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## Family as Institution

The family is one of the foundational social institutions in all societies, although the definition of ‘the family’ varies from place to place and from time to time. Thornton and Fricke (1989, p. 130) suggest an inclusive definition that provides a good starting point: ‘family [is] a social network, not necessarily localized, that is based on culturally recognized biological and marital relationships.’ In most times and places, families were responsible for production, distribution, and consumption of commodities, for reproduction and socialization of the next generation, for co-residence and transmission of property. And families generally still are. This article examines the structure of the contemporary family and changes in that structure. It describes alternative family forms and it looks at the processes producing families and dissolving them.

### 1. Family Mode of Social Organization

Under the family mode of social organization, kin groups pooled resources, including their labor, specialized in particular tasks, coordinated their activities, and connected to the larger community as a unit. This family mode of social organization is often associated with agricultural production, but it appears in a wide range of economic environments (Thornton and Fricke 1989).

The family mode of social organization has altered, however, with other, far-reaching social changes,

including the rise of the market economy, vast increases in productivity with concomitant increases in real income (Fogel 2000), urbanization, changes in ideology toward greater individualization (Lesthaeghe 1983), and changes in the structure of education. All of these changes have shifted decision making and social control away from the family, toward the individual or toward other social institutions. As families have less control over the time and resources of children, they are less able to influence marriage choices—whether, when, and whom to wed. As more people support themselves through wage-based employment rather than through work on a family farm or small business, families have less stake in the property and family connections that a potential marriage partner brings and young adults acquire more autonomy in marriage choices (Caldwell et al. 1983). Urbanization and electronic communication have made the family a less important source of companionship and entertainment now than when most people lived on farms or in villages (Burch and Matthews 1987).

In developed industrial societies such as the USA, the family retains responsibility for reproduction, socialization, co-residence, and transmission of property across generations. It is the main unit of consumption and often also produces considerable amounts of goods and services. Families provide care and support for both the young and the old. Although older adults receive financial transfers and access to medical care from the government in many societies, family members still provide the vast majority of their help and support (Logan and Spitze 1996) and children are almost entirely dependent on their families for financial, emotional, and instrumental support.

### 2. Structure of the Family

In the USA and many industrialized societies, the structure of the family looks quite different than it did in the mid-twentieth century. In fact, fewer people live in families as traditionally defined and more live in nonfamily households. The rise in nonfamily living can be traced to earlier nestleaving by young adults (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1993), to delayed marriage and to nonmarriage, to continued high rates of marital disruption with lower rates of remarriage (Cherlin 1992), and to increases in independent living at older ages (Michael et al. 1980). In 1998, 15 percent of all people lived in nonfamily households, 10 percent alone (US Bureau of the Census 1999, Table 16), compared to 6 percent in nonfamily households in 1950 (US Bureau of the Census 1955).

### 3. Marriage

In the USA, men and women are delaying marriage into their mid-to-late twenties, often entering a cohabitation first. Divorce rates are high and stable, but rates of remarriage have fallen, so that a larger

proportion of adults are unmarried at the beginning of the twenty-first century than in the past. In 1970, unmarried people made up 28 percent of the adult population. In 1996, 40 percent of all adults were unmarried. Seventy-one percent of women born in the early 1950s had married by age 25, compared to 54 percent of those born in the late 1960s (Raley 2000). In fact, the shift away from marriage has been so dramatic for blacks that now a majority of black men and women are not married, compared to about a third of white men and women (Waite 1995).

Similar changes in marriage patterns have taken place in most European countries; recent cohorts are marrying at older ages and over a wider range of ages than in the past. In addition, European countries differ substantially in marriage ages. The Nordic countries of Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland show the highest average ages at marriage for women (around age 29) and the Eastern European countries of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland the lowest (around age 22). Since societies with relatively high age at marriage also tend to be those in which many people never marry, this diversity suggests that marriage is a more salient component of family in some European countries than others (Kiernan 2000).

Countries in Europe also show a great deal of variation in the proportion of women in marital unions. Marriage is most common in Greece and Portugal, where over 60 percent of women aged 25 to 29 are married, and least common in the Nordic countries, Italy, and Spain where a third or less are.

Age at marriage also seems to be rising in many countries in Africa, including the northern African countries of Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, and Tunisia, and in Kenya, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Countries in northern Africa also show a rise in age at first birth that is not apparent in the rest of Africa, suggesting an increase in nonmarital childbearing in those countries in which age at marriage is rising (van de Walle 1993). The proportion of women who are currently married is 55 percent in Morocco, 61 percent in Kenya, 58 percent in Haiti (both formal and informal unions), 68 percent in Indonesia, and 63 percent in Bangladesh (Macro International 2000).

#### 4. Cohabitation

Declines in marriage are closely linked to increases in cohabitation, although it is difficult to untangle the nature of the association. In the USA cohabitation has become an increasingly common step in the courtship process; only seven percent of the women born in the late 1940s cohabited before age 25 compared to 55 percent among those born in the late 1960s (Raley 2000). Most couples begin their intimate life together by cohabiting rather than by marrying, so that the form of the union has changed more than its existence. But even when we consider both marriage and cohab-

itation, young adults are less likely to have formed a union now than in the past. Among young women born in the early 1950s about a quarter had not formed a union by age 25, compared to a third of those born in the late 1960s (Raley 2000).

Although a number of European countries have experienced similar increases in cohabitation, some have experienced much more and some much less. Cohabitation is strikingly common in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, and France also shows fairly high levels, with about 30 percent of the women aged 25–29 in cohabiting unions. A group of countries that includes The Netherlands, Belgium, UK, West and East Germany, and Austria shows moderate levels of cohabitation—from 8 to 16 percent of women aged 25–29 are in this type of union. And in the Southern European countries and Ireland cohabitation is rare with less than three percent cohabiting among women aged 25–29 (Kiernan 2000).

In many European countries, women typically are in either cohabitational or marital unions by their mid-to-late twenties. However, over 60 percent of Italian women and 50 percent of Spanish are single, neither cohabiting nor married at these ages, compared to around one in three Portuguese and Greek women. In the Nordic countries and France, about a third of women aged 25–29 are cohabiting, a third are married, and a third are single. Marriage is much more common than cohabitation in all other European countries (Kiernan 2000).

#### 5. Unmarried Childbearing

Changes in marriage have played a central role in increases in unmarried childbearing, which has reached historically unprecedented levels (Bachrach 1998); in 1996 32.4 percent of all births and 44 percent of all first births in the USA occurred to women who were not married (Ventura et al. 1999). But over a quarter of unmarried mothers are cohabiting with the child's father at the time of the birth so their children are living in 'intact,' if unmarried, families (Bumpass et al. 1995).

The proportion of births to unmarried women depends on the share of all women who are married, the fertility of unmarried women, and the fertility of married women. Marital fertility is relatively low in the USA and many European countries. Where nonmarital fertility is also low, as it is in Spain, Italy, and Japan, total fertility is substantially below replacement, but those low-fertility countries with fairly high levels of nonmarital childbearing, like the USA and France, tend to have higher total fertility (Rindfuss et al. 2000).

Unmarried childbearing varies substantially among racial and ethnic groups in the USA. The percentage of births to unmarried women is highest for black women (69 percent), and lowest for Chinese Americans (7 percent), with whites intermediate between

these two extremes at 26 percent. Rates of unmarried childbearing also vary a good deal within Hispanic origin groups, with rates for Puerto Rican women approaching rates for blacks (59 percent), whereas rates for Cuban-origin women (24 percent) approximate those of non-Hispanic whites (Ventura et al. 1999).

As we might expect from differences in the proportion of women who are single and in the proportion in cohabitational unions, unmarried childbearing also varies dramatically across countries in Europe. The Nordic countries, which have a high rate of cohabitation, also have quite high percentages of births to unmarried women; in Norway, for example, 46 percent of births at the end of the twentieth century occurred to unmarried women, most of whom were cohabiting. More than half of births in Sweden and almost half in Norway occur to unmarried women. At the other extreme, only 10 percent of births in Spain, 8 percent in Italy and 3 percent in Greece are to unmarried women. Countries such as Ireland, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, and The Netherlands fall in between (Rindfuss et al. 2000). The social implications of unmarried childbearing depend on both the extent to which these births take place within stable, socially recognized cohabiting couples, like in the Nordic countries, and the extent to which social welfare programs cushion the financial impact on the family of having a single parent. Where few supports for single parents exist, as in the USA, children in these families do less well than children raised in two-parent families, but even under these circumstances, most children raised by single parents are happy and successful as adults (Amato and Booth 1997).

#### 6. *Marital Disruption and Union Dissolution*

A substantial proportion of all marriages end in divorce or separation due to marital discord. The divorce rate, which reflects the number of divorces in a year relative to the number of married people, rose continuously for more than a century in the USA and many similar industrialized countries, then leveled off at a fairly high level in about 1980 (Goldstein 1999). In the USA, the best estimates suggest that around half of all marriages will be disrupted (Cherlin 1992). The marriages most likely to end include those with no children, with children from a previous union or older children (Waite and Lillard 1991), marriages begun at a young age, and marriages between partners with relatively low levels of education (Martin and Bumpass 1989).

Although high divorce rates make marriages seem unstable, other types of unions are much more likely to dissolve. Cohabitational unions show quite high chances of disruption, with a quarter ending in separation within three to four years compared to only five percent of marriages, according to one study (Wu and Balakrishnan 1995). Many cohabitations become

marriages, but these show lower stability than marriages not preceded by cohabitation (Lillard et al. 1995).

#### 7. *Alternative Family Structures*

The married, two-parent family has been the most common family form in the USA and other industrialized countries for some centuries. But even at the height of the married couple family, many people lived in other types, most often due to the death of one member of the couple before all the children were grown (Watkins et al. 1987). When death ended many marriages relatively early in life, remarriage and stepfamilies were common, as were single-parent families caused by widowhood. The rise of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing have meant that unmarried-couple families and never-married mother families are now common alternative family forms.

#### 8. *Sex*

In spite of the sexual revolution, marriage circumscribes the vast majority of sexual relationships. Almost all married men and women are sexually active and almost all have only one sex partner—their spouse. Unmarried men and women have much lower levels of sexual activity than the married, and frequently have no sex partner at all. Cohabiting couples are at least as sexually active as married couples, but are much less likely to be sexually exclusive (Laumann et al. 1994). Thus, the married couple remains the locus of the vast majority of sexual activity.

#### 9. *Working Families*

Perhaps as dramatic and far-reaching as the alternations in the structure of the family are the changes in the way its members use their time. In the early 1960s in the USA, among those in the prime working ages most married couples followed the male breadwinner/female homemaker model; 56 percent had only one earner. The dual-income family was uncommon—both spouses worked full-time in 21 percent of married couples. By 1997, only a quarter of married couples had one earner. In 44 percent of married couples both spouses worked full-time, and in another 24 percent one worked full-time and one part-time. The shift toward the dual-worker family was even more dramatic for couples with children (Waite and Nielsen 2001). Even by the beginning of the 1970s, most children living with a single parent did not have a parent at home full-time; now most children in married-couple families do not either.

Many public commentators and some scholars of the family argue that the family is in decline and under siege from legal, economic and social change (Popenoe 1993). As evidence, they point to low marriage rates,

high divorce rates, low marital and high nonmarital fertility. And this evidence is compelling, as far as it goes. But most adults are married (although it is a second marriage for many), most have children, most rate their marriage as very happy and place a high value on family life, and most have only one sex partner—their spouse. Most single parents raise happy and successful children. This evidence suggests that the family remains a key social institution, even in its altered state.

*See also:* Divorce and Gender; Divorce, Sociology of; Families as Educational Settings; Family and Gender; Family and Kinship, History of; Family Bargaining; Family Processes; Family Theory: Economics of Childbearing; Family Theory: Economics of Marriage and Divorce; Family Theory: Role of Changing Values; Gender-related Development; Kinship in Anthropology; Marriage; Marriage and the Dual-career Family; Cultural Concerns

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## Family Bargaining

### 1. Introduction

The concept of bargaining refers to a particular approach to decision-making in situations of conflict. Such conflicts could be resolved in other ways: dictatorially, for instance, through the use of force or authority, or democratically through majority vote. Bargaining, on the other hand, refers to the attempts