

## **The Recent Transformation of the American Family: Witnessing and Exploring Social Change**

I entered sociology a half century ago, initially as a major at Haverford College in the late 1950s and then as a graduate student at Columbia from 1961 to 1967. Little did I know that I would witness a transformation in the institution of marriage and kinship, the likes of which were simply unimaginable when I began my academic career. It is no exaggeration to say that the American, and more broadly the Western, family changed more dramatically in the latter half of the twentieth century than in any comparable span of time in our history.

Explaining why and how family change occurs has been the consuming passion of my professional life. And I continue to puzzle over what is happening to the institution of marriage and kinship after five decades of watching the “the second demographic transition,” as demographers call it, in the West (Lesthaeghe 1995). This transition has seen many family practices revised, if not reversed or abandoned. Family historians and scholars of contemporary family life have contributed substantially to our understanding of this transformation: why the Western family followed this unexpected course from a seemingly stable and nearly ubiquitous arrangement to a far more complex form that many regard as “de-institutionalized,” with rules dissolved, time-honored practices eschewed and seemingly “rational” bargains reneged (Cherlin, 2004).

As has always occurred in times of family revolution or evolution, critics and defenders of these changes describe them in starkly different terms. Social scientists are committed to understanding or explaining change, not condemning or valorizing it, but as I develop my account, it will become clear enough how the costs and benefits of this transformation have been borne by different segments of American society.

My initial task is to weave together a prospective and ongoing narrative of the key elements of change in marriage and kinship, trying first to portray the world of the family as it appeared to Americans a half century ago. I will trace the path of change from the period when the nuclear family was dominant to its present “post-modern” form, as some social scientists characterize the contemporary family (Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The changes that have taken place involve some cultural and normative continuities as well as many discontinuities. Observers tend to focus far more on the latter than the former, but I will attempt to give both their proper due. In providing this account of change, I apply a theoretical lens that helps us to understand how and why such monumental changes occurred in the institution of marriage and the family, and why they have been so pervasive in the Western world.

My interpretation works back and forth from macro-level to micro-level. I will show how and why changes create tensions for individuals and couples making it difficult, if not impossible, to conform to prevailing ideals of marriage, parenthood, and kinship (Mills 1959). The tensions are not always initiated by exogenous shocks or pressures at the macro-level; they often emerge at the micro-level as customary ways of doing things no longer appear to make sense. Often these contradictions or incompatibilities may affect one part of the population and, under certain conditions, diffuse beyond the group that initially experiences the tensions.

Social historians of the family have always recognized that changes in family and kinship practices occur unevenly and sometimes spread more broadly when new behaviors become common or even legitimized by common practice (Ozmet 2001; Shorter 1977; Stone 1977). This analytic frame is hardly a “theory” of family change, but it helps to avoid the untenable assumption that change in family systems occurs for a single reason or even a common set of reasons that play out similarly in all societies or within all parts of a single society. Clearly, we

must separate the initial sources of change from the way that change is diffused within a given society if we are to reach a satisfactory understanding of how change actually takes place (Watkins 1991). To do so inevitably requires blending observations produced by qualitative and quantitative studies on family demography, beliefs, and practices.

### **The Isolated Nuclear Family in the Post-War Era: Fact and Fiction**

There are now many good histories of the post-war American family that prevailed in the wake of the Great Depression and the Second World War (Cherlin 1992; Coontz 2005; May 1988; Mintz 2004; Modell 1989). When I took my first sociology courses in the late 1950s, I was immediately immersed in contemporary accounts of what had happened to the family in the *first half* of the twentieth century, such as Burgess and Locke's famous treatise on marriage, the work on the Polish peasant by Thomas and Znaniecki (1996), and, of course, Parsons' (1964) writings on American kinship. All of these were enormously influential in the middle of the last century.

Virtually all accounts at the time viewed the contemporary, mid-century family as a form that emerged after a lengthy period of emancipation (for better and worse) from a more patriarchal and extended kinship system that had prevailed prior to industrialization. A year after I entered graduate school, I took a course with William J. Goode, who at that time was putting the final touches on his monumental study of family change. I quickly became thoroughly steeped in the debates over grand theories of social change and the family. Goode used to say that sociologists lacked a convincing, empirically testable, theory of family change. He was right. The reigning paradigm, which he largely embraced, was "functional analysis." The form and functions of the family were biologically based and universal. The institution of marriage and kinship created ways of avoiding inbreeding (rules against incest), and established social

exchange by defining property rights and paternal connections (Bell and Vogel 1968; Coser 1964; Davis 1985). Kinship fostered social integration, reducing conflict within and between many agrarian-based, feudal societies. There was, in short, a kind of inevitability in the “triumph” of the “modern family” over outdated and antiquated systems, as seen through the eyes of historians and family sociologists. This triumph, however, was bringing the family to the verge of disintegration (Shorter 1977; Stone 1977).

With economic change from agrarian to industrialization, the family and kinship ceded its pervasive influence as the institution of the family shed its patriarchal practices and more complex household forms. The introduction of a job-based economy eroded the power of elders throughout the West, and males in particular. In its place emerged the “isolated nuclear family,” a form that was largely detached from the influence of kinship lines of authority (Parsons 1964). The nuclear family was believed to be far more compatible with the demand for a flexible and geographically mobile labor supply. It offered a more efficient gender-based division of labor, allowing men and women to specialize in work and domestic duties. With the growth of education and training, the family ceded responsibility to other institutions. Goode (1963) argued in *World Revolution and Family Change* that this conjugal form privileging marital bonds over lineage ties would emerge in a growing swath of economically developing nations.

I entered the discipline when grand theory was largely a separate enterprise from empirical research, though my graduate training occurred just at the point when historical research based on population records was in its infancy. The advent of the computer was about to revolutionize the field of family studies. Sociologists and anthropologists were beginning to make use of the Human Area Files, a project begun by social anthropologists who were attempting to catalogue properties of kinship systems, marriage patterns, and family organization

from non-literate and modern societies (Davis 1985; Murdock 1957; Whiting & Whiting 1975). In about the same period, historical demographers were beginning to reconstitute household change over time using church registries and census records to understand how families arrange themselves in space and over time (Laslett 1972; Smith 1972). For the first time, the field was beginning to carry out empirical work on the broad class of modernization theories that largely viewed family change as evolutionary developments growing out of technological, economic, and cultural changes (Berger and Berger 1983; Lasch 1977; Nisbet 1953). It is difficult to remember without consulting the literature of the time just how ahistorical and culturally limited most writings on the family were before the mid-1960s. There was a contingent of mostly senior scholars whose writings lamented the presumed waning of the extended family (Zimmerman 1947). However, most scholars, following Parsons, applauded features of the so-called modern family, with its emphasis on companionate marriages and more intimate relations across the generations. It was as if the American family stood as the beacon of the future. The optimism of post-war era made it seem inevitable that other nations would follow the same path of development. To be sure, there was a murmur of discontent about the nature of contemporary family life. Conservative scholars noted that the family's functions had been usurped; others complained about the emotional intensity of the new family form (overprotection of children by their mothers) or the disappearance of fathers as a source of authority (Berger and Berger 1983; Lasch 1977).

There was a small but lively empirical literature among American sociologists of the family in the 1960s and 1970s that attempted to test some of these critiques. Scholars sought to demonstrate that kinship was still alive and well in the United States and England, particularly among the working class (Gans 1962; Young and Willmott 1957). And there was an almost

obsessive interest in courtship and marriage practices. A high proportion of publications in the leading journals examined in detail how young couples moved into marriage, why marriages failed, and how individuals repaired the damage by contracting new and more secure remarriages. The field of scholarly research largely embraced functional theory that held that the contemporary family had successfully adapted to the new economic realities (Hill 1971; Litwak and Szelenyi 1969; Sussman 1959; Winch 1958).

My first published paper, “Industrialization and the American Family: A Look Backward,” was based on my own small effort to test the impact of early industrialization on the family (Furstenberg 1966). I examined foreign travelers’ observations on the American family in the first half of the nineteenth century to create a small data set (all the accounts that I could find in the Columbia library stacks) on courtship, marriage, family formation, and childrearing practices among Americans prior to industrialization. Surprisingly, the data revealed that the main features of the so-called modern family were entirely evident to foreign observers well before the advent of industrialization in this country. Americans lived in nuclear families, marriages were seen as egalitarian, and the relations between parents and children were more democratic than was customarily the case in Europe, so most of the travelers (regardless of political view) reported. The family “then and now” was far less different than any current theory on the link between industrialization and the family predicted.

This paper ultimately helped to secure my first job at the University of Pennsylvania and began the next stage of my professional involvement in the study of family change.

## **Entering Academia at the Precipice of Change**

I was hired in an era when many students entered academia without yet completing their Ph.D., much less publishing, before they began their academic career. I came with Ph.D. in hand, but only the vaguest idea of what academic issues I would explore. My thesis on the transmission of values in the family was a micro-level study of socialization. It produced a single article that has largely been forgotten, no doubt deservedly so. Having studied deviant behavior under Richard Cloward, I arrived at Penn with as much interest in criminological as in family studies. My pre-tenure years could be best described as shaky and unpromising. My early publications counted as many articles on the topic of crime as on the family. I lacked professional direction.

By a quirk of fate, in 1965 I began a life-long longitudinal study of teenage mothers in Baltimore without recognizing it. As I have recounted elsewhere, it took me almost a decade to understand what I was doing and, longer than that before I recognized that this study could become an important project in the study of individual and family change (Furstenberg 2002). At the outset, I was still largely unschooled in the emerging literature in sociology and demography on the life course.

Shortly after arriving at Penn, I had the good fortune of meeting Glen Elder at a conference. Elder was just beginning to synthesize different strands of current theory and research based on the ideas of Mannheim and Mills into a life-course framework. His work would synthesize historical, sociological, and psychological elements (Elder 1974). It was under his informal mentorship that I began to read widely in the emerging historical, demographic, and sociological literature on aging. The Social Science Research Council published its monumental review of the field, *Aging and Society*, edited by Matilda Riley and Norman Ryder in 1968, and

this three-volume set contributed incalculably to the development of family demography and life course sociology.

During the same period, the first sprouts of feminist research in family sociology were beginning to appear. The study of gender was not yet an explicit subfield of family sociology, but it was to become so in short order after the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. The fields of social history, feminist writings, and life-course demography were beginning to infuse the intellectual backwater area of sociology of the family with new ideas. Eventually, I began to appreciate the possibilities of examining the unfolding lives of teenage mothers and their offspring as a far more ambitious enterprise than I had previously imagined. These families, I can now say in retrospect, provided a window to understanding why marriage began to lose its grip on low-income couples in the final third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Reconsidering Marriage: The Origins of Change**

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the meaning and practice of teenage marriage and childbearing was testing the limits of marriage, or at least the form that was known then. The near hegemonic practice of early marriage and parenthood during the marriage rush after World War II and the ensuing baby boom era of the 1950s and early 1960s was suddenly proving unworkable for one segment of the population—lower income blacks. The single-family wage earner, never practicable in the black community, was rapidly becoming an unaffordable luxury to a growing number of American families as well. Less affluent young women and their parents were beginning to recognize the importance of education for gaining a secure foothold in the economy. Moreover, the high levels of marital dissolution following early marriage and parenthood created a negative feedback loop, especially, in low- and moderate-income black

communities, which were beginning to cast a skeptical eye on the benefits of “shotgun weddings.” (See, for example, Weeks 1976.)

Until the 1960s, premarital pregnancy had been part of the American courtship system. Romantic love or what passed for it in the 1940s and 1950s propelled many teenage couples, who barely knew each other, into “committed relationships” where sexual relations were tolerated. The median length of courtship—the time between meeting and marriage—in the 1950s was only six months (Rapoport 1964). Marriage provided a safety net for sexual risk-taking among youth who, increasingly, were unwilling to maintain the lofty standard of premarital chastity. Indeed, in the 1950s nearly one-half of all teen marriages were preceded by a pregnancy. Arnold Green (1941), a shrewd student of family life, observed in a study of Polish-American couples, that women relaxed their strict sexual standards, believing that their partners would consent to marry in the event of pregnancy. Clark Vincent (1957), another leading family researcher, in his widely read book, *Unmarried Mothers*, noted that a shadow system of adoption had provided a backup to white women whose partners were unwilling or unable to wed.

In interviews with a sample of predominately black women in the Baltimore study in the mid-1960s, I discovered a strong note of skepticism about the payoff of early marriage (Furstenberg, 1976). This was particularly evident in the interviews with mothers of the pregnant teens, whose own lives had often worked out poorly because so many had married precipitously after becoming pregnant at an early age. A number of these women counseled their daughter to defer marriage and continue their education. More generally, rates of nonmarital childbearing were rapidly rising among low- and moderate-income blacks, a pattern that was attributed to the cultural legacy of slavery rather than their current economic circumstances (Moynihan 1965; Rainwater and Yancey 1967). Although I did not recognize it at the time, this shift away from

early marriage among pregnant black teens was a more general harbinger of things to come—the future unraveling of “marriage as we knew it” in mid-century America.

### **Pressures on the Nuclear Family**

In hindsight, it is far easier now to see the building tensions in the nuclear family underway after the war. The postwar family—now ironically regarded as the “traditional family”—was, it would turn out, merely a passing phase in a continuously changing family system. It was also the culmination of a set of ideals that had developed over several centuries.

Marriage in the early Christian era was never as pervasive as is popularly believed (Coonz 2005; Glendon 1989). The modern form of the family began to take root during the Renaissance when privacy, intimacy, and individual expression were first given greater cultural currency (Aries 1962; Ozmet 2001; Stone 1977). Historians still disagree on the precise package of influences that produced the modern family. Patriarchy largely survived until the twentieth century, but the institutionalization of women and children’s rights through legal statutes and social conventions was a gradual process, evolving over several centuries in the West (Therborn 2004).

Edward Shorter (1977) wrote that the family was “born modern” in colonial America, but if this was true, it was surely because many early settlers were extending religious and political freedoms that had met with enormous conflict in Europe. No doubt, the availability of land, the isolation of the New World, the diversity of peoples, and the emergence of a distinctive American culture contributed to a range of marriage and family practices that helped to speed the decline of patriarchy (Hawke 1988). That is not to say that patriarchy did not exist in early America, but the ability of males to control their wives and their offspring ran up against the

democratic ethos of the post-colonial period, a point that I discovered in my paper on the accounts of foreign travelers in the first half of the nineteenth century (see also De Tocqueville 1945).

The innovative scholarship beginning in the late 1960s by social historians and historical demographers began to reconstruct family histories, revealing sharp changes in family formation patterns in relatively small amounts of time, and huge variability by geographical region, social class, and religious affiliation (Carter and Glick 1976; Smith 1972). Clearly, historical research in North America and Europe indicates a great deal more cultural and individual diversity than is commonly acknowledged even today. Evidence only seems to go so far in altering our image of what Goode referred to as “the classical family of Western nostalgia.”

Even as the nuclear or companionate family type reached its apogee in the middle of the last century, it exposed a set of contradictions and paradoxes that would lead to its undoing, although at the time, few social scientists seemed even dimly aware of these incipient tensions. The companionate marriage form (in which a man and wife join together and form one indissoluble union) was built upon a gender-based division of labor that appeared to be as “natural” as the birds and the bees. The fact that teenagers—one-half of all women were married by age 20 in the late 1950s—were establishing life-long unions with partners they often barely knew (often with a child on the way) only began to trouble experts when it became abundantly clear that many marriages were not surviving beyond the first few years.

As noted above, the end of the postwar economy in the 1960s, during which American workers had enjoyed a period of unprecedented economic gains, had begun to erode the prevailing single-earner model. The loss of manufacturing jobs paying union wages, as William J. Wilson (1987) noted two decades ago, imperiled the black family, but it also later helped to

undermine the gender-based division of labor among low- and middle-income white families as well.

More affluent couples were reexamining the institution of marriage and the family for another set of reasons. First, women's rising levels of education resulted in greater aspirations among college-educated women, who no longer were content to invest their human capital solely in childrearing (Komarovsky 1973). Second, mounting divorce rates began to give women pause about whether they would be able to support themselves if their marriage dissolved. Third, the advent of the Pill in the 1960s provided women a means to regulate their fertility to better suit their personal desires and childbearing intentions. Fourth, the growth of mass marketing no doubt stimulated consumption desires that could only be satisfied by two earners in a middle-income household. Finally, there was also a growing emphasis on the quality of children rather than the quantity, which began to spread from the affluent and better educated downward. Even poor families like those I was studying in Baltimore wanted to control their family size. (Only one-third of the teen mothers ultimately had more than two children.)

This constellation of economic, social, and demographic conditions combined with the ideology of civil rights and equal rights in the early 1970s was a heady mixture for changing marriage practices and the form of the family. Among the well off, the pressures for change were slightly different and perhaps more ideologically influenced. Men like me were learning that they had to take a greater hand in domestic life as women entered the labor force in ever larger numbers. I can attest to the power of social pressure in the early 1970s. Between the birth of my first child in 1967 and my second in 1970, I somehow managed to learn how to change diapers and boil an egg.

Initially, the changes resulted in a rising age of marriage and, at least among young black women, a sharp increase in non-marital childbearing. But gradually, as I will recount later on, the shift in marriage practices became more widespread and dramatic.

### **Marriage and the Changing Life Course of Young Adults**

As I was completing my first book on the Baltimore study in the mid-1970s, I returned to my interest in the social history of the American family. Along with my friend and collaborator John Modell, I delved into historical census records on the black family and became involved in the contentious debate over the Moynihan Report, a controversial document describing the plight of the black family in the United States. During the course of our collaboration, Modell and I began to examine the organization of the life course during the course of the twentieth century, showing how the timing of leaving home, completion of school, and entrance into the labor force, marriage, and parenthood became tightly scheduled and highly coordinated during the middle part of the last century (Modell, Furstenberg, Strong 1978). Marriage had been the mainspring of the transition, particularly for females, who often completed their education, got married, left home, and became parents (usually in that order) in their late teens and early twenties. Our analysis ended with the 1970 census, but the data hinted at an emerging pattern of delay and diversity that would quickly and dramatically reverse the prevailing pattern of early adulthood, extending this passage and making it more complex and less linear. It was another two decades before I would come to appreciate just how much the change in family formation was affecting the timing of adult transitions in ways that would alter the meaning of marriage and parenthood.

## **The Growth of Family Diversity**

My growing interest in the social organization of the life course led me to think more searchingly about the changing institution of marriage and how rising levels of divorce and remarriage were complicating family forms and practices. In the late 1970s, I undertook a review of the sparse literature on remarriage and concluded that the exclusive attention on the nuclear family was diverting our attention away from the fact that a growing number of children were being reared in alternative family systems. Divorce and remarriage were not an aberration but an intrinsic feature of our family system. I characterized this pattern as “conjugal succession,” an ungraceful term that I regrettably coined to signify that remarriage after divorce was becoming a more prevalent option in the Western kinship system. Rather than recreating the nuclear family, remarriage instead represented a widespread and largely unexamined alternative family form.

*Recycling the Family*, the book I coauthored with Graham Spanier (1984), described how parents and children moved through divorce and remarriage, how grandparents adapted to these changes, and how children adapted to the complexities of living in a kinship system created by chains of relationships spanning divorce and remarriage. In a piece in 1981 that eventually became a chapter of our book, I contended that the family form that was so widely assumed to be universal was, in fact, undergoing fundamental change.

“... there is reason to suspect that the rise of conjugal succession is related to a general shift in the pattern of family formation which has unraveled marriage from what was once a common strand of status transitions. As marriage has become independent of other events in the life course, it is seen as a more voluntary and less permanent arrangement. This does not necessarily mean that individuals today expect less of marriage. Indeed, it is entirely possible that as marriage has become less binding and inviolable, standards of what constitutes a gratifying and satisfying marriage have risen.” (p.110, Furstenberg 1982)

These ideas closely paralleled speculations that Andrew J. Cherlin (1978) had advanced in his important piece on “Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution.” Our similar views on what was happening to the American family led to a life-long personal and intellectual collaboration, including writings on grandparenthood and the effects of divorce on children, stepfamilies, and the broader American kinship system.

Andy and I also attempted in the 1980s to project what the family might look like at the beginning of the twenty-first century, given changing economic conditions and new technology. Needless to say, our projections came up short in many respects. However, we did argue that the family would never return to its early post-war form. The growing freedom from control of parental authority due in part to the extension of education and the economic opportunities afforded young adults, the availability of contraception that permitted couples to postpone marriage and parenthood, the cultural and economic changes allowing women to escape the extreme form of interdependence, among other conditions, were permitting and, one could argue, requiring a greater level of individual discretion and personal control in making family choices (see also Rosenfeld 2007). Cohabitation, we believed, would become more common, but we did not believe it would replace marriage but rather fill in periods when marriage was premature (in early adulthood) or spans after divorce and before remarriage.

Our speculations, it turns out, were not bold enough. Even in the early 1980s, we failed to see just how profound were the changes taking place in the institution of marriage or to appreciate fully the growing impact on family of economic inequality that became more evident over the past quarter of a century. The growing gaps by education, occupation, and income have

profoundly altered the conditions under which family formation, childbearing, and parenting now occurs. In hindsight, we also missed how technological change would influence childbearing and childrearing, a topic that I will come to later. And, we could not have foreseen the huge effect of the wave of immigration that began in the 1980s and its contribution to more culturally varied family practices.

By contemporary standards, Americans used to live in far more homogeneous family forms in the middle of the past century. Even so, we are now inclined to exaggerate the uniformity of family arrangements in the first half of the twentieth century. Important differences in household form and family practice have always existed by race and social class, and especially the combination of the two. Indeed, a great deal of attention was devoted to social class differences during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It was not until the beginning of the 1960s that scholars began to move away from the class-based analysis of family patterns that had been so much a part of the stock and trade of our research on family life when I started my academic career (Furstenberg 2007; 2009).

In part, this shift happened because of a growing attention to gender and ethnic differences, for quite legitimate reasons. The lens of gender, often absent in earlier analyses of family life, provided powerful insights on internal cleavages inside the household. Building on the writings of early feminist sociologists such as Myra Komarovsky, Jessie Bernard, Rose Coser, and Alice Rossi, many sociologists of the family began to view gender as the bedrock for understanding how and why marriage was under challenge. Similarly, later on in the last century, we began to recognize anew the important differences among new immigrant groups who introduced to the United States different models of how families operate. The attention to gender and ethnicity need not have diverted our gaze from social class, but I suspect it did.

An important reason for the waning class analyses during this period was the consuming interest in racial differences in the family that was sparked by the publication of the Moynihan Report in 1965 (Furstenberg, 2007, 2009). Although certainly aware of the long tradition of social class differences in the black family, Moynihan's almost exclusive focus on poor black families and communities ignited an intellectual debate and an outpouring of studies on low-income black families. In doing so, his powerful contribution to analysis of the conditions that produce unstable family life among low-income blacks was widely misinterpreted in part because he failed to recognize that the same set of conditions might produce similar, if not identical, effects on whites (and Asians, or Hispanics in more recent times).

Moynihan was not wrong in seeing the crushing pressures on the low- and moderate-income black families arising from a changed labor market, but he could not foresee that many of the same economic and cultural forces that were making marriage problematic for blacks would begin to create similar dilemma for other low-income populations in the United States. The cultural legacy of slavery may have been far less potent than the economic legacy of slavery and racial discrimination, which persisted throughout the last century. The Moynihan Report created the false notion that low-income blacks (re)created a distinctly different family form owing to their special history. In fact, lower-income blacks had long exhibited family patterns at variance with many practices observed in the middle class—patterns that in recent decades low-income whites have begun to mimic (Margolis and Furstenberg 2010).

That patterns of family life have always varied across economic class is hardly news to students of the family. However, the nuanced analysis of how socioeconomic position shapes and constrains family practices in ways that recreate family forms over generations is still understudied despite the vast outpouring of work on the poor that occurred in the later third of

the past century. We continue to act as if the poor and non-poor create different family worlds, without recognizing that patterns of family life have always varied both across and within social strata including the broad middle class. Differences both in priorities and the means to realize them have long existed among the different social strata. As inequality has grown in American society during the past several decades, it is likely that the differentiation has grown greater. The greater variability in marriage patterns and family practices may be widening the gap in outcomes for children and their long-term prospects of escaping poverty (McLanahan, 2004; Furstenberg 2007a).

It also remains to be seen how the new and increasing streams of different immigrant populations may be interacting with economic opportunities. We focus a lot in the study of immigrant families on the differences by generation, assuming a high level of assimilation over time. However, we focus less on how such differences may play out for different nationalities over time. The dynamic of differential assimilation by social class will be especially important to follow both in the United States and in other nations with advanced economies. Understanding the interplay between ethnicity, social class, and national policy has become one of the most urgent and attractive items on the growing agenda of comparative research (Rumbaut and Portes 2001).

### **New Marriage Patterns and Their Consequences**

As I mentioned earlier, the emerging information and knowledge-based economy in the final third of the last century exerted a different set of pressures for moderate and higher income couples to delay marriage, also linked to economic prospects. As the economy began to shift from a manufacturing to services, information, and knowledge-based industries, the premium

placed on education attainment increased. This premium first appeared during the 1970s, as jobs declined and a huge baby boom population began to enter the labor market. The Recession of 1972 and the waning of the Vietnam War initiated a period of low economic growth that was only interrupted for brief spells over the last several decades (Danziger & Gottschalk 1997; Levy 1998). This created an incentive for those who could to remain in school for longer periods of time, putting off home leaving for many and marriage for nearly all. The median age of marriage began its seemingly relentless climb upward from 20 for women in 1957 to 26 in 2007 (and still rising).

Later marriage was accompanied by widespread adoption of a set of patterns that historically had been practiced by a relatively small number of outliers: sexual intercourse *without* the intention to marry (among females) and cohabitation before marriage. Beginning in the 1960s and picking up pace in the 1970s, women largely abandoned the practice of delaying sex until marriage (or almost until marriage), and the long-held double standard that permitted men to have sex while encouraging women to remain virgins collapsed (Zelnik, Kantner, and Ford 1981). Youth from educated and affluent families started to have sex, too, albeit slightly later, without the pretense that marriage would ensue. The combination of the extension of higher education, marriage ages, and availability of new and more reliable methods of contraception all contributed to severing the link between marriage and sexual initiation.

Along with the change in sexual standards, larger numbers of young college-goers began to cohabit, first clandestinely and then openly. The *New York Times* heralded this change when it profiled an undergraduate couple from Columbia and Barnard who were cohabiting in the late 1960s, questioning the traditional role of the college as an institution that served *in loco parentis* (Silverman 1977). It was not long afterward that social scientists began to take notice of this

“new practice.” Of course, cohabitation had always existed as an alternative to formal marriage, but it operated, as do many family practices, in the shadows. Public notice of underground practices can propel normative change by providing quasi-legitimacy for those who might otherwise be unwilling to buck prevailing norms.

Floyd Allport (1924), the social psychologist, referred to this process as “pluralistic ignorance,” a collective recognition that private behavior is more widely shared than ever imagined. Normative shifts of this type occur as individuals find they are unable to adhere to standard practices. As they stray from the fold, they experience or engage in what Hyman Rodman (1963) once labeled “value stretch.” Much like the teenage mothers in the Baltimore sample (but for somewhat different reasons), a growing number of youth in their late teens and early twenties began to regard early marriage as economically and psychologically impractical. When the link between sexual initiation and marriage was decoupled, arguably it also reduced, in turn, the incentive to wed as early as possible.

In the decades to follow, cohabitation proved to be an attractive way of managing premarital sexual relationships for growing legions of young adults who were finding it increasingly difficult or hazardous to form permanent commitments while still in school or while they were testing the waters in the labor market. Cohabitation also permitted young couples to practice marriage or a marriage-like relationship without the long-term obligations that wedlock entailed. Of course, initially many parents were unhappy if not offended and outraged when their children cohabited rather than wed. By now, this is ancient history in most parts of the country as the practice of cohabitation has become commonplace, if not universal.

The creation of this hybrid form of a union had profound implications for the institution of marriage itself. It began a long-term shift away from marriage as an *advanced pledge* of a life-

long commitment to a *celebration* of a commitment that develops in the course of living together. Cohabitation has become a common stage in the process of family formation—neither courtship nor engagement—that can lead to a more binding commitment over time if circumstances permit. Parenthood, it seems, is one of those circumstances, propelling some couples into marriage or, alternatively, testing the relationship and finding it cannot bear the weight of new demands (Carlson and McLanahan, 2004; England and Edin 2007; Gibson-Davis, 2007; McLanahan, 2009).

The decoupling of sex and marriage and the emergence of cohabitation are prime examples of what might be called “unpackaging” of elements of the family and kinship system, a more general process that has become characteristic of the contemporary Western family. We can refer to this change as the “deinstitutionalization” of marriage, as Cherlin and others have described it, but it also could be seen as a process of re-institutionalization of family formation that allows for greater flexibility to fit with a changing life course. Whether this flexibility improves the life chances of children now born into unions is a separate and critical question that I will return to later. However, I see this process of uncoupling and recoupling of discrete elements of marriage, family, and kinship as inevitable as the family system in different social strata adapts to changing economic, cultural, and social conditions. Whether this means that the institution of marriage and family is “declining” in importance or becoming permanently “deinstitutionalized” is in my view still an open and unsettled question.

Undoubtedly, Americans are “doing” marriage quite differently than they did at the middle of the last century. Let us not forget, however, that Americans in the 1950s certainly did marriage quite differently from those in 1900 or 1850 (Cherlin 2009; Coontz 1992). We may be

prone to exaggerating the significance of recent changes while diminishing the significance of changes in the more distant past after they have become normalized.

Almost all young Americans hope to marry, most will eventually wed or enter civil or marriage-like unions, and they will continue to have children largely in unions. Still, the process of family formation has become less uniform, predictable, and stable than it once was. At the same time, it is more flexible and adaptable to the circumstances of couples, allowing greater choice and discretion in union formation.

The legalization of same-sex marriages is also a part of the reinstitutionalization of marriage and parenthood. The notion that marriage was exclusively a heterosexual institution is giving way to a more inclusive standard of eligibility. The legal contract has less to do with the management of sex or the regulation of parenthood than with certifying the rights and obligations of partnership and parenthood. Accordingly, a series of court decisions revised the legal meaning of marriage. Fathers no longer can refuse child support because they were unmarried when their children were born and, accordingly, will be given access to their children whether they live with them or not. Stepparents who invest in children over time inevitably will be accorded a greater share of access and control over the children in whom they invest and help to rear. More recently, courts have begun to recognize the rights of couples to legitimate same-sex marriages, broadening access to a still culturally valued institution that affords rights and requires responsibilities.

### **The Changing Meaning of Love and its Place in Marriage**

Over time and across different societies, kinship systems have regarded romantic love as a threat to family control over marriage, a desirable precondition for marriage, or, alternatively,

the *sine qua non* for entering marriage (Goode 1962). Two centuries ago, even in America, parents, if not younger couples, viewed romantic love as a basis for marriage with circumspection (Rothman 1984). A half century ago, love in its most passionate form became a compelling motivation or justification for marriage (Coser, 1974). (It might be that sexual desire and love were less easily distinguishable then than they are now.) Today, I would venture to say that being in love has become a necessary but insufficient reason for marriage, if only because it can comfortably exist outside of marriage in a system where marriage has become more optional.

Understanding how love and marriage co-exist has been insufficiently examined in the recent literature on the family (Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Swidler 2001). I cannot hope to do so here, but I must observe that my collaborators and I were amazed to discover in analyzing open-ended interviews of nearly five hundred young adults that we rarely heard “talk of love” as individuals reported on the marriage process (Kefalas et al. in press). Wedlock these days is more about becoming and being committed, less about promises and more about demonstrations of commitment that develop over time.

It seems that the test of commitment is exercised quite differently across social strata. Among the poor and the near-poor, who often now bear children long before they wed, the test of paternal commitment involves showing support in the form of affection, time, and material aid. Men may come and go, but they only stay if they prove to be reliable parents and partners (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Liebow 1967; Waller 2002). This pattern, it seems, is extending upward as women in the middle strata are becoming more skeptical about the benefits of marriage. In part, this is both because men’s economic position has eroded but also because the standard of what constitutes a “good man” has extended beyond just being a good provider to also being a good parent and a good partner.

Years ago, when I was interviewing the young adult offspring of the teen mothers in Baltimore, I was impressed by how much “feminist” concerns infused their language (Furstenberg 1995). Increasingly, women were looking for and expected a greater range of socio-emotional skills than most men were able to demonstrate. Increasingly, couples are waiting to see that the relationship works before they enter marriage. Young couples with limited education and income are embedded in a social world that is populated by adults who have had failed marriages. Increasingly, they want proof before making what they see as a “permanent” commitment even when children enter the picture (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

It is probably also the case that the definition of a suitable partner is changing. More is expected of men than before because women have the option of opting out. Of course, men do too, and the “shotgun” strategy of pressuring (or even persuading, as was the policy of the Bush administration) young couples into marriage is simply no longer viable because neither partner is willing to stay together merely for the sake of the child, even if they believe that it is better to live together if at all possible. This is because young people have grown up in an era when marriage standards have been climbing to new and daunting levels. Men and women must now collaborate around economic and domestic support in ways their parents and grandparents never faced.

This requires a new “vocabulary of motives,” as Gerth and Mills (1993) described the way that social structure insinuates itself into the realm of cultural standards and personal needs. Women want men to perform a new repertoire of roles for which they are often ill-prepared. Men, as Goode (1980) perceptively noted decades ago, may resist, feeling that the expectations for them are too high and require behaviors that are regarded as inappropriate. In turn, men find women far less passive and accepting of their foibles and limitations than they did in an era when

the choice of living alone was far less acceptable. So as the standards of what constitutes a “good marriage or partnership” have been rising, couples, particularly those with less education and income, have struggled to make a good match.

A generation ago, educated men like me went through this process of revising the marriage contract often with similar doubts and reluctance. Divorce rates among the well-educated were significantly higher in the late 1970s than they are today (Carter and Glick 1976). They have dropped for several reasons. First, young adults with high education are taking a far longer time to find a partner, mostly to good effect. Second, the educational process itself has had a salutary impact on acquiring the “soft skills of marriage.” By that I mean to say that a growing number of men and women who progress through college and beyond are learning to acquire the habits of a more egalitarian relationship in word and deed. In part, these habits have been acquired inside families as young people watch their parents cope with their relationships, but they are also acquired through everyday dealings in educational and work settings. This process of cultural re-alignment has been gradual and is surely incomplete. But, there is no doubt that in the United States and throughout the Western world, marriage or its equivalent has been revised. This revision ultimately is producing a more symmetrical marriage form that is replacing the patriarchal model that prevailed until the middle of the twentieth century.

Another feature of contemporary marriage is a shift away from the classic model of the previous era often characterized as a “companionate” marriage system (Burgess and Locke 1960). I like to describe that form by the formula, one plus one equal one (he and she become one). Two individuals coming together, it was believed a generation ago, should merge into a single entity defined by common interests. (Of course, in actuality, it was frequently expected that women would subordinate their own interests to their husbands). It seems now that the

model is shifting to a different formula: one plus one equals three (he and she now become he, she, and us). Far more space is permitted and even encouraged for individuals to keep their distinctive needs and desires. This new form of marriage is most conspicuous among highly-educated couples.

Why has the change disproportionately been concentrated at the top? There are many overlapping reasons. Women are in a better position to bargain for more separation and enforce the bargain. More educated men, who have many more arenas where they can fulfill their status, may be more accepting of the changes. Both men and women have also had greater opportunity to acquire the necessary skills to meet the new demands of successful relationships through education and work. And, of course, couples spend much more time practicing living together than they once did.

Our information on what is happening in families where one or both partners have had some higher education but have not completed college or entered a well-paying occupation is very limited. My own current research is on families in the middle, but unfortunately it is still too early for me to say much about the topic. If I had to guess, I suspect that my collaborators and I will find a mixed picture that reflects a blend of the old and new (as is still true for privileged couples), but the blend may differ from that among the highly educated. In fact, it is remarkable how much of our research either concentrates on the top (people like us) or the bottom of the social structure. Too few researchers examine the full range of family formation practices, particularly what goes on inside marriages and cohabitational unions. Oddly enough, for all the attention given to the sociology of culture in recent decades, research on how couples go about living together is still fairly sparse.

## **The Changing Passage to Parenthood**

Between the 1950s and the late 1970s, our cultural understanding of what it meant to be a parent began to change and so too the passage to becoming a parent. Through the post-war period, the link between marriage and parenthood remained virtually in-dissolvable though the signs of change were evident by 1970 (Cutright, 1972). Non-marital childbearing, even in the black community where rates were modestly high by standards of the time, received near universal opprobrium until a half century ago. However, disapproval of single parenthood began to soften in the 1960s, first among blacks and in subsequent decades among less well-off whites and Hispanics. As marriage became more problematic, and with the sharp rise of divorce rates in the 1970s, fewer couples felt compelled to wed, at least immediately, when premarital pregnancy occurred.

It is difficult to know just why this shift occurred so rapidly in the United States and indeed among almost all Western nations. The change took place along with, and in part in response to, shifting legal doctrines about the status of “illegitimate” children. However, the legal doctrines themselves reflected a disintegration of long-held understandings about the role of marriage in designating ownership and inheritance rights. Children were no longer seen as property, a significant departure from long-standing patriarchal practice in the West (Therborn 2004).

Marriage and parenthood were delinked in another way: for the first time, significant proportions of married women elected not to have children. In the 1950s, childlessness within marriage was viewed as a personal tragedy. By the 1970s, people were beginning to view parenthood within marriage as voluntary (Thorton and Freedman, 1982; Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007). By the end of the century, the rate of childlessness had risen to one in five. It had

become acceptable for married women not to bear children, while unmarried motherhood was tolerated. A recent General Social Survey poll indicated that nearly one-half of all Americans thought parenthood was not necessarily part of the transition to adulthood. Those who did were less educated and more religious (Furstenberg, et al. 2004).

The decoupling of marriage and parenthood reconfigures kinship in a profound way that shapes family and intergenerational ties. The West has long been characterized by bilateral kinship ties that equally emphasize both maternal and paternal lines—although the significance of maintaining paternal last names hints at the enduring elevation of men’s rights over women’s. (It was not until the beginning of the last century when women began to retain custody over children in the event of a divorce.) As divorce and nonmarital childbearing have become more prevalent, the kinship system has been tilted in a distinctly matrilineal direction, at least for the time being.

Cherlin and I (1991) first noted this trend when we wrote on the effects of divorce on intergenerational contact between children and their grandparents. It seemed that nonresidential fathers frequently withdrew from biological children after they established a new partnership, particularly one with children. Stated indelicately, many of these men engaged in a pattern of “child swapping” as new child care obligations replaced those with their first set of biological children. Fathers do not always willingly withdraw; sometimes they are pushed out by mothers, who become gatekeepers by discouraging contact and influence in an effort to promote the relationships with their current partners. This pattern within non-nuclear households has profound consequences for maintaining intergenerational bonds. Many children lose contact with their paternal kin over time, diminishing the level of available support and resources. Thus, the

matrilineal tilt, most evident among lower-income families, can and often does diminish the network of effective kin who sponsor, mentor, and monitor children and young adults.

My impression, backed up by all too little data, is that over the past several decades, nonresidential fathers have gradually become committed and been permitted to retain ties with biological offspring from a prior relationship. However, the psychological, social, and economic complexities of multi-partnered fertility constitute considerable structural barriers to maintaining the equitable balance of kinship ties from paternal and maternal lines. Of course, remarriage, or at least recoupling introduces new potential kin on the father's side, but there is every reason to believe that step and quasi-step kin are not as reliable or constant a source of support to offspring whose biological parents live apart (Johnson 1988).

We know relatively little about how kinship operates among same-sex couples and their offspring (for a conspicuous exception, see Weston 1997). However, there is every reason to suspect that these kinship patterns operate relatively similarly to heterosexual couples. It would be useful to examine the impact of formal marriage on the workings of the kinship system both for heterosexual and same-sex couples.

One other structural feature of kinship deserves greater attention than it has received to date. Earlier I alluded to the dramatic change that has taken place in the transition to adulthood. In the past ten years, I have devoted my time to understanding these changes. The lengthening of education and the difficulty of early entrance to the labor market has changed the timetable for growing up or extended parents' responsibilities well into the third decade of life (Furstenberg 2010). Parents are increasingly called on to support their children during the transition, although many less-educated and less-affluent families are in a poor position to provide the material and cultural capital necessary to support children in college and beyond.

The structural fissures that I have just discussed are quite evident during this new stage of life. Divided families and multi-partnered parenthood often compromise the available assistance to young adults. Less-advantaged parents must place more of the burden on young adults to support themselves during their late teens and early twenties. To the extent they help out, they are potentially depleting their retirement savings. Thus, the extension of early adulthood puts an almost impossible squeeze on less-affluent families, and in all likelihood, it reduces the prospects of educational attainment for young adults from low- and moderate-income families and/or depletes the limited resources of their parents. Or, to put it differently, the early adult years may amplify the diverging developmental course between rich and poor and perhaps between the rich and the middle as well.

### **The Changing Meaning of Parenthood**

The growing perception that a college degree is necessary to achieve a secure position in the middle class began to take shape in the 1980s, as the realities of de-industrialization and the loss of manufacturing jobs set in. This perception has steadily grown within all social strata and, as it has better-educated parents have begun to believe that even college graduation is insufficient to provide economic security for their children. In fact, economic data over the past several decades has reinforced this impression, creating something of a panic among better-off families that their children could not be assured of a bright future without a graduate degree. Risk of downward mobility, whether real or not, has become a driving force in how the role of parent is presently constructed: managing for success in school has become a dominant concern among the highly educated.

At the top, parenthood has become more protective and more actively concerned with promoting skills, talents, and knowledge. Educated parents, especially, have become far more involved in managing their children's cognitive and cultural development. In the apt description of Annette Lareau (2003), affluent parents have increasingly adopted a style of "concerted cultivation" while working-class families continue to adhere to a style of "natural growth," encouraging autonomy and early independence. Of course, these different orientations to parental responsibilities do not perfectly align with the social status of families, but they suggest a dramatic shift away from the dominant style of parenting in the previous generation when upper middle-class parents favored a style of "sponsored independence" (Miller and Swanson 1958).

I suspect, too, that at least one driving force changing parents' standards of appropriate behavior has been the return of mothers to the labor force. As mothers moved from full-time domesticity into the workplace, they received a good deal of criticism from those who believed that they were depriving their children of needed nurturance and instruction (Hoffman and Youngblade 1999). Their response was to give more attention to the needs of their children. Arguably, full-time mothers in earlier generations, ironically, may have felt more entitled to supervise their children less tightly if only because they felt they were on-call all the time. It may also be that smaller family size has altered time-honored practices of letting older children supervise, if not parent, infants and toddlers. Finally, whether true or not, the belief that we live in a "winner take all" society has become widespread among privileged Americans.

Although historical comparisons are largely lacking, it is hard not to see the rising protectiveness, particularly among the better-off. Halloween, once an occasion where children freely roamed neighborhoods, is now a highly-supervised event. We have greatly restricted

children's mobility over the past several decades. Parents chauffeur their children to afterschool and weekend activities, when in earlier times children would be far freer to make their own schedules. Children are more carefully monitored with cell phones, email, and the video camera. This supervision now extends into adolescence and even early adulthood. I have become fond of following Penn students through the campus listening to their frequent telephone conversations with parents as they seek advice, support, and approbation.

By most available measures, parental investment has grown if only because families are generally smaller now than they were a half-century ago. Contrary to critics who say working parents are spending less time with their children, both mothers and fathers are spending more time directly supervising their children and probably devote more of their resources to doing so (Bianchi 2000; Gauthier, Smeeding & Furstenberg 2004). In ongoing research, Sabino Kornrich and I are finding a distinct rise in the costs of rearing children, owing to preschool and afterschool expenditures aimed at enhancing children's education. The differences by social class are predictably huge.

Changes in both the structure of parenthood and the styles of parenting across social class have probably widened over time, but we have rather limited evidence on the pattern of parental investment over time. Nonetheless, it appears that the gap in American society between the advantaged families, those in middle-income families, and the disadvantaged has increased, reflecting the widening chasm between the top and bottom in earnings, social, and cultural capital. It is a daunting task to invent policies that might reverse this trend if only because the advantaged command so many resources to give their children such a large head start in the educational system. Assuming the trends I have just sketched are accurate, it would be revealing to see if they have occurred in other nations that have experienced a sharp growth in inequality

and compare them to those with less inequality. Can the level of government support for less well families mitigate the inherent advantages that well educated and affluent parents possess?

### **Looking Ahead: Anticipating Future Change**

One inescapable conclusion can be drawn from this overview of what has happened to the family during the past half century: the family will not be the same as it is today in another half century. It will keep changing and adapting in response to economic, demographic, technological, and cultural trends. The traditional family is a social fiction. It is only an illusion about the recent past, a receding cultural horizon between the present and the recent past that is usually distorted by hindsight. Will we ever look back on the family of the present time with the same sort of reverence that many feel for the postwar era of mass domesticity? Perhaps. If we do, it will require editing history just as we have done when we glorify the family of the 1950s, which although it had its virtues, it had problems as well (Coontz 1992).

New and different tensions are undermining existing family practices just as has occurred throughout our past. In this final section, I want to mention a few obvious sources of change that are currently percolating in American society that may threaten the status quo.

First, the gender revolution is still underway, but it is taking a paradoxical turn. Currently, males, particularly in the bottom tiers of American society, are finding it difficult to adapt to the new order. A growing number are becoming marginalized owing to their inability to find a place in society and, hence, in families. The problem of how to help males make a transition to a society that values physical capital less than it once did is not an easy one. The sorts of gender bargains struck in affluent families cannot be so easily achieved in families with

limited means. Will we see men and women striking new deals that are not yet widely visible, such as a growth of men as domestic specialists (Doucet 2006)?

Closely related to the shifts in gender roles are changes in sexual practices between unmarried men and women. The process of sexual liberation for young adults has been an untidy one in the United States. We manage the link between nonmarital sex and fertility poorly in this country. If we were to reduce unplanned parenthood to a minimum, it would have a huge impact on the timing and frequency of nonmarital births. Consider, for example, the potential impact of a widely adopted contraceptive method that would make fertility impossible unless it was intentionally reversed. The technology is presently available, but cultural and political resistance remains high even in light of the obvious costs. Still, it is possible to imagine a different course in the future.

Predicting the future of marriage is notoriously difficult. As we have already seen, it is entirely possible that different parts of the population will experience different futures. Or, will we return to an era of greater family convergence because of social and cultural diffusion from the top to the bottom or vice versa. Convergence, were it to occur, would probably depend on economic changes and shifts in educational attainment, mitigating or exacerbating inequality. Our efforts to expand access to higher education have been puny compared with those in many other countries. Were we to mount a successful campaign to improve educational attainment, we can reasonably infer that the impact on marriage practices and family formation patterns would be large.

The culture of parenting styles has always been subject to change in American society. I see no reason why the current highly protective approach that parents have adopted could not be relaxed if the next generation of parents were to decide (or be convinced by expert observers)

that children need more free time or benefit from greater autonomy. It is equally plausible that new and more effective means of technology will bring about even greater parental supervision and control. Conceivably, the styles will shift in different directions across class and ethnic subgroups.

Shifts in the intergenerational flow of resources, which have been almost uniformly downward (except for foreign born) could also change in light of an altered life course and increased longevity. Older parents may find that subsidizing their children and grandchildren is unsustainable in light of changes in Social Security and retirement benefits.

As technology changes the form and locus of schooling and work, it will inevitably shift styles of child care and parental supervision. We are only at the dawn of changes in workplace and home innovations, much as we were when industrialization drastically altered the production of goods outside the home, irrevocably helping to undermine the gender-based division of labor. It is not difficult to envision similar changes resulting from the growth of new technologies that reduce the distance between work and home.

Nothing that has happened during the past half century has undermined the importance of the family, despite our apprehensions to the contrary. Indeed, it could easily be argued that parents and children are more closely bound together than they have ever been. Similarly, grandparents and extended kin are arguably more present and active in the lives of their progeny than they have ever been. While the institution of marriage has weakened in some respects, it has been strengthened in others, particularly for advantaged Americans. Parenthood, because it is more voluntary, also entails greater commitment and responsibility for most Americans. How will family life be organized a half century from now? It is impossible to say except for the certainty that it will not be the same.



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