor.

Second, family diversity plays a part in different economic orders and the shifts that accompany them. Scholars have suggested that the multiplicity of household types is one of the chief props of the world economy (Smith, Wallerstein, & Evers, 1985). The example of U.S.-Mexican cross-border households brings this point into full view. This household arrangement constitutes an important “part of the emerging and dynamic economic and technological transformations in the region” (Velez-Ibañez, 1996, p. 143). The structural reordering required by such families is central to regional economic change.

Finally, the incredible array of immigrant family forms and their enormous capacity for adaptation offer new departures for the study of postmodern families. “Binational,” “transnational,” and “multinational” families, together with “border balanced households” and “generational hopscotching,” are arrangements that remain invisible even in Stacey’s (1996) compelling analysis of U.S. family life at the century’s end. And yet the experiences of Latino families—flexible and plastic—as far back as the late 1800s (Griswold del Castillo, 1984), give resonance to the image of long-standing family fluidity and of contemporary families lurching backward and forward into the postmodern age (Stacey, 1990). The shift to a postindustrial economy is not the only social transformation affecting families. Demographic and political changes sweeping the world are engendering family configurations that are yet unimagined in family social science.

These trends offer new angles of vision for thinking about family diversity. They pose new opportunities for us to remake family studies as we uncover the mechanisms that construct multiple household and family arrangements.

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■ READING 34

Cultural Diversity and Aging Families

Rona J. Karasik and Raeann R. Hamon

It is not by the gray of the hair that one knows the age of the heart.

—Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton

In thinking about aging and older families, it is important to consider that aging is not a single experience. Many equate aging with the physiological changes our bodies go through over time. Some focus on diseases that, while not age related, are often thought to be associated with old age. Aging, however, is much more than the accumulation of wrinkles, gray hair, and the possibility of one or more chronic health conditions. Aging is also about how we view people (including ourselves) based on how we look and act and even by the number of candles on our birthday cakes. Aging is also about relationships—how they are sustained, how they change, and how new relationships are formed.

We have many stereotypes about aging and older persons. While our expectations are often negative, in reality, there are both positive and negative aspects to aging. The way in which we age is affected by a wide range of personal and social factors. Older

persons are a highly heterogeneous group, and the family relationships of older persons are highly diverse as well. This chapter will focus on how culture and ethnicity interplay with a variety of factors to affect aging and older families.

WHY FOCUS ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN OLDER FAMILIES?

We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another, unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present.

—*Anais Nin*

There are many reasons to try to understand the diverse impact of aging on families. First and foremost is the size and ongoing growth of the older population in the United States. In 2002, 35.6 million persons (12.3 percent of the U.S. population) were aged 65 and older (Administration on Aging, 2003). By 2030, the older population is expected to grow to 20 percent of the U.S. population—roughly 71.5 million persons will be aged 65 and older. Not surprisingly, the U.S. older population is not just growing in size but in ethnic diversity as well. In 2000, 17.2 percent of adults 65 and older in the United States reported being ethnic minorities. African American elders made up the largest ethnic minority elder group (8.1 percent), followed by 2.7 percent identifying as Asian or Pacific Islanders, and less than 1 percent identifying themselves as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Older persons identifying themselves as Hispanic (who may be of any race) composed 5.5 percent of the population, and 0.5 percent of older adults indicated being of two or more races. By 2030, the proportion of ethnic minority elders is expected to grow to 26.4 percent of the older population (Administration on Aging, 2003).

While these demographics clearly reflect a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse older population, numbers do not tell the whole story. Diversity within each racial and ethnic group is considerable. Most data on race and ethnicity, however, are reported in the overly broad categories of White, Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, and Hispanic (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). Moreover, while the census requests write-in information on a “person’s ancestry or ethnic origin,” rarely are these data included in descriptions of the aging population. As such, we know very little about how culture and ethnicity affect the aging experiences of many groups in the United States.

Salari (2002), for example, notes the invisibility in aging research of the diverse groups in the United States who have Middle Eastern origins as well as of those who practice Islam. For many groups, religion is a vital concern in how we understand the impact of cultural diversity on aging. Thus, a second reason to explore the cultural diversity of the older population is to understand how factors of culture, ethnicity, and race interplay with the other factors that make aging unique—including religion (Salari, 2002), gender (Conway-Turner, 1999), sexual orientation (Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Orel, 2004), health (Diwan & Jonnalagadda, 2001; Johnson & Smith, 2002; Li & Fries, 2005;

Zhan & Chen, 2004), socioeconomic status (Angel, 2003), family relationships (Shawler, 2004), social support (Johnson & Tripp-Reimer, 2001; Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005), geographic location (Applewhite & Torres, 2003; Barusch & TenBerge, 2003; Himes, Hogan, & Eggebeen, 1996), and life experiences (Moriarty & Butt, 2004). None of these factors alone makes a person or family. Rather, all are important for us to understand who our older population is and what their increasing numbers will mean.

Finally, considerations for how best to meet the needs of this rapidly growing and changing population are a third reason for exploring the impact of cultural diversity. Many call attention to the need for *cultural competence*—a system that provides appropriate, effective, high-quality services for all persons regardless of racial or ethnic background (Geron, 2002). Defining what constitutes cultural competence and how we can achieve it, however, can be challenging and perhaps a bit overwhelming. Capitman (2002), therefore, suggests starting with *cultural humility*, where we begin by “acknowledging what we do not know about each other as individuals and members of multiple cultural groups” (p. 12). Such an approach, however, still requires working not only toward understanding the needs of all older adults, but also toward the improved provision of culturally appropriate services. Saying we know little about a group is not enough. We must continuously seek to learn more about the diverse experiences, strengths, and needs of older adults and their families.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND AGING FAMILIES

It is theory that decides what can be observed.

—Albert Einstein

In selecting a framework to examine cultural diversity in older families, we must be sensitive to how our own expectations and biases affect not only the questions we ask but also the way in which we interpret the responses. Currently, much of the research on diversity in aging takes a preliminary, primarily descriptive approach (e.g., “what?” “who?” and “how many?”). Several studies, however, have taken the next step of grounding their research into a particular theoretical framework.

Many theories focus on the problems experienced by culturally diverse aging families. Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000), for example, employ stress theory to explore factors that affect levels of stress experienced by grandparents who serve as parents to their grandchildren. Not surprisingly, research conducted under such an approach can result in lists of problems to be “fixed” by programs, services, and more research.

Other studies employ broader theoretical frameworks, such as the life course perspective, where the focus is on age norms and the timing of life transitions (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985). From this perspective, family life transitions (e.g., marriage, widowhood, grandparenthood) are placed into social and historical context (e.g., as “on-time” or “off-time”). Individual life experiences and their outcomes are then interpreted with

regard to the impact of such timing. Some recent studies using this framework have expanded the perspective to include how factors such as race and ethnicity affect the timing and interpretation of such experiences (Burton, 1996).

While also considering changes over the life span, selectivity theory focuses on the evolving function of social interaction and emotional closeness within relationships. Carstensen (2001) suggests that older persons become more selective in their choice of social partners, often directing their attention to, and thus placing more importance on, relationships with available close family and friends. Such an approach may be seen as an adaptive way to deal with shrinking social networks.

Also seeking to focus on positive adaptation, some frame their research in terms of the shared strengths and challenges certain social and historical circumstances bring about. Conway-Turner (1999) uses a feminist perspective to examine the lives of older women of color. Her approach is grounded in the notion that while women of color may come from very different backgrounds, they share experiences of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Conway-Turner's approach also calls for exploring the cumulative effects of these variables as they both positively and negatively interact with the later-life and family experiences of women of color.

More recently, Pillemer and Lüscher (2004) suggest that "societies, and the individuals within them, are characteristically ambivalent about relationships between parents and children in adulthood" (p. 6). They propose an ambivalence framework "for studying dilemmas and contradictions in late-life families" in an empirical and systematic fashion, both at the sociological and psychological levels. Though it has not yet been explicitly applied to family relationships among ethnically or culturally diverse families, Boss and Kaplan (2004) assert that "the ambiguous loss of a parent with dementia provides fertile ground for increased ambivalence in intergenerational relations" (p. 207), making the model particularly relevant. So, too, ambivalence is a useful construct when considering adult children's filial role or sense of responsibility for the well-being of their aging parents (Lang, 2004).

Finally, Gibson's work (2005) is one of a handful of studies looking at aging families from an Afrocentric perspective. Such an approach "focuses on traditional African philosophical assumptions, which emphasize holistic, interdependent, and spiritual conceptions of people and their environment" and "focuses on family strengths within the culture of people of African descent" (p. 293). Thus, in contrast to a life course perspective that might view the event of grandparents parenting their grandchildren as "off-time," or stress theory, which might look at the negative impact parenting duties have on grandparents (Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000), Gibson looks at the positive aspects gained from this "grand-parenting" role and focuses, instead, on ways to strengthen the existing grandparent-as-parent relationships. Similarly, Minkler and Fuller-Thomson (2005) emphasize the value of "theories of intersectionality" or those that stress the connection of class, race, and gender (p. S82), particularly when examining later-life family topics like care provided by grandparents in African American communities.

Each of the above theoretical frameworks has a place in helping us to understand the experiences of culturally diverse older families. Certainly, aging families face many challenges as well as possess unique strengths. These theoretical approaches help to place the current research findings into context as well guide new research questions.

RESEARCH ON DIVERSITY IN LATER-LIFE FAMILIES

We have become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams.

—*Jimmy Carter*

Despite the rather large but separate bodies of research on aging families (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2000; Walker, Manoogian-O'Dell, McGraw, & White, 2001) and diversity in older populations (Capitman, 2002; Harris, 1998) there has been only limited research focusing on the intersections of race, ethnicity, and cultural background in aging families. Thus, much of the research presented here was not specifically designed to address culturally diverse aging families.

Additionally, in examining this research, it is important to recognize that culture and ethnicity do not operate in a vacuum. Time, history, immigration (Wilmoth, 2001), acculturation (Silverstein & Chen, 1999), and societal pressure continuously make and remake culture's role. For example, while Harris (1998) notes that the traditions of many groups (e.g., African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American) focus on collectivity and interdependence—placing the needs of the family above the needs of the individual—changing societal influences have altered the meaning and outcome of these traditions. Whereas elders in such families might expect to hold central roles (e.g., teacher, guide, tradition bearer), many find themselves in conflict with current societal pressure to focus on youth and individualism. Many also face the paradox of wanting their children and grandchildren to become fully assimilated into the dominant culture and to have a better life than they did, while still adhering to their cultural traditions as well (Patterson, 2003). The goal of this section, therefore, is to highlight areas where culture, ethnicity, and aging families intersect, while also considering how such influences continue to change in today's society.

PARTNERSHIPS IN LATER LIFE

Newlyweds become oldyweds, and oldyweds are the reasons that families work.

—*Author unknown*

Despite media images of lonely older adults, over half of adults age 65 and over are married. There are, however, significant discrepancies in marital status between men and women. Older women, who outnumber older men by a ratio of 141:100, are much less likely to be married than older men. In fact, in 2002, 73 percent of older men and only 41 percent of older women were currently married (Administration on Aging, 2003). These gender disparities also hold true when looking across broad racial and ethnic categories. While older White males were more likely to be married (74.3 percent) than older Hispanic males (67.5 percent) and older Black males (53.9 percent), males in general were still more likely to be married than females. As such, 42.9 percent of White

older women, 38 percent of Hispanic older women, and 25 percent of older Black women were currently married (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002).

Conversely, older women (46 percent) were over four times as likely to be widowed as older men (14 percent) (Administration on Aging, 2003). With regard to race and ethnicity, older Black women (54.6 percent) were the most likely to be widowed, followed by White older women (44.4 percent) and Hispanic older women (39.4 percent). Similarly, older Black men (21 percent) were more likely to be widowed than older Hispanic men (15 percent) and older White men (13.9 percent) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002).

Some of the gender difference in marital status has been attributed to the discrepancy in overall numbers and life expectancy between men and women, with women living an average of six years longer than men (Administration on Aging, 2003; Arias, 2004). Life expectancy differences, however, are not the only factor here. Social and cultural expectations about marriage and remarriage, which can vary among different groups, have also been cited in the higher rates of continued widowhood for women. The pool of socially acceptable potential mates for widowed women (their age and older) continues to diminish, while the pool for men (their age and younger) is potentially endless. Social norms about race and acceptable marriage partners may also contribute to this disparity (Pienta, Hayward, & Jenkins, 2000), as well as pervasive media images of older women as unattractive and men as ageless. Regardless of the cause, women of all ethnic groups are much more likely to live alone in later life than men (Administration on Aging, 2003; Himes et al., 1996). Furthermore, older women living alone, particularly older Hispanic women, have the highest rates of poverty among older adults (Administration on Aging, 2003). Factors of education and employment status, however, are also found to interact with marital status and ethnicity in regard to rates of income and poverty (Wilson & Hardy, 2002).

In addition to widowhood, divorce is another factor that places older women of all ethnic backgrounds at higher risk both of living alone and experiencing poverty. In 2002, approximately 10 percent of older persons were currently divorced, a rate that has almost doubled since 1980 (Administration on Aging, 2003). With regard to data on race and ethnicity, however, some gender differences appear, with the percentage of currently divorced older Hispanic women (11.1 percent) being somewhat higher than for older Hispanic men (8.4 percent) and older Black women (8.9 percent) and older Black men (8.4 percent). The number of currently divorced older White women (7.1 percent) was also slightly higher than for older White men (6.0 percent) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002).

Finally, an often overlooked area is the highly diverse group of older adults who have remained ever-single (Cooney & Dunne, 2001), accounting for about 4 percent of older men and 4 percent of older women (Administration on Aging, 2003). Older Black men (9.1 percent) were the most likely group not to marry, followed by older Black women (5.9 percent) and older Hispanic women (5.6 percent). An equal percentage of older White men (3.8 percent) and older Hispanic men (3.8 percent) remained ever-single, while older White women (3.5 percent) were the least likely to never marry. Currently, few studies focus on older ever-singles—and even fewer, if any, focus on culture and ethnicity in older ever-singles. The reasons why a person might remain single, however, and also in who we as a society label as single, are important factors in later-life

experiences. Careers, lack of opportunity, and relatively high percentage of Latinos who live in informal unions; these individuals may not appear in demographic studies as married. Similarly, some stay single because marriage is not a legal option, not because they are not involved in a partnership. While growing attention is being given to gay and lesbian partnerships in later life (Grossman, D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 2000; Orel, 2004), few studies focus specifically on issues of culture and ethnicity (McFarland & Sanders, 2003).

Beyond the above demographic descriptions, research directed specifically at the intersections of race, culture, ethnicity, and later-life family partnerships is limited. Pienta et al. (2000) looked at the effects of marriage on health for White, African American, and Latino adults and found that married older adults had better health than widowed and divorced persons, although these findings were less distinct for Whites than for persons of color. Kitson (2000) found similarly complex outcomes looking at how widows adjust to the death of their spouses, with age, race, and cause of death interacting. Of note is that Black widows of spouses who died of suicide expressed more distress than similar White widows, suggesting a greater stigma against suicide among Blacks.

SIBLINGS IN LATER LIFE

To the outside world we all grow old. But not to brothers and sisters. We know each other as we always were.

—Clara Ortega

The sibling relationship is typically one of the longest lasting of all family relationships, with most current older adults having at least one living sibling—something that may change as smaller families become the norm. Later-life sibling relationships tend to decrease in intensity and contact during the childbearing and rearing years, followed by increased contact in the later years (Goetting, 1986). Studies suggest gender, geographic proximity, and individual differences mediate the amount and type of contact siblings have in later life (Connidis & Campbell, 2001). Campbell, Connidis, and Davies (1999) discovered the centrality of the confidant role as well as emotional and instrumental support among siblings; companionship is a less critical function for siblings. So, too, they found that single, childless, and widowed women tend to have greater involvement with their siblings. Gold (1990) found that race also had an impact on later sibling relationships, finding that Black sibling dyads tended to be more positive than White sibling dyads. Other findings that include culture and race, however, are somewhat mixed. For example, many studies find that sister-sister ties hold the strongest bonds (Connidis & Campbell, 2001). John (1991), however, found ties between brothers to be stronger in his study of siblings in the Prairie Band Potawatomi, a Native American tribe.

While few studies focus directly on the impact of culture and ethnicity on later-life sibling relationships, several studies on the social support networks of culturally diverse older adults also find that siblings play an important role. Becker, Beyene, Newsom, and Mayen (2003) found that siblings were an important part of mutual support networks for older African Americans, Latinos, and Filipino Americans. Similarly, Johnson (1999)

found strong bonds between older Black men and their siblings. Williams (2001), on the other hand, found that the impoverished older Mexican American men in her sample had little interaction with their extended families, including their siblings.

GRANDPARENTHOOD

Grandchildren are the dots that connect the lines from generation to generation.

—Lois Wyse

While there have always been some who have lived long enough to become grandparents, the evolution of grandparenthood is fairly new. Today's ever-increasing life expectancies have created unprecedented numbers of three-, four-, and even five-generation families. Szinovacz (1998) calls grandparenthood a "near universal experience" (pp. 48–49), with most older adults having an average of five to six grandchildren. Szinovacz also notes, however, that "about 15 percent of Black and Hispanic men report that they are not grandparents" (p. 49). In suggesting that some of these men may be unaware of their grandparent status due to loss of contact with their families (via immigration, divorce, and other means), Szinovacz raises two important concerns.

First, much of the data on grandparenthood is self-reported. Even the census, which recently added questions on the number of grandparents living with grandchildren, relies on measures of self-report (Simmons & Dye, 2003). A second concern is the question of who is a grandparent. Is grandparenthood solely a biological event, or must one acknowledge the bond for it to exist? Also, is a biological bond required? In some groups, the titles "mother" and "grandmother" are used as a sign of respect for all elder women or to designate fictive kin (Gibson, 2005; Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005) and is not necessarily reserved for blood kin.

Additionally, the roles grandparents play and their impacts on families are quite varied. Several factors can influence the shape grandparent roles may take, including gender, age, culture, and ethnicity (Bengtson, 1985; Fingerman, 2004). Cherlin and Furstenberg (1992) describe three grandparenting styles—remote, companionate, and involved. Remote relationships were characterized as largely symbolic, with little if any direct contact. Often geographic distance and/or divorce were factors in limiting the amount of grandparent-grandchild contact. Companionate grand-relationships tend to focus more on leisure activities and friendship, while involved grandparents took a more active role in their grandchildren's lives, often taking on a more parental role. Weibel-Orlando (2001) found similar grandparenting styles among Native American elders, adding two additional styles—*ceremonial grandparents*, who lived distant from their grandchildren but had frequent, culturally endowed contact, and *cultural conservator grandparents*, who actively sought contact and temporary coresidence with their grandchildren "for the expressed purpose of exposing them to the American Indian way of life" (p. 143).

In another study, Silverstein and Chen (1999) examined how acculturation, defined as "the erosion of traditional cultural language, values, and practices" (p. 196) affected the quality of the grandparent-grandchild relationship in Mexican American families. Using data from the study of three-generational Mexican American families, Silverstein and Chen

found that gaps in cultural values between generations reduced the social interaction and intimacy of these Mexican American grandparents and grandchildren over time. While language barriers appeared to add to this gap, language was not the sole cause of the relationship distance. Of additional note is that while the grandchildren in this study reported a reduction in their grandparent-grandchild relationship, their grandparents did not.

Other research focuses on the small but growing trend involving coresidence among grandparents and grandchildren. The 2000 census found that 3.6 percent of adults (or 5.8 million people) were living with grandchildren under the age of 18 (Simmons & Dye, 2003). Some of these relationships may be characterized as coparenting (where the parent also lives with the grandparent and grandchild) and others (2.4 million, or 42 percent) were described as custodial grandparent caregivers. Census rates of coresidence, either as coparent or as caregiver, varied considerably by racial and ethnic category. Only 2 percent of non-Hispanic Whites reported coresiding with a grandchild, compared with 6 percent of Asian Americans, 8 percent of American Indian and Native Alaskans, 8 percent of people who are Black, 8 percent who are Hispanic, and 10 percent of Pacific Islanders (Simmons & Dye, 2003).

Several researchers have looked at the phenomenon of grandparents raising grandchildren (Erera, 2002). Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, and Driver (1997) note that while custodial grandparenting was not limited to any single group, a disproportionate number of single women, African Americans, recently bereaved parents, and persons with low income were found in this role. African American grandparent caregivers, especially grandmothers, were particularly vulnerable in that they experienced elevated rates of poverty and “were more likely than their noncaregiving peers to report functional limitations” (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005, p. S90). Examinations of the impact on grandparents providing care for grandchildren suggest that the role involves some level of stress (Musil, 1998), but that a variety of factors, including caregiving context and family support (Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000) as well as ethnicity (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002), moderate just how much stress caregiving grandparents experience.

Taking a somewhat different approach, Gibson (2005), focused on the positive impact parenting African American grandparents can have on their grandchildren and identified seven themes or potential strengths of such relationships, including maintaining effective communication, taking a strong role in their grandchildren’s education, providing socioemotional support, involving the extended family, involving grandchildren in the community, working with the vulnerabilities of the grandchildren, and acknowledging the absence of the grandchildren’s biological parent(s). Strom, Carter, and Schmidt (2004) and Strom, Heeder, and Strom (2005) similarly found that African American grandparents often take a strong role in their grandchildren’s lives, particularly with regard to being a teacher and role model. These studies suggest that teaching is a strength of Black grandmothers, and that grandparents should be encouraged to help support the education of their grandchildren.

Taken together, these findings suggest that grandparenthood is an important yet highly variable aspect of later-life families. The range of variables, including cultural and ethnic diversity, that affect grandparenthood suggest further research with broader samples from a variety of backgrounds is warranted (Fingerman, 2004; Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005).

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■ READING 35

Gay and Lesbian Families: Queer Like Us

Judith Stacey

Until recently, gay and lesbian families seemed quite a queer concept, if not oxymoronic, not only to scholars and the general public but even to most lesbians and gay men. The grass roots movement for gay liberation of the late 1960s and early 1970s struggled along with the militant feminist movement of that period to liberate gays and women *from* perceived evils and injustices represented by “the family,” rather than *for* access to its blessings and privileges. Early marches for gay pride and women’s liberation flaunted provocative, countercultural banners, like “Smash the Family” and “Smash Monogamy.” Their legacy is a lasting public association of gay liberation and feminism with family subversion. Today, however, gays and lesbians are in the thick of a vigorous profamily movement of their own.

Gay and lesbian families are indisputably here. By the late 1980s an astonishing “gay-by” boom had swelled the ranks of children living with at least one gay or lesbian parent.¹ *Family Values*, the title of a popular 1993 book by and about a lesbian’s successful struggle to become a legal second mother to the son she and his biological mother have coparented since his birth,² is also among the most popular themes of contemporary Gay Pride marches. In 1989, Denmark became the first nation in the world to legalize a form of gay marriage, termed “registered partnerships,” and its Nordic neighbors, Norway and Sweden, soon followed suit. In April 2001, the Netherlands leap-frogged ahead to become the first nation in the world to grant full legal marriage rights to same-sex couples. Meanwhile, in 1993, thousands of gay and lesbian couples participated in a mass wedding ceremony on the Washington Mall during the largest demonstration for gay rights in U.S. history. That same year, the Hawaiian state supreme court issued a ruling that raised the prospect that Hawaii would become the first state in the United States to legalize same-sex marriage. As a result, controversies over gay and lesbian families began to receive center stage billing in U.S. electoral politics.

Gay and lesbian families come in different sizes, shapes, ethnicities, races, religions, resources, creeds, and quirks, and even engage in diverse sexual practices.³ The gay and lesbian family label primarily marks the cognitive dissonance, and even emotional threat, that much of the nongay public experiences upon recognizing that gays can participate in family life at all. What unifies such families is their need to contend with the particular array of psychic, social, legal, practical, and even physical challenges to their very existence that institutionalized hostility to homosexuality produces. Paradoxically, the label “gay and lesbian family” might become irrelevant if the nongay population could only “get used to it.”

In this [reading] I hope to facilitate such a process of normalization, ironically, perhaps, to make using the marker “gay and lesbian” to depict a family category seem queer—as queer, that is, as it now seems to identify a *family*, rather than an individual or a desire, as heterosexual.⁴ I will suggest that this historically novel category of family crystallizes widespread processes of family diversification and change that characterize the postmodern family conditions.⁵ Gay and lesbian families represent such a new, embattled, visible, and, necessarily, self-conscious genre of kinship, that they help to expose the widening gap between the complex reality of contemporary family forms and the dated family ideology that still undergirds most public rhetoric, policy, and law concerning families. Nongay families, family scholars, and policymakers alike can learn a great deal from examining the experience, struggles, conflicts, needs, and achievements of contemporary gay and lesbian families.

BRAVE NEW FAMILY PLANNING

History rarely affords a social scientist an opportunity to witness during her own lifetime the origins and evolution of a dramatic and significant cultural phenomenon in her field. For a family scholar, it is particularly rare to be able to witness the birth of a historically unprecedented variety of family life. Yet the emergence of the “genus” gay and lesbian family as a distinct social category, and the rapid development and diversification of

its living species, have occurred during the past three decades, less than my lifetime. Same-sex desire and behavior, on the other hand, have appeared in most human societies, including all Western ones, as well as among most mammalian species; homosexual relationships, identities, and communities have much longer histories than most Western heterosexuals imagine; and historical evidence documents the practice of sanctioned and/or socially visible same-sex unions in the West, as well as elsewhere, since ancient times.⁶ Nonetheless, the notion of a gay or lesbian family is decidedly a late-twentieth-century development, and several particular forms of gay and lesbian families were literally “inconceivable” prior to recent developments in reproductive technology.

Indeed, before the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, the family lives of gays and lesbians were so invisible, both legally and socially, that one can actually date the appearance of the first identifiable species of gay family life—a unit that includes at least one self-identified gay or lesbian parent and children from a former heterosexual marriage. Only one U.S. child custody case reported before 1950 involved a gay or lesbian parent, and only five more gays or lesbians dared to sue for custody of their children between 1950 and 1969. Then, immediately after Stonewall, despite the predominantly antifamily ethos of the early gay liberation period, gay custody conflicts jumped dramatically, with fifty occurring during the 1970s and many more since then.⁷ Courts consistently denied parental rights to these early pioneers, rendering them martyrs to a cause made visible by their losses. Both historically and numerically, formerly married lesbian and gay parents who “came out” after marriage and secured at least shared custody of their children represent the most significant genre of gay families. Such gay parents were the first to level a public challenge against the reigning cultural presumption that the two terms, “gay” and “parent” are antithetical. Their family units continue to comprise the vast majority of contemporary gay families and to manifest greater income and ethnic diversity than newer categories of lesbian and gay parents. Moreover, studies of these families provide the primary data base of the extant research on the effects of gay parenting on child development.

It was novel, incongruous, and plain brave for lesbian and gay parents to struggle for legitimate family status during the height of the antinatalist, antimaternalist, anti-family fervor of grass roots feminism and gay liberation in the early 1970s. Fortunately for their successors, such fervor proved to be quite short-lived. Within very few years many feminist theorists began to celebrate women’s historically developed nurturing capacities, not coincidentally at a time when aging, feminist baby-boomers had begun producing a late-life boomlet of their own.⁸ During the middle to late seventies, the legacy of sexual revolution and feminist assertions of female autonomy combined with the popularization of alternative reproductive technologies and strategies to embolden a first wave of “out” lesbians to join the burgeoning ranks of women actively choosing to have children outside of marriage.

Fully intentional childbearing outside of heterosexual unions represents one of the only new, truly original, and decidedly controversial genres of family formation and structure to have emerged in the West during many centuries. While lesbian variations on this cultural theme include some particularly creative reproductive strategies, they nonetheless represent not deviant, but vanguard manifestations of much broader late-twentieth-century trends in Western family life. Under postmodern conditions, processes

of sexuality, conception, gestation, marriage, and parenthood, which once appeared to follow a natural, inevitable progression of gendered behaviors and relationships, have come unhinged, hurtling the basic definitions of our most taken-for-granted familial categories—like mother, father, parent, offspring, sibling, and, of course, “family” itself—into cultural confusion and contention.

The conservative turn toward profamily and postfeminist sensibilities of the Reagan-Bush era, combined with the increased visibility and confidence of gay and lesbian communities, helped to fuel the “gay-by” boom that escalated rapidly during the 1980s. It seems more accurate to call this a “lesbaby” boom, because lesbians vastly outnumber the gay men who can, or have chosen to, become parents out of the closet. Lesbian “planned parenthood” strategies have spread and diversified rapidly during the past two decades. With access to customary means to parenthood denied or severely limited, lesbians necessarily construct their chosen family forms with an exceptional degree of reflection and intentionality. They have been choosing motherhood within a broad array of kinship structures. Some become single mothers, but many lesbians choose to share responsibility for rearing children with a lover and/or with other coparents, such as sperm donors, gay men, and other friends and relatives. Several states expressly prohibit adoptions and/or foster care by lesbians and gay men, and many states and adoption agencies actively discriminate against them. Consequently, independent adoption provided the first, and still traveled, route to planned lesbian maternity, but increasing numbers of lesbians have been choosing to bear children of their own. In pursuit of sperm, some lesbians resort quite instrumentally to heterosexual intercourse—with or without the knowledge of the man involved—but most prefer alternative insemination strategies, locating known or anonymous donors through personal networks or through private physicians or sperm banks.

Institutionalized heterosexism and married-couple biases pervade the medically controlled fertility market. Many private physicians and many sperm banks in the United States, as well as the Canadian and most European health services, refuse to inseminate unmarried women in general, and lesbians particularly. More than 90 percent of U.S. physicians surveyed in 1979 denied insemination to unmarried women, and a 1988 federal government survey of doctors and clinics reported that homosexuality was one of their top four reasons for refusing to provide this service.⁹ Thus, initially, planned lesbian pregnancies depended primarily upon donors located through personal networks, very frequently involving gay men or male relatives who might also agree to participate in child rearing, in varying degrees. Numerous lesbian couples solicit sperm from a brother or male relative of one woman to impregnate her partner, hoping to buttress their tenuous legal, symbolic, and social claims for shared parental status over their “turkey-baster babies.”

Despite its apparent novelty, “turkey-baster” insemination for infertility dates back to the late eighteenth century, and, as the nickname implies, is far from a high-tech procedure requiring medical expertise.¹⁰ Nonetheless, because the AIDS epidemic and the emergence of child custody conflicts between lesbians and known sperm donors led many lesbians to prefer the legally sanitized, medical route to anonymous donors, feminist health care activists mobilized to meet this need. In 1975 the Vermont Women’s Health Center added donor insemination to its services, and in 1980 the Northern

California Sperm Bank opened in Oakland expressly to serve the needs of unmarried, disabled, or nonheterosexual women who want to become pregnant. The clinic ships frozen semen throughout North America, and more than two-thirds of the clinic's clients are not married.¹¹

The absence of a national health system in the United States commercializes access to sperm and fertility services. This introduces an obvious class bias into the practice of alternative insemination. Far more high-tech, innovative, expensive, and, therefore, uncommon is a procreative strategy some lesbian couples now are adopting in which an ovum from one woman is fertilized with donor sperm and then extracted and implanted in her lover's uterus. In June 2000, one such couple in San Francisco became the first to receive joint recognition as the biological and legal co-mothers of their infant. The irony of deploying technology to assert a biological, and thereby a legal, social, and emotional claim to maternal and family status throws the contemporary instability of all the relevant categories—biology, technology, nature, culture, maternity, family—into bold relief.

While the advent of AIDS inhibited joint procreative ventures between lesbians and gay men, the epidemic also fostered stronger social and political solidarity between the two populations and stimulated gay men to keener interest in forming families. Their ranks are smaller and newer than those of lesbian mothers, but by the late eighties gay men were also visibly engaged in efforts to become parents, despite far more limited opportunities to do so. Not only do men still lack the biological capacity to derive personal benefits from most alternative reproductive technologies, but social prejudice also severely restricts gay male access to children placed for adoption, or even into foster care. Ever since Anita Bryant's "Save the Children" campaign against gay rights in 1977, right-wing mobilizations in diverse states, including Florida, Utah, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, have successfully cast gay men, in particular, as threats to children and families and denied them the right to adopt or foster the young. In response, some wishful gay fathers have resorted to private adoption and surrogacy arrangements, accepting the most difficult-to-place adoptees and foster children, or entering into shared social parenting arrangements with lesbian couples or single women. During the 1990s, "Growing Generations," the world's first gay and lesbian-owned surrogacy agency, opened in Los Angeles to serve an international constituency of prospective gay parents.

Compelled to proceed outside conventional channels, lesbian and gay male planned parenthood has become an increasingly complex, creative, and politicized, self-help enterprise. Because gays forge kin ties without established legal protections or norms, relationships between gay parents and their children suffer heightened risks. By the mideighties many lesbians and gays found themselves battling each other, as custody conflicts between lesbian coparents or between lesbian parents and sperm donors and/or other relatives began to reach the dockets and to profoundly challenge family courts.¹² Despite a putative "best interests of the child" standard, a bias favoring the heterosexual family guided virtually all the judges who heard these early cases. Biological claims of kinship nearly always trumped those of social parenting, even in heartrending circumstances of custody challenges to bereaved lesbian "widows" who, with their deceased lovers, had jointly planned for, reared, loved, and supported children since their birth.¹³ Likewise, judges routinely honored fathers' rights arguments by favoring parental claims of donors who had contributed nothing more than sperm to their offspring over those of lesbians

who had coparented from the outset, *even when these men had expressly agreed to abdicate paternal rights or responsibilities*. The first, and still rare, exception to this rule involved a donor who did not bring his paternity suit until the child was ten years old.¹⁴ While numerous sperm donors have reneged on their prenatal custody agreements with lesbian parents, thus far no lesbian mother has sued a donor to attain parental terms different from those to which he first agreed. On the other hand, in the first case in which a lesbian biological mother sought financial support from her former lesbian partner, a New York court found the nonbiological coparent to be a parent. Here, the state's fiduciary interest rather than gay rights governed the decision.¹⁵

Perhaps the most poignant paradox in gay and lesbian family history concerns how fervently many lesbians and gay men have had to struggle for family status precisely when forces mobilized in *the name of The Family* conspire to deny this to them. The widely publicized saga of the Sharon Kowalski case, in which the natal family of a lesbian who had been severely disabled in a car crash successfully opposed her guardianship by her chosen life-companion, proved particularly galvanizing in this cause, perhaps because all of the contestants were adults. After eight years of legal and political struggle, Sharon's lover, Karen Thompson, finally won a reversal, in a belated, but highly visible, landmark victory for gay family rights.¹⁶

Gay family struggles rapidly achieved other significant victories, like the 1989 *Braschi* decision by New York State's top court, which granted protection against eviction to a gay man by explicitly defining family in inclusive, social terms, to rest upon

the exclusivity and longevity of the relationship, the level of emotional and financial commitment, the manner in which the parties have conducted their everyday lives and held themselves out to society, and the reliance placed upon one another for daily family services . . . it is the totality of the relationship as evidenced by the dedication, caring and self-sacrifice of the parties which should, in the final analysis, control.¹⁷

More recently, in 2000, Vermont became the first state in the United States to grant same-sex couples the right to enter a civil union, a status that confers all of the legal benefits of marriage except those denied by federal law, and numerous state legislatures will be considering similar proposals. The struggle for second-parent adoption rights, which enable a lesbian or gay man to adopt a lover's children without removing the lover's custody rights, represents one of the most active, turbulent fronts in the struggle for gay family rights. In more than half of the 50 states, individual lesbian and gay male couples have won petitions for second-parent adoptions at the trial court level. However, many trial judges deny such petitions, and only a handful of states have granted this right at the appeals court level. In 2000, a Pennsylvania appeals court decision denied such an appeal, thereby setting back the drive for gay parental rights in that state. Even the Nordic countries explicitly excluded adoption rights when they first legalized gay registered partnerships, but since then the Netherlands, Denmark, and Iceland have granted these rights, and other European and Commonwealth countries are beginning to follow suit.

The highly politicized character of family change in the United States renders struggles for gay parenting rights painfully vulnerable to unfavorable political winds.

For example, state barriers to lesbian and gay second-parent adoptions in California rise and fall with the fortunes of Republican and Democratic gubernatorial campaigns. The National Center for Lesbian Rights considers second-parent adoptions right to be so crucial to the lesbian “profamily” cause that it revoked its former policy of abstaining from legal conflicts between lesbians over this issue. Convinced that the long-term, best interests of lesbian parents and their children depend upon defining parenthood in social rather than biological terms, the center decided to represent lesbian parents who are denied custody of their jointly reared children when their former lovers exploit the biological and homophobic prejudices of the judiciary.¹⁸

Here again, gay family politics crystallize, rather than diverge from, pervasive cultural trends. Gay second-parent adoptions, for example, trek a kin trail blazed by court responses to families reconstituted after divorce and remarriage. Courts first allowed some stepparents to adopt their new spouses’ children without terminating the custody rights of the children’s former parents. Gay family rights law also bears a kind of second cousin tie to racial kin case law. Gay and lesbian custody victories rely heavily on a milestone race custody case, *Palmore v. Sidoti* (1984), which restored the custody rights of a divorced, white mother who lost her children after she married a black man. Even though *Palmore* was decided on legal principles governing race discrimination, which do not yet apply to gender or sexual discrimination, several successful gay and lesbian custody decisions rely on its logic. The first successful second-parent adoption award to a lesbian couple actually was a “third-parent” adoption on the new model of stepparent adoption after divorce, which Mary Ann Mason discusses in [Reading 18]. The court granted coparent status to the nonbiological mother without withdrawing it from the sperm donor father, a Native American, in order to honor the shared desires of all three parents to preserve the child’s bicultural inheritance.¹⁹

As U.S. tabloid and talk show fare testify daily, culturally divisive struggles over babies secured or lost through alternative insemination, in vitro fertilization, ovum extraction, frozen embryos, surrogacy, transracial adoption, not to mention mundane processes of divorce and remarriage are not the special province of a fringe gay and lesbian minority. We now inhabit a world in which technology has upended the basic premises of the old nature-nurture debate by rendering human biology more amenable to intervention than human society. Inevitably, therefore, contests between biological and social definitions of kinship, such as depicted in the chapters on adoption and stepfamilies, will continue to proliferate and to rub social nerves raw.

Thus while one can discern a gradual political and judicial trend toward granting parental and family rights to gays, the legal situation in the fifty states remains uneven, volatile, and replete with major setbacks for gay and lesbian parents.²⁰ Forces opposed to gay parenting continue to introduce statewide initiatives and regulations to rescind such rights. The crucial fact remains that numerous states still criminalize sodomy, supported by the 1986 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which upheld the constitutionality of this most basic impediment to civil rights for gay relationships. One decade later, however, in May 1996, the court struck down a Colorado antigay rights initiative in *Romer v. Evans*, raising the hopes of gays and lesbians that it might soon reconsider the detested *Bowers* ruling. As of 2002, however, such wishes remain unfulfilled.

A MORE, OR LESS, PERFECT UNION?

Much nearer at hand, however, than most ever dared to imagine is the momentous prospect of legal gay marriage. The idea of same-sex marriage used to draw nearly as many jeers from gays and lesbians as from nongays. As one lesbian couple recalls,

In 1981, we were a very, very small handful of lesbians who got married. We took a lot of flak from other lesbians, as well as heterosexuals. In 1981, we didn't know any other lesbians, not a single one, who had had a ceremony in Santa Cruz, and a lot of lesbians live in that city. Everybody was on our case about it. They said, What are you doing, How heterosexual. We really had to sell it.²¹

Less than a decade later, gay and lesbian couples would proudly announce their weddings and anniversaries, not only in the gay press, which now includes specialized magazines for gay and lesbian couples and parents, like *Partners Magazine*, but even in such mainstream, midwestern newspapers as the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*.²² Jewish rabbis, Protestant ministers, Quaker meetings, and even some Catholic priests regularly perform gay and lesbian wedding or commitment ceremonies, and the phenomenon has become a fashionable pop culture motif. In December 1995, the long-running, provocative TV sitcom *Roseanne* featured a gay male wedding, and one month later, the popular sitcom *Friends* aired a lesbian wedding on primetime television. A few years later, a high profile made-for-TV HBO movie starring Vanessa Redgrave, Michelle Williams, Ellen DeGeneres, and Sharon Stone, *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, expanded on the theme by highlighting difficulties experienced by lesbian couples who cannot be legally married. Such popular culture breakthroughs have helped normalize what once seemed inconceivable to gay and straight audiences alike.

Gradually, major corporations, universities, and nonprofit organizations are providing spousal benefits to the domestic mates of their gay and lesbian employees, and a small but growing number of U.S. municipalities, states, and increasing numbers of European and Commonwealth nations have legalized domestic partnerships, which grant legal status and varying rights and responsibilities to cohabiting couples, irrespective of gender or sexual identity.

When the very first social science research collection about gay parents was published in 1987, its editor concluded that however desirable such unions might be, "it is highly unlikely that marriages between same-sex individuals will be legalized in any state in the foreseeable future."²³ Yet, almost immediately thereafter, precisely this specter began to exercise imaginations across the political spectrum. A national poll reported by the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1989 found that 86 percent of lesbians and gay men supported legalizing same-sex marriage.²⁴ A few years later, the Hawaiian supreme court issued a ruling that made such a prospect seem imminent. Amidst rampant rumors that thousands of mainland gay and lesbian couples were stocking their hope chests with Hawaiian excursion fares, posed to fly to tropical altars the instant the first gay matrimonial bans falter, right-wing Christian groups began actively to mobilize resistance. Utah became the first state to pass legislation refusing recognition to same-sex

marriages if they were performed in other states. Soon a majority of states were considering similar bills.

On May 8, 1996, gay marriage galloped onto the nation's center political stage when Republicans introduced the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) to define marriage in exclusively heterosexual terms as "a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife." Introduced primarily as a "wedge" issue in the Republican 1996 electoral strategy, DOMA passed both houses of Congress in a landslide vote, and President Clinton promptly signed it, despite his personal support for gay rights.

As with child custody, the campaign for gay marriage clings to legal footholds planted by racial justice pioneers. It is startling to recall how recent it was that the Supreme Court finally struck down antimiscegenation laws. Not until 1967, that is only two years before the Stonewall rebellion, did the high court, in *Loving v. Virginia*, find state restrictions on interracial marriages to be unconstitutional. (Twenty states still had such restrictions on the books in 1967, a greater number than currently prohibit sodomy.) A handful of gay couples quickly sought to marry in the 1970s through appeals to this precedent, but until three lesbian and gay male couples sued Hawaii in *Baehr v. Lewin* for equal rights to choose marriage partners without restrictions on gender, all U.S. courts had dismissed the analogy. In a historic ruling in 1993, the Hawaii Supreme Court remanded this suit to the trial court, requiring the state to demonstrate a "compelling interest" in prohibiting same-sex marriage, a strict scrutiny standard that the state was unable to meet when the case was retried. Significantly, the case was neither argued nor adjudicated as a gay rights issue. Rather, just as ERA opponents once had warned and advocates had denied, passage of an equal rights amendment to Hawaii's state constitution in 1972 paved the legal foundation for *Baehr*.²⁵

Although backlash forces succeeded in preventing the legalization of gay marriage in Hawaii, this global struggle keeps achieving milestone victories at a breathless pace. Marriage rights in all but name are now available throughout most of Western Europe and Canada, as well as in Vermont. In 2001, the Netherlands assumed world leadership in fully legalizing same-sex marriage at the national level, and similar developments appear imminent in the Nordic nations, Canada, and perhaps in South Africa. Clearly this issue is on the historical agenda for the twenty-first century. Not all gay activists or legal scholars embrace this prospect with enthusiasm. Although most of their constituents desire the right to marry, gay activists and theorists continue to debate vigorously the politics and effects of this campaign. An articulate, vocal minority seeks not to extend the right to marry, but to dismantle an institution they regard as inherently, and irredeemably, hierarchical, unequal, conservative, and repressive.²⁶ A second perspective supports legal marriage as one long-term goal of the gay rights movement but voices serious strategic objections to making this a priority before there is sufficient public support to sustain a favorable ruling in any state or the nation. Such critics fear that a premature victory will prove pyrrhic, because efforts to defend it against the vehement backlash it has already begun to incite are apt to fail, after sapping resources and time better devoted to other urgent struggles for gay rights. Rather than risk a major setback for the gay movement, some leaders advocate an incremental approach to establishing legal family status for gay and lesbian kin ties through a multifaceted struggle for "family diversity."²⁷

However, the largest, and most diverse, contingent of gay activist voices now supports the marriage rights campaign, perhaps because gay marriage can be perceived as harmonizing with virtually every hue on the gay ideological spectrum. Progay marriage arguments range from profoundly conservative to liberal humanist to radical and deconstructive. Conservatives, like those radicals who still oppose marriage, view it as an institution that promotes monogamy, commitment, and social stability, along with interests in private property, social conformity, and mainstream values.²⁸ Liberal gays support legal marriage, of course, not only to affirm the legitimacy of their relationships and help sustain them in a hostile world but as a straightforward matter of equal civil rights. They also recognize the social advantages of divorce law. “I used to say, ‘Why do we want to get married? It doesn’t work for straight people,’” one gay lawyer comments. “But now I say we should care: They have the privilege of divorce and we don’t. We’re left out there to twirl around in pain.”²⁹

Some feminist and other critical gay legal theorists craft more radical defenses of gay marriage. Nan Hunter, for example, rejects feminist colleague Nancy Polikoff’s belief that marriage is an unalterably sexist and heterosexist institution. Hunter argues that legalized same-sex marriage would have “enormous potential to destabilize the gendered definition of marriage for everyone.”³⁰ Likewise, Evan Wolfson, director of the Marriage Project of the gay legal rights organization Lambda Legal Defense, who served as co-counsel in *Baehr*, argues that marriage is neither inherently equal nor unequal, but depends upon an ever-changing cultural and political context.³¹ (Anyone who doubts this need only consider such examples as polygamy, arranged marriage, or the same-sex unions in early Western history documented by the late Princeton historian John Boswell.)

Support for gay marriage, not long ago anathema to radicals and conservatives, gays and nongays alike, now issues forth from ethical and political perspectives as diverse, and even incompatible, as these. The cultural and political context has changed so dramatically since Stonewall that it now seems easier to understand why marriage has come to enjoy overwhelming support in the gay community than to grasp the depth of resistance to the institution that characterized the early movement.

Gay marriage, despite its apparent compatibility with mainstream “family values” sentiment, raises far more threatening questions than does military service about gender relations, sexuality, and family life. Few contemporary politicians, irrespective of their personal convictions, display the courage to confront this contradiction, even when urged to do so by gay conservatives. Gay marriage would strengthen the ranks of those endangered two-parent, “intact,” married-couples families whose praises conservative, “profamily” enthusiasts tirelessly sing. Unsurprisingly, however, this case has won few nongay conservative converts to the cause. After all, homophobia is a matter of passion, politics, and prejudice, not logic.

Surveys suggest, however, that while a majority of citizens still oppose legalizing gay marriage, the margin of opposition is declining slowly but surely. In a 1994 *Time* magazine/CNN poll, 64 percent of respondents did not want to legalize gay marriages.³² A *Newsweek* poll conducted right after the DOMA was introduced in May 1996 reported that public opposition to gay marriage had declined to 58 percent, and a Gallup poll conducted June 2001 indicated a further drop to 52 percent.³³

Despite the paucity of mainstream political enthusiasm for legalizing gay marriage, there are good reasons to believe that gays and lesbians will eventually win this right and to support their struggle to do so. Legitimizing gay and lesbian marriages would promote a democratic, pluralist expansion of the meaning, practice, and politics of family life in the United States, helping to supplant the destructive sanctity of *The Family* with respect for diverse and vibrant *families*. To begin with, the liberal implications of legal gay marriage are far from trivial, as the rush to nullify them should confirm. For example, legal gay marriage in one state could begin to threaten antisodomy laws in all the others. Policing marital sex would be difficult to legitimate, and differential prosecution of conjugal sex among same-sex couples could violate equal protection legislation. Likewise, if gay marriage were legalized, the myriad of state barriers to child custody, adoption, fertility services, inheritance, and other family rights that lesbians and gay men currently suffer could also become subject to legal challenge. Moreover, it seems hard to overestimate the profound cultural implications for the struggle against the injurious effects of legally condoned homophobia that would ensue were lesbian and gay relationships to be admitted into the ranks of legitimate kinship. In a society that forbids most public school teachers and counselors even the merest expression of tolerance for homosexuality, while lesbian and gay youth attempt suicide at rates estimated to be at least three times greater than other youth,³⁴ granting full legal recognition to lesbian and gay relationships could have dramatic, and salutary, consequences.

Moreover, while it is unlikely that same-sex marriage can in itself dismantle the patterned gender and sexual injustices of the institution, I believe it could make a potent contribution to those projects, as the research on gay relationships I discuss later seems to indicate. Admitting gays to the wedding banquet invites gays and nongays alike to consider the kinds of place settings that could best accommodate the diverse needs of all contemporary families. Subjecting the conjugal institution to this sort of heightened democratic scrutiny could help it to assume varied, creative, and adaptive contours. If we begin to value the meaning and quality of intimate bonds over their customary forms, people might devise marriage and kinship patterns to serve diverse needs. For example, the “companionate marriage,” a much celebrated, but less often realized, ideal of modern sociological lore, could take on new life. Two friends might decide to “marry” without basing their bond on erotic or romantic attachment, as Dorthe, a prominent Danish lesbian activist who had initially opposed the campaign for gay marriage, fantasized after her nation’s parliament approved gay “registered partnerships”: If I am going to marry it will be with one of my oldest friends in order to share pensions and things like that. But I’d never marry a lover. That is the advantage of being married to a close friend. Then, you never have to marry a lover!³⁵

While conservative advocates of gay marriage scoff at such radical visions, they correctly realize that putative champions of committed relationships and children who oppose gay marriage can be charged with gross hypocrisy on this score. For access to legal marriage not only would promote long-term, committed intimacy and economic security among gay couples but also would afford invaluable protection to the children of gay parents. Public legitimacy for gay relationships would also provide indirect protection to closeted gay youth who reside with nongay parents. Clearly, only through a process of massive denial of the fact that millions of children living in gay and lesbian families are

here, and here to stay, can anyone genuinely concerned with the best interests of children deny their parents the right to marry.

IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF WHOSE CHILDREN?

The most cursory survey of the existing empirical research on gay and lesbian families reveals the depth of sanctioned discrimination they continue to suffer and the absence of evidence to justify this iniquity. To be sure, substantial limitations mar the social science research on this subject, which is barely past its infancy. Mainstream journals, even those specializing in family research, warmed to this subject startlingly late and little, relegating the domain primarily to sexologists, clinicians, and a handful of movement scholars and their sympathizers and opponents. In 1995, a survey of the three leading journals of family research in the United States found only 12 of the 2598 articles published between 1980 and 1993, that is less than .05 percent, focused on the families of lesbians and gay men, which, even by conservative estimates make up at least 3 percent of U.S. families.³⁶ The research that does exist, moreover, has deficiencies that skew results so as to exaggerate rather than understate any defects of gay and lesbian families. Until very recently, most investigators began with a deviance perspective, seeking, whether homophobically or defensively, to “test” the validity of the popular prejudice that gay parenting is harmful to children. In other words, the reigning premise has been that gay and lesbian families are dangerously, and *prima facie*, “queer” in the pejorative sense, unless proven otherwise. Taking children reared by nongay parents as the unquestioned norm, most studies asymmetrically ask whether lesbian and gay parents hinder their children’s emotional, cognitive, gender, or sexual development. Because lesbian and gay “planned parenthood” is so new, and its progeny so young, nearly all of the studies to date sample the ranks of formerly married parents who had children before they divorced and came out of the closet. The studies are generally small-scale and draw disproportionately from urban, white, middle-class populations. Frequently they make misleading comparisons between divorced lesbian and nongay, single-mother households by ignoring the presence or absence of lesbian life partners or other caretakers in the former.³⁷

Despite such limitations, psychologists, social psychologists, and sociologists have by now conducted dozens of studies which provide overwhelming support for the “proven otherwise” thesis. Almost without exception they conclude, albeit in defensive tones, that lesbian and gay parents do not produce inferior, nor even particularly different kinds of children than do other parents. Generally they find no significant differences in school achievement, social adjustment, mental health, gender identity, or sexual orientation between the two groups of children. As Joan Laird’s overview of research on lesbian and gay parents summarizes:

a generation of research has failed to demonstrate that gays or lesbians are any less fit to parent than their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, a substantial number of studies on the psychological and social development of children of lesbian and gay parents have failed to produce any evidence that children of lesbian or gay parents are harmed

or compromised or even differ from, in any significant ways along a host of psychosocial developmental measures, children raised in heterosexual families.³⁸

The rare small differences between gay and nongay parents reported tend to favor gay parents, portraying them as somewhat more nurturant and tolerant, and their children, in turn, more tolerant and empathic, and less aggressive than those reared by nongay parents.³⁹ In April 1995, British researchers published the results of their unusual sixteen-year-long study which followed twenty-five children brought up by lesbian mothers and twenty-one brought up by heterosexual mothers from youth to adulthood. They found that the young adults raised in lesbian households had better relationships with their mothers' lesbian partners than the young adults brought up by heterosexual single mothers had with their mothers' male partners.⁴⁰ Published research to date seems to vindicate one ten-year-old girl who, rather apologetically, deems herself privileged to be the daughter of two lesbian parents: "But I think you get more love with two moms. I know other kids have a mom and a dad, but I think that moms give more love than dads. This may not be true, but it's what I think." Her opinion is shared by a six-year-old girl from another lesbian family: "I don't tell other kids at school about my mothers because I think they would be jealous of me. Two mothers is better than one."⁴¹

In light of the inhospitable, often outrightly hostile climate which gay families typically encounter, this seems a remarkable achievement. One sign that mainstream social scientists have begun to recognize the achievement is the inclusion of Laird's chapter, "Lesbian and Gay Families," in the 1993 edition of a compendium of research, *Normal Family Processes*, whose first edition, in 1982, ignored the subject.⁴² Researchers have begun to call for, and to initiate, a mature, creative, undefensive approach to studying the full range of gay and lesbian families. Coming to terms with the realities of the postmodern family condition, such studies begin with a pluralist premise concerning the legitimacy and dignity of diverse family structures. They ask whether and how gay and lesbian families differ, rather than deviate, from nongay families; they attend as much to the differences among such families as to those dividing them from nongays; and they explore the particular benefits as well as the burdens such families bestow on their members.⁴³

This kind of research has begun to discover more advantages of gay and lesbian family life for participants and our society than have yet been explored. Most obvious, certainly, are mental health rewards for gay and lesbian youth fortunate enough to come of age in such families. Currently most youth who experience homosexual inclinations either conceal their desires from their immediate kin or risk serious forms of rejection. State hostility to gay parents can have tragic results. In 1994, for example, the Nebraska Department of Social Services adopted a policy forbidding lesbian or gay foster homes, and the next day a seventeen-year-old openly gay foster child committed suicide, because he feared he would be removed from the supportive home of his gay foster parents.⁴⁴

Of course, this speaks precisely to the heart of what homophobes most fear, that public acceptance of lesbian and gay families will spawn an "epidemic" of gay youth. As Pat Robertson so crudely explained to a Florida audience: "That gang of idiots running the ACLU, the National Education Association, the National Organization of Women, they don't want religious principles in our schools. Instead of teaching the

Ten Commandments, they want to teach kids how to be homosexuals.”⁴⁵ Attempting to respond to such anxieties, most defenders of gay families have stressed the irrelevance of parental sexual identity to that of their children. Sympathetic researchers repeatedly, and in my view misguidedly, maintain that lesbian and gay parents are no more likely than nongay parents to rear lesbian and gay children. Laird, for example, laments:

One of the most prevalent myths is that children of gay parents will themselves grow up gay; another that daughters will be more masculine and sons more feminine than “normal” children. A number of researchers have concluded that the sexual orientations/preferences of children of gay or lesbian parents do not differ from those whose parents are heterosexual.⁴⁶

Increasingly this claim appears illogical, unlikely, and unwittingly anti-gay. Ironically, it presumes the very sort of fixed definition of sexuality that the best contemporary gay and lesbian scholarship has challenged. Although it is clearly true that, until now, nearly all “homosexuals,” like almost everyone else, have been reared by nongays, it is equally clear that sexual desire and identity do not represent a singular fixed “trait” that expresses itself free of cultural context. However irresolvable eternal feuds over the relative weight of nature and nurture may forever prove to be, historical and anthropological data leave no doubt that culture profoundly influences sexual meanings and practices. Homophobes are quite correct to believe that environmental conditions incite or inhibit expressions of homosexual desire, no matter its primary source. If culture had no influence on sexual identity, there would not have emerged the movement for gay and lesbian family rights that inspired me to write this [reading].

Contrary to what most current researchers claim, public acceptance of gay and lesbian families should, in fact, slightly expand the percentage of youth who would dare to explore their same-sex desires. In fact, a careful reading of the studies does suggest just this.⁴⁷ Children reared by lesbian or gay parents feel greater openness to homosexuality or bisexuality. In January 1996, the researchers who conducted the long-term British study conceded this point, after issuing the obligatory reassurance that, “the commonly held assumption that children brought up by lesbian mothers will themselves grow up to be lesbian or gay is not supported by the findings.” Two of the twenty-five young adults in the study who were reared by lesbians grew up to identify as lesbians, but none of the twenty-one who were reared in the comparison group of heterosexual mothers identify as lesbian or gay. More pertinent, in my view, five daughters and one son of lesbian mothers, but none of the children of heterosexual mothers, reported having had a same-sex erotic experience of some sort, prompting the researchers to acknowledge that, “It seems that growing up in an accepting atmosphere enables individuals who are attracted to same-sex partners to pursue these relationships.”⁴⁸ This prospect should disturb only those whose antipathy to homosexuality derives from deeply held religious convictions or irrational prejudice.

The rest of us could benefit from permission to explore and develop sexually free from the rigid prescriptions of what Adrienne Rich memorably termed “compulsory heterosexuality.”⁴⁹ Currently, lesbian and gay parents grant their children such permission much more generously than do other parents. Not only do they tend to be less

doctrinaire or phobic about sexual diversity than heterosexual parents, but, wishing to spare their children the burdens of stigma, some gay parents actually prefer that their youngsters do not become gay. Indeed, despite the ubiquity of Pat Robertson's sort of alarmist, propagandistic warnings, "advice on how to help your kids turn out gay," as cultural critic Eve Sedgwick sardonically puts it, "not to mention your students, your parishioners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous than you might think."⁵⁰

Heterosexual indoctrination is far more pervasive and far the greater danger. Contemporary adolescent culture is even more mercilessly homophobic, or perhaps less hypocritically so, than most mainstream adult prejudices countenance. Verbal harassment, ridicule, hazing, and ostracism of "faggots," "bull-dykes," and "queers"—quotidian features of our popular culture—are particularly blatant among teens. "Sometimes I feel like no one really knows what I'm going through," one fifteen-year-old daughter of a lesbian laments: "Don't get me wrong. I really do love my mom and all her friends, but being gay is just not acceptable to other people. Like at school, people make jokes about dykes and fags, and it really bothers me. I mean I bite my tongue, because if I say anything, they wonder, Why is she sticking up for them?"⁵¹ In a 1995 survey, nearly half the teen victims of reported violent physical assaults identified their sexual orientation as a precipitating factor. Tragically, family members inflicted 61 percent of these assaults on gay youth.⁵²

Little wonder such disproportionate numbers of gay youth commit suicide. Studies claim that gay youth commit one-third of all teenage suicide attempts.⁵³ To evade harassment, most of the survivors suffer their clandestine difference in silent isolation, often at great cost to their self-esteem, social relationships, and to their very experience of adolescence itself. One gay man bought his life partner a Father's Day card, because he "realized that in a lot of ways we've been brother and father to each other since we've had to grow up as adults. Because of homophobia, gay people don't have the same opportunity as heterosexuals to be ourselves when we are teenagers. A lot of times you have to postpone the experiences until you're older, until you come out."⁵⁴

The increased social visibility and community-building of gays and lesbians have vastly improved the quality of life for gay adults. Ironically, however, Linnea Due, author of a book about growing up gay in the nineties, was disappointed to find that this improvement has had contradictory consequences for gay teens. Due expected to find conditions much better for gay youth than when she grew up in the silent sixties. Instead, many teens thought their circumstances had become more difficult, because, as one young man put it, "now they know we're here."⁵⁵

While most youth with homosexual desires will continue to come of age closeted in nongay families into the foreseeable future, they would surely gain some comfort from greater public acceptance of gay and lesbian families. Yet in 1992, when the New York City Board of Education tried to introduce the Rainbow multicultural curriculum guide which advocated respect for lesbian and gay families in an effort "to help increase the tolerance and acceptance of the lesbian/gay community and to decrease the staggering number of hate crimes perpetrated against them," public opposition became so vehement that it contributed to the dismissal of Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez.⁵⁶

Indeed, the major documented special difficulties that children in gay families experience derive directly from legal discrimination and social prejudice. As one, otherwise

well-adjusted, sixteen-year-old son of a lesbian puts it: “If I came out and said my mom was gay, I’d be treated like an alien.”⁵⁷ Children of gay parents are vicarious victims of homophobia and institutionalized heterosexism. They suffer all of the considerable economic, legal, and social disadvantages imposed on their parents, sometimes even more harshly. They risk losing a beloved parent or coparent at the whim of a judge. They can be denied access to friends by the parents of playmates. Living in families that are culturally invisible or despised, the children suffer ostracism by proxy, forced continually to negotiate conflicts between loyalty to home, mainstream authorities, and peers.

However, as the Supreme Court belatedly concluded in 1984, when it repudiated discrimination against interracial families in *Palmore v. Sidoti*, and as should be plain good sense, the fact that children of stigmatized parents bear an unfair burden provides no critique of their families. The sad *social* fact of prejudice and discrimination indicts the “family values” of the bigoted society, not the stigmatized family. In the words of the Court: “private biases may be outside the reach of the law, but the law cannot, directly or indirectly, give them effect.”⁵⁸ Although the strict scrutiny standards that now govern race discrimination do not apply to sexual discrimination, several courts in recent years have relied on the logic of *Palmore* in gay custody cases. These decisions have approved lesbian and gay custody awards while explicitly acknowledging that community disapproval of their parents’ sexual identity would require “greater than ordinary fortitude” from the children, but that in return they might more readily learn that, “people of integrity do not shrink from bigots.” The potential benefits that children might derive from being raised by lesbian or gay parents which a New Jersey court enumerated could serve as child-rearing ideals for a democracy:

emerge better equipped to search out their own standards of right and wrong, better able to perceive that the majority is not always correct in its moral judgments, and better able to understand the importance of conforming their beliefs to the requirements of reason and tested knowledge, not the constraints of currently popular sentiment or prejudice.⁵⁹

The testimony of one fifteen-year-old daughter of a lesbian mother and gay father indicates just this sort of outcome:

I think I am more open-minded than if I had straight parents. Sometimes kids at school make a big deal out of being gay. They say it’s stupid and stuff like that. But they don’t really know, because they are not around it. I don’t say anything to them, but I know they are wrong. I get kind of mad, because they don’t know what they are talking about.⁶⁰

However, literature suggests that parents and children alike who live in fully closeted lesbian and gay families tend to suffer more than members of “out” gay families who contend with stigma directly.⁶¹ Of course, gay parents who shroud their families in closets do so for compelling cause. Some judges still make the closet an explicit condition for awarding custody or visitation rights to gay or lesbian parents, at times imposing direct restrictions on their participation in gay social or political activity.⁶² Or, fearing judicial homophobia, some parents live in mortal terror of losing their children, like one

divorced lesbian in Kansas City whose former, violent husband has threatened an ugly custody battle if anyone finds out about her lesbianism.⁶³

Heroically, more and more brave new “queer” families are refusing the clandestine life. If the survey article, “The Families of Lesbians and Gay Men: A New Frontier in Family Research,”⁶⁴ is correctly titled, then research on fully planned lesbian and gay families is its vanguard outpost. Researchers estimate that by 1990, between five thousand and ten thousand lesbians in the United States had given birth to chosen children, and the trend has been increasing ever since.⁶⁵ Although this represents a small fraction of the biological and adopted children who live with lesbian parents, planned lesbian births, as Kath Weston suggests, soon, “began to overshadow these other kinds of dependents, assuming a symbolic significance for lesbians and gay men disproportionate to their numbers.”⁶⁶ Lesbian “turkey-baster” babies are equally symbolic to those who abhor the practice. “National Fatherhood Initiative” organizer David Blankenhorn, for example, calls for restricting sperm bank services to infertile married couples in order to inhibit the production of such “radically fatherless children,” and similar concerns have been expressed in such popular publications as *U.S. News and World Report* and *Atlantic Monthly*.⁶⁷ (Interestingly, restrictions that limit access to donor sperm exclusively to married women remain widespread in Europe, even in most of the liberal Nordic nations.) Because discrimination against prospective gay and lesbian adoptive parents leads most to conceal their sexual identity, it is impossible to estimate how many have succeeded in adopting or fostering children, but this, too, has become a visible form of gay planned parenthood.⁶⁸

Research on planned gay parenting is too young to be more than suggestive, but initial findings give more cause for gay pride than alarm. Parental relationships tend to be more cooperative and egalitarian than among heterosexual parents, child rearing more nurturant, children more affectionate.⁶⁹ On the other hand, lesbian mothers do encounter some particular burdens. Like straight women who bear children through insemination, they confront the vexing question of how to negotiate their children’s knowledge of and relationship to sperm donors. Some progeny of unknown donors, like many adopted children, quest for contact with their genetic fathers. One ten-year-old girl, conceived by private donor insemination, explains why she was relieved to find her biological father: “I wanted to find my dad because it was hard knowing I had a dad but not knowing who he was. It was like there was a missing piece.”⁷⁰

Lesbian couples planning a pregnancy contend with some unique decisions and challenges concerning the relationship between biological and social maternity. They must decide which woman will try to become pregnant and how to negotiate feelings of jealousy, invisibility, and displacement that may be more likely to arise between the two than between a biological mother and father. Struggling to equalize maternal emotional stakes and claims, some couples decide to alternate the childbearing role, others attempt simultaneous pregnancies, and some, as we have seen, employ reproductive technology to divide the genetic and gestational components of procreation. Some nongestational lesbian mothers stimulate lactation, so that they can jointly breastfeed the babies their partners bear, some assume disproportionate responsibility for child care to compensate for their biological “disadvantage,” and others give their surnames to their partners’ offspring.

Planned lesbian and gay families, however, most fully realize the early planned Parenthood goal, “every child a wanted child,” as one twelve-year-old son of a lesbian recognized: “I think that if you are a child of a gay or lesbian, you have a better chance of having a great parent. If you are a lesbian, you have to go through a lot of trouble to get a child, so that child is really wanted.”⁷¹ Disproportionately “queer” families choose to reside in and construct communities that support family and social diversity. Partly because fertility and adoption services are expensive and often difficult to attain, intentional gay parents are disproportionately white, better educated, and more mature than other parents. Preliminary research indicates that these advantages more than offset whatever problems their special burdens cause their children.⁷² Clearly, it is in the interest of all our children to afford their families social dignity and respect.

If we exploit the research with this aim in mind, deducing a rational wish list for public policy is quite a simple matter. A straightforward, liberal, equal rights agenda for lesbians and gays would seem the obvious and humane course. In the best interests of all children, we would provide lesbian and gay parents equal access to marriage, child custody, adoption, foster placements, fertility services, inheritance, employment, and all social benefits. We would adopt “rainbow” curricula within our schools and our public media that promote the kind of tolerance and respect for family and sexual diversity that Laura Sebastian, an eighteen-year-old reared by her divorced mother and her mother’s lesbian lover, advocates:

A happy child has happy parents, and gay people can be as happy as straight ones. It doesn’t matter what kids have—fathers, mothers, or both—they just need love and support. It doesn’t matter if you are raised by a pack of dogs, just as long as they love you! It’s about time lesbians and gays can have children. It’s everybody’s right as a human being.⁷³

OUR QUEER POSTMODERN FAMILIES

Far from esoteric, the experiences of diverse genres of gay and lesbian “families we choose” bear on many of the most feverishly contested issues in contemporary family politics. They can speak to our mounting cultural paranoia over whether fathers are expendable, to nature-nurture controversies over sexual and gender identities and the gender division of labor, to the meaning and purpose of voluntary marriage, and, most broadly, to those ubiquitous “family values” contests over the relative importance for children of family structure or process, of biological or “psychological” parents.

From the African-American “Million Man March” in October 1995, the stadium rallies of Christian male “Promise Keepers” that popularized the subject of responsible fatherhood in evangelical churches across the nation, and the National Fatherhood Initiative, to congressional hearings on the Father’s Responsibility Act in 2001, the nation seems to be gripped by cultural obsession over the decline of dependable dads. Here research on lesbian families, particularly on planned lesbian couple families, could prove of no small import. Thus far, as we have seen, such research offers no brief for Blankenhorn’s angst over “radically fatherless children.” Also challenging to those who claim that the mere presence of a father in a family confers significant benefits on his children are

surprising data reported in a study of youth and violence commissioned by Kaiser Permanente and Children Now. The study of 1000 eleven to seventeen-year-olds and of 150 seven to ten-year-olds found that, contrary to popular belief, 68 percent of the “young people exposed to higher levels of health and safety threats” were from conventional two-parent families. Moreover, poignantly, fathers were among the last people these troubled teens would turn to for help, even when they lived in such families. Only 10 percent of the young people in these two-parent families said they would seek their fathers’ advice first, compared with 44 percent who claimed they would turn first to their mothers, and 26 percent who would first seek help from friends. Many more youth were willing to discuss concerns over their health, safety, and sexuality with nurses or doctors.⁷⁴ Thus, empirical social science to date, like the historical record, gives us impeccable cause to regard fathers and mothers alike as “expendable.” The quality, not the gender, of parenting is what truly matters.

Similarly, research on the relationships of gay male and lesbian couples depicts diverse models for intimacy from which others could profit. “Freed” from normative conventions and institutions that govern heterosexual gender and family relationships, self-consciously “queer” couples and families, by necessity, have had to reflect much more seriously on the meaning and purpose of their intimate commitments. Studies that compare lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples find intriguing contrasts in their characteristic patterns of intimacy. Gender seems to shape domestic values and practices more powerfully than sexual identity, so that same-sex couples tend to be more compatible than heterosexual couples. For example, both lesbian and straight women are more likely than either gay or straight men to value their relationships over their work. Yet both lesbian and gay male couples agree that both parties should be employed, while married men are less likely to agree with wives who wish to work. Predictably, same-sex couples share more interests and time together than married couples. Also unsurprising, lesbian couples have the most egalitarian relationships, and married heterosexual couples the least. Lesbian and gay male couples both share household chores more equally and with less conflict than married couples, but they share them differently. Lesbian couples tend to share most tasks equally, while gay males more frequently assign tasks “to each according to his abilities,” schedules, and preferences.⁷⁵ Each of these modal patterns for intimacy has its particular strengths and vulnerabilities. Gender conventions and gender fluidity alike have advantages and limitations, as Blumstein and Schwartz and other researchers have discussed. Accepting queer families does not mean converting to any characteristic patterns of intimacy, but coming to terms with the collapse of a monolithic cultural regime governing our intimate bonds. It would mean embracing a genuinely pluralist understanding that there are diverse, valid ways to form and sustain these.

Perhaps what is truly distinctive about lesbian and gay families is how unambiguously the substance of their relationships takes precedence over their form, emotional and social commitments over genetic claims. Compelled to exercise “good, old-fashioned American” ingenuity to fulfill familial desires, gays and lesbians improvisationally assemble a patchwork of “blood” and intentional relations—gay, straight, and other—into creative, extended kin bonds.⁷⁶ Gay communities more adeptly integrate singles into their social worlds than does mainstream heterosexual society, a social “skill” quite valuable in a world in which divorce, widowhood, and singlehood are increasingly normative.

Because “queer” families must continually, self-consciously migrate in and out of the closet, they hone bicultural skills particularly suitable for life in a multicultural society.⁷⁷ Self-identified queer families serve on the front lines of the postmodern family condition, commanded directly by its regime of improvisation, ambiguity, diversity, contradiction, self-reflection, and flux.

Even the distinctive, indeed the definitional, burden that pervasive homophobia imposes on lesbian and gay families does not fully distinguish them from other contemporary families. Unfortunately, prejudice, intolerance, and disrespect for “different” or “other” families is all too commonplace in the contemporary world. Ethnocentric familism afflicts the families of many immigrants, interracial couples, single mothers (be they unwed or divorced, impoverished or affluent), remarried couples, childless “yuppie” couples, bachelors and “spinsters,” househusbands, working mothers, and the homeless. It even places that vanishing, once-hallowed breed of full-time homemakers on the (“I’m-just-a-housewife”) defensive.

Gay and lesbian families simply brave intensified versions of ubiquitous contemporary challenges. Both their plight and their pluck expose the dangerous disjuncture between our family rhetoric and policy, on the one hand, and our family and social realities, on the other. In stubborn denial of the complex, pluralist array of contemporary families and kinship, most of our legal and social policies atavistically presume to serve a singular, “normal” family structure—the conventional, heterosexual, married-couple, nuclear family. In the name of children, politicians justify decisions that endanger children, and in the name of *The Family*, they cause grave harm to our families. It is time to get used to the queer, post-modern family condition we all now inhabit.

Notes

1. An estimate that at least six million children would have a gay parent by 1985 appeared in J. Schulenberg, *Gay Parenting* (New York: Doubleday, 1985) and has been accepted or revised upwards by most scholars since then. See, for example, F. W. Bozett (ed.), *Gay and Lesbian Parents* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 39; C. Patterson, “Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents,” *Child Development* 63:1025–1042; K. R. Allen and D. H. Demo, “The Families of Lesbians and Gay Men: A New Frontier in Family Research,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57 (February 1995):111–127. Nevertheless, these estimates are based upon problematic assumptions and calculations, so the actual number could be considerably lower—especially if we exclude children whose parents have not acknowledged to anyone else in the family that they are gay or lesbian. Still, even a conservative estimate would exceed one million.
2. P. Burke, *Family Values: A Lesbian Mother’s Fight for Her Son* (New York: Random House, 1993).
3. For a sensitive discussion of the definitional difficulties involved in research on gay and lesbian families, see Allen and Demo, “Families of Lesbians and Gay Men,” 112–113.
4. Many gay activist groups and scholars, however, have begun to reclaim the term “queer” as a badge of pride, in much the same way that the black power movement of the 1960s reclaimed the formerly derogatory term for blacks.
5. In J. Stacey, *Brave New Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), I provide a book-length, ethnographic treatment of postmodern family life in the Silicon Valley.
6. For historical and cross-cultural treatments of same-sex marriages, relationships, and practices in the West and elsewhere, see J. Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994) and W. N. Eskridge Jr., “A History of Same-Sex Marriage,” *Virginia Law Review* 79:1419–1451, 1993.

7. R. R. Rivera, "Legal Issues in Gay and Lesbian Parenting," in Bozett, ed., *Gay and Lesbian Parents*.
8. Among the influential feminist works of this genre were: N. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978); C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); and S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
9. See R. Rosenbloom (ed.), *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights* (San Francisco: International Gay and Lesbian Human Right Commission, 1995), 226 (fn22); and L. Benkov, *Reinventing the Family* (New York: Crown, 1994), 117.
10. D. Wikler and N. J. Wikler, "Turkey-baster Babies: The Demedicalization of Artificial Insemination," *Milbank Quarterly* 69(1):10, 1991.
11. *Ibid.*
12. The first known custody battle involving a lesbian couple and a sperm donor was *Loftin v. Flournoy* in California. For a superb discussion of the relevant case law, see N. Polikoff, "This Child Does Have Two Mothers," *Georgetown Law Journal* 78(1990):459–575.
13. Polikoff, "Two Mothers" provides detailed discussion of the most significant legal cases of custody contests after death of the biological lesbian comother. In both the most prominent cases, higher courts eventually reversed decisions that had denied custody to the surviving lesbian parent, but only after serious emotional harm had been inflicted on the children and parents alike. See pp. 527–532.
14. V. L. Henry, "A Tale of Three Women," *American Journal of Law & Medicine* XIX, 3:297, 1993.
15. *Ibid.*, 300; Polikoff, "This Child Does Have Two Mothers," 492.
16. J. Griscom, "The Case of Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson," in P. S. Rothenberg (ed.), *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).
17. See W. B. Rubenstein (ed.), *Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Law* (New York: New Press, 1993), 452.
18. National Center for Lesbian Rights, "Our Day in Court—Against Each Other," in Rubenstein, 561–562.
19. M. Gil de Lamadrid, "Expanding the Definition of Family: A Universal Issue," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* v. 8:178, 1993.
20. The Sharon Bottoms case in Virginia is the most prominent of current setbacks. In 1994, Sharon Bottoms lost custody of her two-year-old son because the trial court judge deemed her lesbianism to be immoral and illegal. In April 1995, the Virginia state supreme court upheld the ruling, which at this writing is being appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.
21. Quoted in S. Sherman (ed.), *Lesbian and Gay Marriage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 191.
22. *Ibid.*, 173.
23. Bozett, epilogue to *Gay and Lesbian Parents*, 232.
24. Cited in Sherman, *Lesbian and Gay Marriage*, 9 (fn. 6). A more recent poll conducted by *The Advocate* suggests that the trend of support for gay marriage is increasing. See E. Wolfson, "Crossing the Threshold," *Review of Law & Social Change* XXI, 3:583, 1994–95.
25. The decision stated that the sexual orientation of the parties was irrelevant because same-sex spouses could be of any sexual orientation. It was the gender discrimination involved in limiting one's choice of spouse that violated the state constitution. See Wolfson, "Crossing the Threshold," 573.
26. See, for example, Nancy Polikoff, "We Will Get What We Ask For: Why Legalizing Gay and Lesbian Marriage Will Not 'Dismantle the Legal Structure of Gender in Every Marriage.'" *Virginia Law Review* 79:1549–1550, 1993.
27. Law professor Thomas Coleman, executive director of the "Family Diversity Project" in California, expresses these views in Sherman, 128–129. Likewise, Bob Hattoy, a gay White House aide in the Clinton administration, believed that "to support same-sex marriage at this particular cultural moment in America is a loser." Quoted in Francis X. Clines, "In Gay-Marriage Storm, Weary Clinton Aide Is Buffeted on All Sides," *New York Times*, May 29, 1996, A16.
28. A. Sullivan, "Here Comes the Groom: A Conservative Case for Gay Marriage," *New Republic* 201(9):20–22, August 28, 1989; J. Rauch, "A Pro-Gay, Pro-Family Policy," *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 1995, A22.
29. Kirk Johnson, quoted in Wolfson, 567.

30. N. D. Hunter, "Marriage, Law and Gender: A Feminist Inquiry," *Law & Sexuality* 1(1):12, 1991.
31. Wolfson, "Crossing the Threshold."
32. "Some Progress Found in Poll on Gay Rights," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 20, 1994.
33. "Support for Clinton's Stand on Gay Marriage," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 25, 1996, A6; Available online at www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr010604.asp.
34. G. Remafedi (ed.), *Death by Denial* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1994).
35. Quoted in Miller, *Out in the World*, 350.
36. The three journals were *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Family Relations*, and *Journal of Family Issues*; Allen and Demo, "Families of Lesbians and Gay Men," 119.
37. For overviews of the research, see Patterson, "Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents"; J. Laird, "Lesbian and Gay Families," in Walsh (ed.), *Normal Family Processes* 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 282–328; Allen and Demo, "Families of Lesbians and Gay Men."
38. Laird, "Lesbian and Gay Families," 316–317.
39. Ibid., 317; D. H. Demo and K. Allen, "Diversity within Lesbian and Gay Families," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 13(3):26, 1996; F. Tasker and S. Golombok, "Adults Raised as Children in Lesbian Families," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 65:203–215, 1998.
40. Tasker and Golombok, "Adults Raised as Children in Lesbian Families."
41. Quoted in L. Rafkin, *Different Mothers* (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1990), 34.
42. Laird, "Lesbian and Gay Families."
43. See, for example, Patterson; Demo and Allen; Benkov; K. Weston, *Families We Choose* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and L. Peplau, "Research on Homosexual Couples: An Overview," in J. P. De Cecco (ed.), *Gay Relationships* (New York: Hayworth Press, 1988).
44. S. Minter, "U.S.A.," in Rosenbloom (ed.), *Unspoken Rules*, 219.
45. Quoted in Maralee Schwartz & Kenneth J. Cooper, "Equal Rights Initiative in Iowa Attacked," *Washington Post*, Aug 23, 1992, A15.
46. Laird, 315–316.
47. See, for example, Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz, "Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?" *American Sociological Review* 66(2):159–183, April 2001.
48. As Tasker and Golombok concede, "Young adults from lesbian homes tended to be more willing to have a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender if they felt physically attracted to them. They were also more likely to have considered the possibility of developing same-gender sexual attractions or relationships. Having a lesbian mother, therefore, appeared to widen the adolescent's view of what constituted acceptable sexual behavior to include same-gender sexual relationships," 212.
49. A. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum," *Signs* 5(4):Summer 1980: 631–660.
50. Eve Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay," in Warner (ed.), *Fear of a Queer Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 76.
51. Quoted in Rafkin, *Different Mothers*, 64–65.
52. Minter, "U.S.A.," 222.
53. Remafedi, *Death by Denial*.
54. Quoted in Sherman, 70.
55. L. Due, *Joining the Tribe* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).
56. See J. M. Irvine, "A Place in the Rainbow: Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Culture," *Sociological Theory* 12(2):232, July 1994.
57. Quoted in Rafkin, *Different Mothers*, 24.
58. Quoted in Polikoff, "This Child Does Have Two Mothers," 569–570.
59. Quoted in Polikoff, 570.
60. Quoted in Rafkin, 81.
61. Benkov, *Reinventing the Family*, chap. 8.
62. L. Kurdek and J. P. Schmitt, "Relationship Quality of Gay Men in Closed or Open Relationships," *Journal of Homosexuality* 12(2):85–99, 1985; and F. R. Lynch, "Nonghetto Gays: An Ethnography of Suburban Homosexuals," in Herdt (ed.), *Gay Culture in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 165–201.
63. Rafkin, 39.

64. Allen and Demo.
65. Polikoff, "This Child Does Have Two Mothers," 461 (fn.2).
66. Weston, "Parenting in the Age of AIDS," 159.
67. D. Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 233; J. Leo, "Promoting No-Dad Families," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 15, 1995:26; and S. Seligson, "Seeds of Doubt," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1995:28.
68. Bozett, p. 4 discusses gay male parenthood strategies. Also, available on-line at www.growing-generations.com.
69. Stacey and Biblarz, "Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?"; Maureen Sullivan, "Rozzie and Harriet?: Gender and Family Patterns of Lesbian Coparents," *Gender & Society* 10(6):747–767, December 1996.
70. Quoted in Rafkin, 33.
71. *Ibid.*, 53.
72. Stacey and Biblarz, "Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?" 176.
73. Rafkin, 174.
74. T. Moore, "Fear of Violence Rising among 1990s Youth," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 7, 1995, A1, A15.
75. L. Kurdek, "The Allocation of Household Labor in Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Married Couples," *Journal of Social Issues* 49(3):127–139, 1993; P. Blumstein and P. Schwartz, *American Couples* (New York: William Morrow, 1983); Peplau, 193; Stacey and Biblarz, "Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter," 173–174; Sullivan, "Rozzie and Harriet?"; Gillian Dunne, "Opting into Motherhood: Lesbians Blurring the Boundaries and Transforming the Meaning of Parenthood and Kinship," *Gender & Society* 14(1):11–35, 2000.
76. See Weston, *Families We Choose*, for an ethnographic treatment of these chosen kin ties.
77. As Allen and Demo suggest, "An aspect of biculturalism is resilience and creative adaptation in the context of minority group oppression and stigma," and this "offers a potential link to other oppressed groups in American society." "Families of Lesbians and Gay Men," 122.