

Changing Family Patterns

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Abstract

All societies have families, but their form varies greatly across time and space. The history of the family is thus one of changing family forms, which result from the interplay of shifting social and economic conditions, diverse and contested ideals, and the attempts of ordinary people to build their lives amid the constraints of their particular time and place. Because the family is a site of our most intimate experiences, the study of families tends to prompt heated theoretical and empirical debate. From the early anthropological charting of kinship systems to current analyses of proliferating family forms, studying the family has been a contested terrain. If the 1950s produced a short-lived consensus on the “ideal nuclear family,” the current context of rapid family change poses a series of puzzles and paradoxes. What is a family, and why has its definition become so controversial? What are the emerging contours of adult commitment, and what is the future of marriage? How is family life linked to institutions outside the home, and how are the boundaries between public and private spheres blurring? What role does family life play in the structuring of social inequality? In addition, what are the prospects for creating social policies that meet the needs of diverse family forms? These questions draw our attention to the dislocations and contradictions of family change, but they also point to new opportunities to build more just and humane family forms. The challenge will be to find common ground for addressing the needs of diverse families and realigning both public and private institutions to better fit the circumstances of family life in the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

The family is an institution of paradoxes. All societies have families, but their form varies across time and space. The family is a site of our most intimate experiences, but it is shaped by a range of impersonal forces far beyond its boundaries. In addition, as few areas of social life are more complex, its ubiquity creates a sense of easy understanding. It is thus no surprise that the study of families is subject to heated debate.

Understanding the family as a social institution is challenging for several reasons. We are all connected to family life in some way, which encourages a belief in our expertise even without wider knowledge. Personal experiences also encourage strong, emotionally charged views about family life. The

family is so closely linked to the desire for human happiness that it invites searches for an ideal form, even though one person's utopian dream can easily become another's nightmare.

It may not be possible—or desirable—to disavow the values we bring to understanding the family, but it is essential to distinguish the *analysis* of family patterns from the *evaluation* of family change. The study of family life requires viewing the family from the “outside”—as a product of historically specific social conditions and forces. The history of the family is a history of changing patterns, which result from the interplay of shifting social conditions, contested ideals, and people's attempts to build their lives amid the constraints of their time and place. To paraphrase Marx, people make families, but not under conditions of their own choosing. The challenge is to decipher how, why, and with what consequences these interacting forces have brought us to where we are today and how they shape the possibilities for where we are likely to go.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Research on the family reflects many of the theoretical debates in the social sciences more generally. From early anthropological studies of kinship systems in small scale societies to the mid-twentieth century focus on breadwinner-homemaker households to contemporary concern with diverse family forms, historical shifts in family patterns have inspired—and required—new explanatory frameworks.

The first major paradigm, structural-functionalism, grew out of a search for universal family forms and then focused on the rise of gender-divided, nuclear households in the industrialized West. In the late twentieth century, as the family forms in advanced industrial societies began to diversify, countervailing approaches rejected functionalism's stress on social equilibrium and focused instead on processes such as conflict, power, and inequality that earlier theories ignored or downplayed. Conflict theories stressed the clash of divergent interests within and among families, especially along the axes of age, gender, and class. Early feminist approaches argued that gender inequality is both unnecessary and dysfunctional. More recent social-constructionist frameworks have focused on how human actors construct diverse family forms in response to social opportunities, constraints, and contradictions. In this way, changing theoretical accounts of family life reflect the need to account for new empirical developments.

THE SEARCH FOR FAMILY UNIVERSALS

The systematic study of family life began in earnest in the early nineteenth century, when anthropologists observing daily life in premodern societies

sought to explain why some family practices existed in all societies, but took different forms in different contexts. In New Guinea, Malinowski [1913] (1964) found a kinship system noticeably different than the nuclear family household common in turn-of-the-century Europe. In the Trobriand islander “avuncular” society, biological fathers resided with their offspring, but were not recognized by others as their father. Instead, maternal uncles provided their sisters’ children with social status and were deemed their “social father.” Malinowski concluded that societies may vary in *who* is defined as the social father, but all societies have a “principle of legitimacy” in which a designated father provides social placement.

Decades later, Levi-Strauss [1957] (1964) proposed another family universal, the “principle of reciprocity” to explain the incest taboo. He argued that these taboos exist not to prevent inbreeding and tainted gene pools (as people in premodern societies are unaware of the science of genetics) but rather to force clans and close-knit groupings to reach across kinship boundaries to form alliances with others. By outlawing intraclan marriage, incest taboos make *society* possible. The principles of legitimacy and reciprocity provided a framework for decades of subsequent research, but they also inspired extensive revision as social scientists learned more about how family practices vary throughout human history and among contemporary societies.

Feminist anthropologists questioned the assumption of men’s monopoly on power—or patriarchy—that underlies these arguments. Their field studies found thriving systems of economic exchange among women and a variety of gender patterns. Today, the importance of legitimacy as a form of social placement has declined as modern economies have eroded the power of socially designated fathers. The principle of reciprocity has also undergone revision. While incest taboos remain one of the few family universals, they need not be based on the presumption of a worldwide patriarchal system in which women are traded among powerful men (Rubin, [1975] 2011). In the modern world, men cannot require their daughters or other women relatives to become wives in a group ruled by another man.

INDUSTRIALISM, THE NUCLEAR FAMILY, AND THE SEX ROLES PARADIGM

Following in the footsteps of early anthropological studies, sociologists extended the logic of structural functionalism to family practices in industrial societies. Drawing on Weber’s concept of “elective affinity,” Goode (1963) saw a fit between the emergence of a worldwide market economy requiring a socially and geographically mobile labor force and a family system organized around an autonomous married couple freed from parental control and able to respond to economic opportunities. He called this *the conjugal family*.

Functionalists such as Parsons and Bales (1954) focused on a process of “structural differentiation” in which the family specialized in emotional support and childhood socialization as other tasks, such as the production of goods and education of the young, moved from the home to the factory and school. Parsons and his colleagues used a “sex roles” paradigm to argue that breadwinner-homemaker households meet the functional requirements of modern societies. Husbands contribute to a family’s survival by performing “instrumental” functions, such as earning income, and wives specialize in the “expressive” functions associated with rearing children and meeting their family’s emotional needs.

These theories provided an influential framework for analyzing family life in industrial societies, especially following World War II, when almost 60% of US households consisted of a married couple with a single (male) earner, but they also sparked critical responses. Critics argued that the functionalist framework prescribes how families *should* be organized rather than explaining the diverse ways that modern families *are* organized. Feminist historians noted that the rise of the industrial system did not predetermine gender differentiation, detailing how the ideology of feminine domesticity rose to justify rather than explain women’s relegation to the private sphere. Feminist economists examined how men’s efforts to secure a “family wage” left women segregated in occupations with lower pay and less job security (Hartmann, 1976). These and other critiques rejected the argument that industrialization inevitably required a family structure based on a gender division between paid and unpaid work, arguing instead that the model of separate spheres and privatized nuclear families emerged from a protracted process of political and social struggle.

POST-INDUSTRIALISM AND ACCOUNTING FOR FAMILY DIVERSITY

The predominance of the breadwinner-homemaker family as a demographic reality and a cultural ideal proved to be short-lived. The past three decades of the twentieth century witnessed interrelated worldwide trends—including rapid rises in women’s employment, marital separation, cohabitation, delayed marriage, and single parenthood—that undermined the hegemony of the two-parent, gender differentiated household. As the twenty-first century arrived, alternative forms, such as two-income couples, single-parent households, same-sex couples, and unmarried single adults, outnumbered “traditional” families in the United States and most other affluent societies. Rather than static family types, today’s families are increasingly fluid, with most households changing their composition and organization over time. Indeed, the image of family pathways may now provide a more useful way to understand family life than the notion of static family types (Gerson, 2011).

Growing family diversity has prompted analysts to question the empirical accuracy of structural-functional theories. “Family decline” theorists see traditional marriage as ideal but argue that cultural forces stressing individualism have undermined its viability and legitimacy (Popenoe, Elshtain, & Blankenhorn, 1996). Rational choice and conflict theories emphasize the role of self-interest in family formation and functioning. Becker (1981) pioneered a “new home economics” that sees everyone as a rational actor, but argues that men find it rational to maximize their earnings by specializing in market work while women find it rational to offset their market ties with unpaid caretaking. Although the rational action framework replaces a theory of gendered personalities with a human capital approach, it reaches similar conclusions about gender-based allocation of family tasks.

Conflict theory, in contrast, sees the domestic sphere as a site of conflicting interests. Collins (1971) argues that historical changes in family structure reflect shifts in how social systems organize power and allocate resources, especially along the axes of gender and age. In this framework, advanced market societies create conditions for more equal forms of sexual exchange by limiting men’s ability to impose their will through physical force and by enhancing women’s access to economic resources in the labor market.

Feminists have also focused on inequality within and between families, but they have taken different positions about its causes and consequences. Some approaches accept gender differences in personality, but see these differences as unnecessary and unjust. Chodorow (1978) contends that gender asymmetry in parenting creates a circular process of gender differentiation, but equal parenting provides a healthier psychological blueprint for everyone.

As post-industrialism has brought household diversity and fluidity, ethnographers (Stack, 1974), survey analysts (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2012), and theorists (Collins, 1991) have charted how families defy the model of an isolated nuclear household by constructing networks of real and fictive kin as strategies of survival, especially in poor and working-class neighborhoods. Others have turned their attention to how social actors construct contemporary families in response to constrained options. Social-constructionists argue that the family is a site where people “do gender” through their interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Others point to the ways that post-industrial families exist in uneasy tension with other social institutions, creating a stalled revolution (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) in which privatized caretaking and time-demanding workplaces conflict with the need to share and integrate work and family life (Blair-Loy, 2003; Gerson, 2011). The emergence of new family forms and practices has undermined earlier frameworks and raised new questions about the future of family patterns throughout the world.

CUTTING-EDGE DEVELOPMENTS AND KEY ISSUES GOING FORWARD

If the 1950s produced a short-lived consensus on the “ideal nuclear family,” the twenty-first century poses a series of puzzles about the future of family life. What is a family, and why has its definition become so contested? What are the prospects for adult commitment and the future of marriage? How has family change reshaped childhood and the transition to adulthood? How are families connected to institutions outside the home, and how are these links complicated by gender change and blurring boundaries between public and private spheres? What role does family life play in structuring social inequality? In addition, what social policies make sense in an era of diverse family forms? These questions draw attention to the dislocations and contradictions of family change, but they also point to new opportunities. Twenty-first-century citizens have few blueprints for constructing their family lives, but they also have unprecedented options to create the families they want.

WHAT IS A FAMILY?

From the early anthropological charting of kinship systems to current analyses of proliferating family forms, defining “the family” has been central to studying it. The question of what counts as a family—and who can claim the social status and legal rights of family membership—has no simple answer. While longstanding definitions typically refer to a group of people who share some combination of legal and biological ties, the rise of divorce, remarriage, same-sex relationships, new reproductive technologies, and out-of-wedlock childbearing has complicated the classic definition. Recent research has shown that Americans use a variety of criteria to decide when a group of people is a family (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010). Almost everyone agrees that marriage and parenthood make a family, but significant numbers also consider unmarried couples without children a family, and disagreement about who should be allowed to marry underlie the heated political struggles over same-sex marriage.

Many controversies reflect disagreement between those who maintain a traditional definition of the family as a household anchored by a married, heterosexual couple and those who conceive of families more broadly. Examining the varying ways that individuals define “family”—and decide whom they consider a member of their own family—is an important element of charting the future of family life. This question turns attention to the beliefs, norms, and values that inform multiple, and often conflicting, views of family membership and the rights and obligations of family members toward each other and the wider society.

THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE AND ADULT COMMITMENT

The emergence of acceptable alternatives to traditional marriage has transformed the social context in which adults form intimate commitments. The rise in women's employment has reduced financial pressures to marry and to stay married. The sexual revolution and the expansion of contraception have eased the social sanctions on sexual activity outside of marriage and created opportunities for partnerships, such as same-sex relationships, once considered taboo. Increased divorce has made it easier to leave a marriage without being faulted. In addition, the extended life span has allowed adults to postpone marriage and even reject it altogether. Taken together, these shifts represent what Cherlin (2009) calls the "deinstitutionalization" of marriage, which is now one option among many rather than a prerequisite for forming a family.

The availability of cohabitation, serial relationships, gay partnerships, and permanent singlehood has transformed the meaning of and reasons for getting married. Marriage remains highly valued, but it has become a voluntary bond rather than a requirement for economic survival and social acceptance. Standards for mate selection are more likely to place interpersonal factors, such as emotional connection and mutual interests, above gender-linked traits such as a man's economic prospects or a woman's housekeeping skills. When Coontz (2005) declares that "love has conquered marriage," she means that marital ties have become contingent on the vicissitudes of the human heart. As people search for partners who can meet their emotional desires, marriage to one partner for life will likely remain but take its place amid other types of intimate partnerships and more changeable adult commitments.

FAMILY STRUCTURES, FAMILY PROCESSES, AND CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Throughout the industrialized world, the rise of divorce, out-of-wedlock parenthood, and employment among mothers has changed the experience of childhood. Children today are more likely to grow up in a home with two employed parents, a single parent, or a same-sex couple and to experience a change in their family composition before leaving home. Even children whose parents stay together and whose mothers do not hold a paid job now grow up in environments where their friends and relatives are likely to experience these life events.

These changes have fueled longstanding debates about the effects of employed mothers or parental breakups on children. Despite concerns about children whose mothers hold a paid job, decades of research show no demonstrable harm. Instead, a mother's satisfaction with work, the quality of child care, and the involvement of the father and other caretakers matter more for a child's well-being.

The effects of growing up in a single-parent home or experiencing a parental breakup are more complex. Children reared consistently by two parents appear to fare better on a variety of measures, but this difference shrinks significantly—and, on some measures, disappears—after controlling for financial resources and parental conflict (Amato & Booth, 1997). Scholars trace most negative consequences of parental separation to a high level of conflict surrounding a breakup and a loss of financial stability. The consequences of a parental separation—whether it reduces or increases parental conflict, involvement, and economic support—matter more than the event itself. Indeed, diversity within family types outstrips the differences between them, and family *process* is more important than family form (Acock & Demo, 1994). As children are now likely to grow up in families that change as they grow to adulthood, the key to their well-being is having financial security and emotional support regardless of the form a family takes at any point or the path it follows over time (Gerson, 2011).

The process of making the transition to adulthood has also changed. Events such as leaving home, finishing school, getting a job, and marrying are more likely to take place at later ages (Newman, 2012). As important, the markers people use to decide who is—and is not—an adult now stress a person's ability to support himself or herself rather than his or her marital or parental status (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). These changes have produced a new life stage that some call “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000). Yet images of youth “failing to launch” do not capture the complex experiences of this life stage. Studies show that new generations hope to find a lifelong partner and bear children within an enduring relationship, but they also believe they need time to develop their own identities, find the right partner, and prepare for an uncertain future that requires more education and training.

PARENTING, GENDER, AND WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

Now that women are an integral part of the labor force and a critical source of family income, the home and workplace are increasingly in conflict. Despite the rise of dual-earner and single-parent families, an “ideal worker” ethos continues to penalize family caretaking (Williams, 2001). In some countries, such as the United States, parents face pressures to work long hours and juggle nonstandard schedules (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004).

Women, in particular, face contradictory pushes and pulls. At work, they contend with a “motherhood penalty” that decreases earnings and erects barriers to advancement (Budig & England, 2001). Carework, whether paid or unpaid, remains economically and socially undervalued. Yet, mothers also

confront a norm of “intensive motherhood” that expects them to lavish time and attention on their children (Hays, 1996).

The clash between family needs and workplace pressures has created time crunches that stress parents and contribute to an unequal “second shift,” where many employed mothers add domestic duties to their work schedules (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Some evidence suggests that growing work-family conflicts have contributed to declining birthrates, especially in countries with few childcare supports. Women’s labor force participation rates have leveled off in recent years, but there is little evidence that women are “opting out” of paid work (Stone, 2007). Despite juggling family demands with paid jobs, younger generations—both men and women—hope to share work and domestic responsibilities (Gerson, 2011). Although fathers’ participation in childcare and housework lags behind that of mothers, the gender gap is shrinking (Sullivan & Coltrane, 2008). To lessen the work-family conflicts that pervade much of the industrialized world, societies need to restructure jobs and caretaking so that parents of all classes and genders can integrate paid and domestic work.

FAMILIES, CLASS, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

The causes and consequences of inequality *among* families remain additional contested areas. Do divergent life chances for individuals and households reflect differences in family cultures or unequal opportunities? The cultural perspective, recently exemplified by Annette Lareau’s study of working- and middle-class families (Lareau 2003), posits a circular link between class cultures and the generational transmission of inequality. Lareau argues that middle-class parents engage in “concerted cultivation,” scheduling children in structured activities, stressing language skills, and imparting a sense of entitlement when interacting with authorities. Working-class families, in contrast, rear children according to “natural growth,” which involves an unstructured approach to leisure, less attention to cognitive development, and more deference to authority. These contrasting childrearing styles leave working-class children at a disadvantage in negotiating middle-class institutions.

The structural perspective focuses on how unequal opportunities shape family outcomes. This approach points to the social and economic obstacles facing poor and working-class families, especially when they are concentrated in disadvantaged neighborhoods with limited social and economic resources. Still others posit an intersectional approach, which argues that class, race, and gender intersect in complex ways that make it difficult—and misleading—to distinguish among their separate effects (Collins, 1991).

In the debate about family inequality, empirical studies suggest that the relationship between culture and structure is complex. Families in different classes and ethnic subcultures may share many core values and practices but still have different economic fates. A Black middle-class, for example, has emerged amid the persistence of an African-American underclass (Wilson, 1980). Similarly, families in the same class may have different family cultures, especially in multiracial and multiethnic societies. Moreover, intra-generational and intergenerational mobility varies across historical periods and across countries with different social conditions and policies. Despite the historic stress on equal opportunity in the United States, American class mobility now lags behind much of Europe's.

Drawing clear class boundaries has also become more complicated. Household composition tends to affect class position. Two-parent, dual income families are more likely to enjoy economic stability, while a disproportionate proportion of single-parent families headed by women remain poor. Yet family composition—and its financial circumstances—can shift over time as members marry, divorce, and change their labor force situation. The fluidity of family life leaves many contemporary families living on a “fault line” between maintaining their economic position and dropping below it (Rubin, 1994).

Family fluidity draws attention to how a range of factors—resources, opportunities, and outlooks—shape the life chances of family members. Understanding family inequality requires examining the full array of supports and obstacles surrounding and within the household.

FAMILIES, POLITICS, AND SOCIAL POLICY

Uneven family change means that people today not only live in different types of families but also have different outlooks on family life. Those who support nontraditional options are more likely to favor policies, such as universal daycare, parental leave, and same-sex marriage, that ease the dilemmas facing new families. Those who disapprove are more likely to oppose such policies. These conflicting views, and the political conflict they create, make it difficult to assess prospects for the future. Family diversity is here to stay, but so is the debate.

Different policy approaches exist among nations at similar levels of economic development. From Europe to Asia, post-industrial nations have experienced similar family shifts, such as women's rising labor force participation, the postponement of marriage, and the proliferation of nontraditional family forms. Yet the policy responses to these shared demographic trends are diverse.

Some countries, especially in Scandinavia, have developed policies that provide universal supports to all citizens, regardless of family situation. This

“egalitarian” approach includes paid parental leaves, universal daycare and healthcare, free education, and anti-discrimination workplace policies. Other countries encourage traditional family structures through a “familistic” approach that offers women incentives to bear and rear children. Ironically, countries that have resisted incorporating women into the public sphere (such as Japan) are more likely to face a birth dearth as many young adults postpone marriage and resist parenthood.

Some national policies, including the United States, adopt an “individualistic” approach that stresses equal opportunity. Unlike familistic approaches, there is less concern for re-creating the traditional family through “maternalism” (Gornick & Meyers, 2009); but unlike egalitarian approaches, there is less concern for diminishing work-family conflict or providing childcare support. Individualistic policies focus more on addressing workplace discrimination and less on providing universal supports for families and caretaking. Countries vary in the extent to which they have addressed family change and developed effective social policies to address it. Yet all post-industrial societies must face the dislocations posed by these new family realities.

CONCLUSION

Family life, or what Goode called the *familistic package*, is a multidimensional set of private experiences and public developments that leaves no one untouched. The family is also an institution in continuous flux. Some family shifts, such as the incorporation of women into paid work and the rise of alternatives to permanent, gender-divided, heterosexual marriage, are so deeply embedded into modern economic and social structures that they are here to stay. Yet the individual and collective responses to these inexorable demographic trends are not predetermined.

Is the family “declining,” or does the diversification of family forms represent resilience in the face of revolutionary social forces? Is it possible to isolate one “best” family form, or does a variety of family practices better fit post-industrial exigencies? How do adults balance personal autonomy and lifelong commitment, and how do parents choose between earning and caretaking? How do children cope with growing up in changing families and negotiating uncertain adulthoods? How do societies address growing inequalities among family forms and growing conflicts between the home and the workplace?

These questions point to how intertwined and reinforcing social changes have created new opportunities, but also new insecurities, dilemmas, and controversies. Twenty-first-century citizens face family options that their parents and grandparents could barely imagine; the future of family life will depend on how individual and collective actors respond to the

inconsistencies and contradictions of change. Family change is inescapable, but its long-term outcomes are not preordained. The challenge will be finding common ground for addressing the needs of diverse families and realigning public and private institutions to better fit the new circumstances of family life.

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