

Transitional Family in Contemporary Times

Abstract

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.

Keywords: Family, Transitional, Parents, Children, Adults, Society, Economy, Services.

Introduction

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.

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 a 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



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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. 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.

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.

Aim of the Study

To highlight the issues confronting the families in transition and changes brought into the size, shape, temperaments, nature, behavior of the families and its members, and institutional arrangements in the society.

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.

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 psycho-cultural 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 "post-materialist 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.

Looking Forward: The Conclusion

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.

Conclusion

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 sub-urbanites circa 1955. We face a world earlier generations could hardly imagine, and we struggle to find new ways to cope with it.

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