

Family

I. Introduction

Family, basic social group united through bonds of kinship or marriage, present in all societies. Ideally, the family provides its members with protection, companionship, security, and socialization. The structure of the family, and the needs that the family fulfills vary from society to society. The nuclear family—two adults and their children—is the main unit in some societies. In others, it is a subordinate part of an extended family, which also consists of grandparents and other relatives. A third family unit is the single-parent family, in which children live with an unmarried, divorced, or widowed mother or father. See Parent and Child.

II. History

Anthropologists and social scientists have developed several theories about how family structures and functions evolved. In prehistoric hunting and gathering societies, two or three nuclear families, usually linked through bonds of kinship, banded together for part of the year but dispersed into separate nuclear units in those seasons when food was scarce. The family was an economic unit; men hunted, while women gathered and prepared food and tended children. Infanticide and expulsion of the infirm who could not work were common. Some anthropologists contend that prehistoric people were monogamous, because monogamy prevails in nonindustrial, tribal forms of contemporary society.

Social scientists believe that the modern Western family developed largely from that of the ancient Hebrews, whose families were patriarchal in structure (see Patrilineage). The family resulting from the Greco-Roman culture was also patriarchal and bound by strict religious precepts. In later centuries, as the Greek and then the Roman civilizations declined, so did their well-ordered family life.

With the advent of Christianity, marriage and childbearing became central concerns in religious teaching. The purely religious nature of family ties was partly abandoned in favor of civil bonds after the Reformation, which began in the 1500s. Most Western nations now recognize the family relationship as primarily a civil matter.

III. The Modern Family

Historical studies have shown that family structure has been less changed by urbanization and industrialization than was once supposed. The nuclear family was the most prevalent preindustrial unit and is still the basic unit of social organization. The

modern family differs from earlier traditional forms, however, in its functions, composition, and life cycle and in the roles of husbands and wives.

The only function of the family that continues to survive all change is the provision of affection and emotional support by and to all its members, particularly infants and young children. Specialized institutions now perform many of the other functions that were once performed by the agrarian family: economic production, education, religion, and recreation. Jobs are usually separate from the family group; family members often work in different occupations and in locations away from the home. Education is provided by the state or by private groups. Religious training and recreational activities are available outside the home, although both still have a place in family life. The family is still responsible for the socialization of children. Even in this capacity, however, the influence of peers and of the mass media has assumed a larger role.

Family composition in industrial societies has changed dramatically. The average number of children born to a woman in the United States, for example, fell from 7.0 in 1800 to 2.0 by the early 1990s. Consequently, the number of years separating the births of the youngest and oldest children has declined. This has occurred in conjunction with increased longevity. In earlier times, marriage normally dissolved through the death of a spouse before the youngest child left home. Today husbands and wives potentially have about as many years together after the children leave home as before.

Some of these developments are related to ongoing changes in women's roles. Women in all stages of family life have joined the labor force. Rising expectations of personal gratification through marriage and family, together with eased legal grounds for divorce and increasing employment opportunities for women, have contributed to a rise in the divorce rate in the United States and elsewhere. In 1986, for instance, there was approximately one divorce for every two marriages in the United States (see Divorce).

During the 20th century, extended family households declined in prevalence. This change is associated particularly with increased residential mobility and with diminished financial responsibility of children for aging parents, as pensions from jobs and government-sponsored benefits for retired people became more common.

By the 1970s, the prototypical nuclear family had yielded somewhat to modified structures including the one-parent family, the stepfamily, and the childless family. One-parent families in the past were usually the result of the death of a spouse. Now, however, most one-parent families are the result of divorce, although some are created when unmarried mothers bear children. In 1991 more than one out of four children lived with only one parent, usually the mother. Most one-parent families, however, eventually became two-parent families through remarriage.

A stepfamily is created by a new marriage of a single parent. It may consist of a parent and children and a childless spouse, a parent and children and a spouse whose children live elsewhere, or two joined one-parent families. In a stepfamily, problems in relations between nonbiological parents and children may generate tension; the difficulties can be especially great in the marriage of single parents when the children of both parents live with them as siblings.

Childless families may be increasingly the result of deliberate choice and the availability of birth control. For many years the proportion of couples who were childless declined steadily as venereal and other diseases that cause infertility were conquered. In the 1970s, however, the changes in the status of women reversed this trend. Couples often elect to have no children or to postpone having them until their careers are well established.

Since the 1960s, several variations on the family unit have emerged. More unmarried couples are living together, before or instead of marrying. Some elderly couples, most often widowed, are finding it more economically practical to cohabit without marrying. Homosexual couples also live together as a family more openly today, sometimes sharing their households with the children of one partner or with adopted or foster children. Communal families, made up of groups of related or unrelated people, have long existed in isolated instances (see Communal Living). Such units began to occur in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s as an alternative life-style, but by the 1980s the number of communal families was diminishing.

IV. World Trends

All industrial nations are experiencing family trends similar to those found in the United States. The problem of unwed mothers—especially very young ones and those who are unable to support themselves—and their children is an international one, although improved methods of birth control and legalized abortion have slowed the trend somewhat. Divorce is increasing even where religious and legal impediments to it are strongest. Smaller families and a lengthened postparental stage are found in industrial societies.

Unchecked population growth in developing nations threatens the family system. The number of surviving children in a family has rapidly increased as infectious diseases, famine, and other causes of child mortality have been reduced. Because families often cannot support so many children, the reduction in infant mortality has posed a challenge to the nuclear family and to the resources of developing nations.