

Introduction

Family in Transition

The aim of this book is to help the reader make sense of American family life in the early years of the twenty-first century. Contrary to most students' expectations, "the family" is not an easy topic to study. One reason is that we know too much about it, because virtually everyone has grown up in a family. As a result there is a great temptation to generalize from our own experiences.

Another difficulty is that the family is a subject that arouses intense emotions. Not only are family relationships themselves deeply emotional, but family issues are also entwined with strong moral and religious beliefs. In the past several decades, "family values" have become a central battleground in American politics. Abortion, sex education, single parenthood, and gay rights are some of the issues that have been debated since the 1980s.

Still another problem is that the current state of the family is always being compared with the way families used to be. The trouble is, most people tend to have an idealized image of families in "the good old days." No era ever looked like a golden age of family life to people actually living through it. That includes the 1950s, which many Americans now revere as the high point of American family life.

Finally, it is difficult to make sense of the state of the family from the statistics presented in the media. For example, just before Father's Day in 2003, the Census Bureau issued a press release with the following headline: "Two Married Parents the Norm." It went on to state that, according to the Bureau's most recent survey, about 70 percent of children live with their two parents. Two months earlier, however, a report by a respected social science research organization contained the following headlines: "Americans Increasingly Opting Out of Marriage" and "Traditional Families Account for Only 7 Percent of U.S. Households."

These are just a few examples of the confusing array of headlines and statistics about the family that the media are constantly serving up. Most often, the news tells of yet another fact or shocking incident that shows the alarming decline of the family. But every once in a while, the news is that the traditional family is making a comeback. No wonder one writer compared the family to a "great intellectual Rorschach blot" (Featherstone, 1979).

Everyone agrees that families have changed dramatically over the past several decades, but there is no consensus on what the changes mean. The majority of women, including mothers of young children, are now working outside the home. Divorce rates have risen sharply (although they have leveled off since 1979). Twenty-eight percent of children are living in single-parent families. Cohabitation—once called "shacking up"

or “living in sin”—is a widespread practice. The sexual double standard—the norm that demanded virginity for the bride, but not the groom—has largely disappeared from mainstream American culture. There are mother-only families, father-only families, grandparents raising grandchildren, and gay and lesbian families.

Indeed, the growing public acceptance of homosexuals is one of the most striking trends of recent time, despite persisting stigma and the threat of violence. Local governments and some leading corporations have granted gays increasing recognition as domestic partners entitled to spousal benefits. In June 2003, the Supreme Court struck down the last state laws that made gay sex a crime. The following November 18, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that gays have the right to marry. These rulings have set off a national debate and a demand by conservatives to sponsor a Constitutional amendment forbidding same-sex marriage.

Does all of this mean the family is “in decline”? In crisis? Are we witnessing a moral meltdown? Why is there so much anxiety about the family? Why do so many families feel so much stress and strain? We can’t answer these questions if we assume that family life takes place in a social vacuum. Social and economic circumstances have always had a profound impact on families, and when the world outside changes in important ways, families must also reshape themselves.

All these shifts in family life are part of an ongoing global revolution. All industrialized nations, and many of the emerging ones, have experienced similar changes. In no other Western country, however, has family change been so traumatic and divisive as in the United States. For example, the two-earner family is the most common family pattern in the United States; 75 percent of mothers of children under 18 and more than 60 percent of those with young children work outside the home. Yet the question of whether mothers *should* work is still a fiercely debated issue—except if the mother is on welfare.

Thus, the typical pattern for public discussion of family issues is a polarized, emotional argument. Lurching from one hot topic to another, every issue is presented as an either–or choice: Which is better for children—two parents or one? Is divorce bad or good for children? Should mothers of young children work or stay home?

This kind of argument makes it difficult to discuss the issues and problems facing the family in a realistic way. It doesn’t describe the range of views among family scholars, and it doesn’t fit the research evidence. For example, the right question to ask about divorce is “Under what circumstances is divorce harmful or beneficial to children?” How can parents make divorce less harmful for their children? (Amato, 1994). In most public debates about divorce, however, that question is never asked, and the public never hears the useful information they should.

Still another problem with popular discourse about the family is that it exaggerates the amount of change that has actually occurred. For example, consider the previous statement that only 7 percent of American households fit the model of the traditional family. This number, or something like it, is often cited by conservatives as proof that the institution is in danger of disappearing unless the government steps in to restore marriage and the two-parent family. At the opposite end of the political spectrum are those who celebrate the alleged decline of the traditional family and welcome the new family forms that have supposedly replaced it.

But is it true that only 7 percent of American households are traditional families? It all depends, as the saying goes, on how you define *traditional*. The statement is true if you count only families with children under 18 in which only the husband works outside the home. But if the wife works too, as most married women now do, the family doesn't count as "traditional" by that definition. Neither does the recently married couple who do not have children yet. The couple whose youngest child turns 18 is no longer counted as a "traditional" family either.

Despite the current high divorce rates (actually down from 1979), Americans have not abandoned the institution of marriage. The United States has the highest marriage rate in the industrial world. About 90 percent of Americans marry at some point in their lives, and virtually all who do either have, or want children. Further, surveys repeatedly show that family is central to the lives of most Americans. Family ties are their deepest source of satisfaction and meaning, as well as the source of their greatest worries (Mellman, Lazarus, and Rivlin, 1990). In sum, family life in the United States is a complex mixture of continuity and change, satisfaction and trouble.

While the transformations of the past three decades do not mean the end of family life, they have brought a number of new difficulties. For example, although most families now depend on the earnings of wives and mothers, the rest of society has not caught up to the new realities. For example, most schools are out of step with parents' working hours—they let out at 3:00, and still maintain the long summer vacations that once allowed children to work on the family farm. Most jobs, especially well-paying ones, are based on the male model—that is, a worker who can work full-time or longer without interruptions. An earnings gap persists between men and women in both blue-collar and white-collar jobs. Employed wives and mothers still bear most of the workload in the home.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING FAMILY

During the same years in which the family was becoming the object of public anxiety and political debate, a torrent of new research on the family was pouring forth. The study of the family had come to excite the interest of scholars in a range of disciplines—history, demography, economics, law, and psychology. We now have much more information available about families of the past, as well as current families, than we have ever had before.

The main outcome of this research has been to debunk myths about family life, both past and present. Nevertheless, the myths persist and help to fuel the cultural wars over family change.

The Myth of Universality

To say that families are the same everywhere is in some sense true. Yet families also vary in many ways—in who is included as a family member, emotional environments, living arrangements, ideologies, social and kinship networks, and economic and other functions. Although anthropologists have tried to come up with a single definition of family

that would hold across time and place, they generally have concluded that doing so is not useful (Geertz, 1965; Stephens, 1963).

For example, although marriage is virtually universal across cultures, the definition of marriage is not the same. Although many cultures have weddings and notions of monogamy and permanence, some lack one or more of these attributes. In some cultures, the majority of people mate and have children without legal marriage and often without living together. In other societies, husbands, wives, and children do not live together under the same roof.

In U.S. society, the assumption of universality has usually defined what is normal and natural both for research and therapy and has subtly influenced our thinking to regard deviations from the nuclear family as sick, perverse, or immoral. As Suzanne Keller (1971) once observed, “The fallacy of universality has done students of behavior a great disservice by leading us to seek and hence to find a single pattern that has blinded us to historical precedents for multiple legitimate family arrangements.”

The Myth of Family Harmony

“Happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” This well-known quotation from Leo Tolstoy is a good example of the widespread tendency to divide families into two opposite types—happy or unhappy, good or bad, normal or abnormal. The sitcom families of the 1950s—*Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and the rest—still serve as “ideal” models for how families should be.

But few families, then or now, fit neatly into either category. Even the most loving relationships inevitably involve negative feelings as well as positive ones. It is this ambivalence that sets close relationships apart from less intimate ones. Indeed, from what we have learned about the Nelson family over the years, the real Ozzie and Harriet did not have an Ozzie and Harriet family.

Only in fairly recent times has the darker side of family life come to public attention. For example, child abuse was only “discovered” as a social problem in the 1960s. In recent years, family scholars have been studying family violence such as child or spousal abuse to better understand the normal strains of family life. More police officers are killed and injured dealing with family fights than in dealing with any other kind of situation. In addition, of all the relationships between murderers and their victims, the family relationship is most common. Studies of family violence reveal that it is much more widespread than had been assumed, cannot easily be attributed to mental illness, and is not confined to the lower classes. Family violence seems to be a product of psychological tensions and external stresses that can affect all families at all social levels.

The study of family interaction has also undermined the traditional image of the happy, harmonious family. About three decades ago, researchers and therapists began to bring schizophrenic patients and their families together to watch how they behaved with one another. Oddly, researchers had not studied whole family groups before. At first the family interactions were interpreted as pathogenic: a parent expressing affection in words but showing nonverbal hostility; alliances being made between different family members; families having secrets; or one family member being singled out as a scapegoat

to be blamed for the family's troubles. As more and more families were studied, however, such patterns were found in many families, not just in those families with a schizophrenic child. Although this line of research did not uncover the cause of schizophrenia, it revealed that normal, ordinary families can often seem dysfunctional, or, in the words of one study, they may be "difficult environments for interaction."

The Myth of Parental Determinism

The kind of family a child grows up in leaves a profound, lifelong impact. But a growing body of studies shows that early family experience is not the all-powerful, irreversible influence it has sometimes been thought to be. An unfortunate childhood does not doom a person to an unhappy adulthood. Nor does a happy childhood guarantee a similarly blessed future (Emde and Harmon, 1984; Macfarlane, 1964; Rubin, 1996).

Any parent knows that child rearing is not like molding clay or writing on a blank slate. Rather, it's a two-way process in which both parent and child influence each other. Children come into this world with their own temperaments and other characteristics. Moreover, from a very early age, children are active perceivers and thinkers. Finally, parents and children do not live in a social vacuum; children are also influenced by the world around them and the people in it—relatives, family friends, their neighborhoods, other children, their schools, as well as the media.

The traditional view of parental determinism has been challenged by the extreme opposite view. Psychologist Judith Rich Harris asserts that parents have very little impact on their children's development. In her book, *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do* (1998), Harris argues that genetics and peer groups, not parents, determine how a child will develop. As in so many debates about the family, both extremes oversimplify complex realities.

The Myth of a Stable Past

Laments about the current state of decay of the family imply some earlier era when the family was more stable and harmonious. Historians have not, in fact, located a golden age of the family. Nor have they found any time or place when families did not vary in many ways from whatever the standard model was. Indeed, they have found that premarital sexuality, illegitimacy, and generational conflict can best be studied as a part of family life itself rather than as separate categories of deviation.

The most shocking finding of recent years is the prevalence of child abandonment and infanticide throughout European history. It now appears that infanticide provided a major means of population control in all societies lacking reliable contraception, Europe included, and that it was practiced by families on legitimate children (Hrdy, 1999).

Rather than being a simple instinctive trait, having profound love for a newborn child seems to require two things: the infant must have a decent chance of surviving, and the parents must feel that the infant is not competing with them and their older children in a struggle for survival. Throughout many centuries of European history, both of these conditions were lacking.

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Another myth about the family is that it has been a static, unchanging form until recently, when it began to come apart. In reality, families have always been in flux; when the world around them changes, families have to change in response. At periods when a whole society undergoes some major transformation, family change may be especially rapid and dislocating.

In many ways, the era we are living through now resembles two earlier periods of family crisis and transformation in U.S. history (see Skolnick, 1991). The first occurred in the early nineteenth century, when the industrial era moved work out of the home (Ryan, 1981). In the older pattern, most people lived on farms. A father was not only the head of the household, but also boss of the family enterprise. The mother, children, and hired hands worked under his supervision.

When work moved out, however, so did the father and the older sons and daughters, leaving behind the mother and the younger children. These dislocations unleashed an era of personal stress and cultural confusion. Eventually, a new model of family emerged that not only reflected the new separation of work and family, but also glorified it.

The household now became idealized as “home sweet home,” an emotional and spiritual shelter from the heartless world outside. Many of our culture’s most basic ideas about the family and gender were formed at this time. The mother-at-home, father-out-at-work model that most people think of as “traditional” was in fact the first version of the modern family.

Historians label this nineteenth century model of the family “Victorian” because it became influential in England and Western Europe, as well as in the United States, during the reign of Queen Victoria. It reflected, in idealized form, the nineteenth-century middle-class family. The Victorian model became the prevailing cultural definition of family, but few families could live up to the ideal in all its particulars. Working-class, black, and ethnic families, for example, could not get by without the economic contributions of wives, mothers, and daughters. Even for middle-class families, the Victorian ideal prescribed a standard of perfection that was virtually impossible to fulfill (Demos, 1986).

Eventually, social change overtook the Victorian model. Beginning around the 1880s, another period of rapid economic, social, and cultural change unsettled Victorian family patterns, especially their gender arrangements. Several generations of so-called “new women” challenged Victorian notions of femininity. They became educated, pursued careers, became involved in political causes—including their own—and created the first wave of feminism. This ferment culminated in the victory of the women’s suffrage movement. It was followed by the 1920s jazz-age era of flappers and flaming youth—the first, and probably the major, sexual revolution of the twentieth century.

Another cultural crisis ensued, until a new cultural blueprint emerged—the companionate model of marriage and the family. The new model was a modern, more relaxed version of the Victorian family; companionship and sexual intimacy were now defined as central to marriage.

This highly abbreviated history of family and cultural change forms the necessary backdrop for understanding the family upheavals of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As in earlier times, major changes in the economy and society have destabilized an existing model of family life and the everyday patterns and practices that have sustained it.

In the last half of the twentieth century, we experienced a triple revolution: first, the move toward a postindustrial service and information economy; second, a life course revolution brought about by reductions in mortality and fertility; and third, a psychological transformation rooted mainly in rising educational levels. Although these shifts have profound implications for everyone, women have been the pacesetters of change. Most women's lives and expectations over the past three decades, inside and outside the family, have departed drastically from those of their own mothers. Men's lives today also are different from their fathers' generation, but to a much lesser extent.

THE TRIPLE REVOLUTION

The Postindustrial Family

A service and information economy produces large numbers of jobs that, unlike factory work, seem suitable for women. Yet as Jessie Bernard (1982) once observed, the transformation of a housewife into a paid worker outside the home sends tremors through every family relationship. It blurs the sharp contrast between men's and women's roles that mark the breadwinner/housewife pattern. It also reduces women's economic dependence on men, thereby making it easier for women to leave unhappy marriages.

Beyond drawing women out of the home, shifts in the nature of work and a rapidly changing globalized economy have unsettled the lives of individuals and families at all class levels. The well-paying industrial jobs that once enabled a blue-collar worker to own a home and support a family are no longer available. The once secure jobs that sustained the "organization men" and their families in the 1950s and 1960s have been made shaky by downsizing, an unstable economy, corporate takeovers, and a rapid pace of technological change.

The new economic uncertainty has also made the transition to adulthood increasingly problematic. In the postwar years, particularly in the United States, young people entered adulthood in one giant step. They found jobs, often out of high school, married young, left home, and had children quickly. Today, few young adults can afford to marry and have children in their late teens or early twenties. In an economy where a college degree is necessary to earn a living wage, early marriage impedes education for both men and women.

Those who do not go on to college have little access to jobs that can sustain a family. Particularly in the inner cities of the United States, growing numbers of young people have come to see no future for themselves in the ordinary world of work. In middle-class families, a narrowing opportunity structure has increased anxieties about downward mobility for offspring and parents as well. Because of the new economic and social realities, a new stage of life has opened up between adolescence and adulthood. It is simply impossible for most young people in today's postindustrial societies to become financially and emotionally independent at the same ages as earlier generations did.

This new stage of life is so new it doesn't have an agreed-on name. It has been called "arrested development," "adulthood," or "emerging adulthood." And many people assume that today's younger generations are simply slackers—unwilling to grow

up, get jobs, and start their own families. But the fact is that today's economy demands more schooling than ever before, and jobs that can sustain a family are fewer and less permanent than ever before.

The Life Course Revolution

It's not just the rise of a new economy that has reshaped the stages of life. The basic facts of life and death changed drastically in the twentieth century. In 1900, average life expectancy was 47 years. Infants had the highest mortality rates, but young and middle-aged adults were often struck down by infectious diseases. Before the turn of the twentieth century, only 40 percent of women lived through all the stages of a normal life course: growing up, marrying, having children, and surviving with a spouse to the age of 50 (Uhlenberg, 1980).

Declining mortality rates have had a profound effect on women's lives. Women today are living longer and having fewer children. When infant and child mortality rates fall, women no longer have five, seven, or nine children to ensure that two or three will survive to adulthood. After rearing children, the average woman can look forward to three or four decades without maternal responsibilities.

One of the most important changes in contemporary marriage is the potential length of marriage and the number of years spent without children in the home. Our current high divorce rates may be a by-product of this shift. By the 1970s, the statistically average couple spent only 18 percent of their married lives raising young children, compared with 54 percent a century ago (Bane, 1976). As a result, marriage is becoming defined less as a union between parents raising a brood of children and more as a personal relationship between two individuals.

A Psychological Revolution

The third major transformation is a set of psychocultural changes that might be described as *psychological gentrification* (Skolnick, 1991). That is, cultural advantages once enjoyed only by the upper classes—in particular, education—have been extended to those lower down on the socioeconomic scale. Psychological gentrification also involves greater leisure time, travel, and exposure to information, as well as a general rise in the standard of living. Despite the persistence of poverty, unemployment, and economic insecurity in the industrialized world, far less of the population than in the historical past is living at the level of sheer subsistence.

Throughout Western society, rising levels of education and related changes have been linked to a complex set of shifts in personal and political attitudes. One of these is a more psychological approach to life—greater introspectiveness and a yearning for warmth and intimacy in family and other relationships (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka, 1981). There is also evidence of an increasing preference on the part of both men and women for a more companionate ideal of marriage and a more democratic family. More broadly, these changes in attitude have been described as a shift to “postmaterialist values,” emphasizing self-expression, tolerance, equality, and a concern for the quality of life (Inglehart, 1990).

The multiple social transformations of our era have brought both costs and benefits: Family relations have become both more fragile and more emotionally rich; longevity has brought us a host of problems as well as the gift of extended life. Although change has brought greater opportunities for women, persisting gender inequality means women have borne a large share of the costs of these gains. We cannot turn the clock back to the family models of the past.

Despite the upheavals of recent decades, the emotional and cultural significance of the family persists. Family remains the center of most people's lives and, as numerous surveys show, is a cherished value. Although marriage has become more fragile, the parent-child relationship—especially the mother-child relationship—remains a core attachment across the life course (Rossi and Rossi, 1990). The family, however, can be both “here to stay” and beset with difficulties.

Most European countries have recognized for some time that governments must play a role in supplying an array of supports to families, such as health care, children's allowances, and housing subsidies. Working parents are offered child care, parental leave, and shorter workdays. Services are provided for the elderly.

Each country's response to these changes, as we noted earlier, has been shaped by its own political and cultural traditions. The United States remains embroiled in a cultural war over the family; many social commentators and political leaders have promised to reverse the recent trends and restore the “traditional” family. In contrast, other Western nations, including Canada and other English-speaking countries, have responded to family change by trying to remedy the problems brought about by economic and social transformations. These countries have been spared much of the poverty and other social ills that have plagued the United States in recent decades.

Looking Ahead

The world at the beginning of the twenty-first century is vastly different from what it was at the beginning, or even the middle, of the twentieth century. Families are struggling to adapt to new realities. The countries that have been at the leading edge of family change still find themselves caught between yesterday's norms, today's new realities, and an uncertain future. As we have seen, changes in women's lives have been a pivotal factor in recent family trends. In many countries there is a considerable difference between men's and women's attitudes and expectations of one another. Even where both partners accept a more equal division of labor in the home, there is often a gap between beliefs and behavior. In no country have employers, the government, or men fully caught up to the changes in women's lives.

Families have always struggled with outside circumstances and inner conflict. Our current troubles inside and outside the family are genuine, but we should never forget that many of the most vexing issues confronting us derive from benefits of modernization few of us would be willing to give up—for example, longer, healthier lives, and the ability to choose how many children to have and when to have them.

When most people died before they reached age 50, there was no problem of a large elderly population to care for. Nor was adolescence a difficult stage of life when children worked; education was a privilege of the rich, and a person's place in society was determined by heredity rather than choice.

In short, family life is bound up with the social, economic, and cultural circumstances of particular times and places. We are no longer peasants, Puritans, pioneers, or even suburbanites circa 1955. We face a world earlier generations could hardly imagine, and we struggle to find new ways to cope with it.

A NOTE ON *THE FAMILY*

Some family scholars have suggested that we drop the term *the family* and replace it with *families* or *family life*. The problem with *the family* is that it calls to mind the stereotyped image of the Ozzie and Harriet kind of family—two parents and their two or three minor children. But those other terms don't always work. In our own writing we use the term *the family* in much the same way we use *the economy*—a set of institutional arrangements through which particular tasks are carried out in a society. The economy deals with the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. The family deals with reproduction and care and support for children and adults.

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