

The American Family

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A. Introduction

One can obtain information on this subject from a variety of sources. The basic source for the type of statistical information which is included in this paper is the United States Bureau of the Census and its various departments. This basic statistical information is then used by others who have a particular interest in trends and their meanings. Rather than document each specific source, I have chosen to name, at this time, the four primary sources which I used in preparing this paper. One is the July/August 1987 issue of *Children Today* published by the office of Human Development Services, Department of Health and Human Services. This issue featured a special report on, "Youth in the Year 2000." Family Service America has completed two volumes on the American family. Volume I, *The State of Families, 1984* presented an overview of how changing environmental trends were having an impact on family life. Volume II, *The State of Families; Work and Families, 1987* examines the trends in the world of work and the economy that effects families. Since their material was very well written and speaks directly to the topic, written permission has been received from them to extensively quote from their material. The fourth source was various issues of *Focus on the Family* by Dr. James Dobson and its companion, *Citizen*, which directs its attention to various current issues and trends.

B. General Comments

In the literature, family is generally defined very broadly and encompasses a variety of living arrangements. One such definition of the family is: "Two or more people joined together by bonds of sharing and intimacy. To these two bonds may be added the bond of commitment through the marriage contract." Carter and McGoldrick in their book, *The Family Life Cycle*, give the following definition: "A family is a small social system made up of individuals related to each other by reason of strong reciprocal affections and loyalties, and comprising a permanent household (or cluster of households) that persist over years and decades. Members enter through birth, adoption, or marriage and leave only at death."

It is generally agreed that most major trends involving family life have tended to level off in recent years or have at least established a predictable pattern. It appears quite likely that the conditions and/or trends which appear in 1987 and 1988 will prevail in the year 2000 and some years beyond. The more dramatic changes have occurred in the past twenty years and are not likely to be as pronounced in the next twenty years. Patterns of childbearing, marriage, divorce, re-marriage, and employment of mothers in the paid labor force have changed decidedly during the past twenty years. The rate of change is expected to be less and the current patterns more constant in the next twenty years.

C. Social Factors

1. Population

The population of the United States will continue to grow and move. Both trends, however, will experience slower rates over the next three decades compared with the last thirty years. It is anticipated that the 226.5 million Americans in 1980 will increase to only 270 million by 2010, representing a more than fifty percent drop in growth rates for the thirty year periods of comparison.

Americans will continue to move. The movement is expected to be from the North and Midwest to the South and West, from the central city to suburb and from metropolitan to rural areas. One of the impacts of transplanted families is the inability of many nuclear families with traditional values to adjust effectively to a new environment. The dream of “Paradise in the Suburbs” may instead turn out to be a nightmare with growing high rates of suicide, alcoholism, and drug abuse for young people, particularly for children from single parent families. Since suburbia may not prove to be the ultimate location, there are some who predict that sometime after the year 2000 we will see the renaissance of the central city as being the most hospitable place for the multiple family structures that lie ahead.

2. Age Distribution

The baby boomer group, those born between 1947 and 1960, will dominate society for another fifty years. By 1990, they will constitute one third of the population between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-three. By the year 2010, this group will be between the ages of fifty-five and seventy-three.

By the year 1990, the number of people sixty-five years in age and over will have approximately doubled from the year 1960. By the year 2000, distribution within the group over sixty-five years of age will have shifted with close to half the group over seventy-five years of age and with numerous women in their eighties. When we view the present population growth and birthrates we are dealing mainly with the collective impact of decisions by baby boomers.

Aging is bringing new opportunities and stresses to families. Today, and in the future, longevity and retirement have changed the potential duration and amount of togetherness of elderly couples. Consequently, when tolerance lessens and ill will festers, there will be increased numbers of separation and divorces in couples over sixty. Other elderly couples will find themselves being drawn closer together due to poverty, hunger, and chronic ill health. Increased longevity of parents will also have an impact upon their adult children, especially during their midlife years.

3. Baby Boomer Families

The biological drive for parenting will continue to be mediated by two societal forces: economics and values. In the decades ahead we can expect the values regarding women’s career and self-fulfillment, the ecological balance and the destructive threat of mounting arms races to dampen the reproductive pressures of economic prosperity.

Minority group populations—Black, Hispanic, Asian—are growing at a faster rate than Whites, due to birth and legal and illegal migration. By 1990, it is projected that there will be more than 50 million Blacks and Hispanics in the United States. Although fertility rates for Black women are high, most of the difference is due to the fact that Black teenagers have fertility rates almost three times higher than White teenagers. More than half of Black babies are born to unmarried women, a rate more than five times the White rate. More than forty percent of Black families are single parent families headed by women. This is a jump of thirty-five percent in a decade.

4. Marriage

The ages at which men and women have been marrying for the first time has been increasing rather steadily since the 1960's. In 1986, the median age at first marriage for men was 25.7 years and for women was 23.1 years.

A major change in age at first marriage for men and women has been associated with several important changes in family life for parents and children.

Some of the changes are:

- a. Both are usually working parents and presumably less time is available for parent/child interaction.
- b. Families are smaller and children therefore have fewer siblings.
- c. Married couples may be less likely to divorce due to an older age at first marriage.
- d. On average parents are older and perhaps more established than in the past.
- e. More single parent families are created by never married women having babies.

5. Size of Family

Postponement of marriage usually means postponement of child bearing. The fertility rate in this country has not changed appreciably over the last decade nor is it expected to change in the near future. Birth expectations of young women indicate little change is likely to occur in desired family size in the next several years. Young women today expect to have, on average, two children. Small families, for several reasons, will remain the norm in our society for the foreseeable future.

6. Divorced

Statistics reveal that in 1980 one out of every two first marriages ended in divorce. Since 1980, there has been little change in the divorce rate but there is some reason to expect the rate to drop somewhat in the near future. At the present time it is probably more accurate to say that forty to fifty percent of first marriages will end in divorce.

7. Serial marriages

Of all divorced people, eighty percent will eventually re-marry. Over sixty percent of re-marriages will end in divorce. This phenomena of marriage-divorced-remarriage-divorced has given rise to the term "Serial Monogamy." The divorce rate for second and subsequent marriages is slightly higher than the rate for first marriages. This fact indicates that the pattern of serial marriages is here with us to stay.

8. Single Parent Families

A direct result of the high divorce rate is a growth in the number and percent of people who live in single parent situations. In recent years, divorce has been the largest contributor to the growth in the number of one parent families. About forty-three percent of all one parent families in 1986 were maintained by a divorced parent. Nine of every ten single parent families in the United States are mother-child(ren) families—a statistic that has remained virtually unchanged over the past thirty years. Currently, close to one fourth of the nation's 60 million children under eighteen live with only one parent. By 1990, it is predicted that thirty percent of children will be living in single parent families. In addition, half of *all* children will have spent some time in a single parent family before reaching the age of eighteen.

9. Stepfamilies

Remarriage is leading to an increase in the number and percent of families involving “Step relationships.” Sixteen percent of all married couples today involve step situations and there is little question that the proportion will continue to grow. The introduction of a substantial number of stepfamilies, blended families and/or re-constituted families into United States society has happened so fast that there is little information about the impact of this phenomena on the lives of children. The small but rapidly growing body of knowledge about these families indicates that stepfamilies are more complex and in some respects more fragile than other families. Relationships are expected to be somewhat of a confusing tangle as a result of people living longer and changing mates. Tomorrow’s children will grow up with several sets of parents and an assortment of half and step siblings. Over the next five decades society will redefine its concept of the family. Through the pattern of divorce and remarriage a whole new network of kinship will arise. There will be double sets of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and brothers and sisters as well as former in-laws and ex-spouses—all of them making up the newly divorced-remarried-extended family.

An article in the May 9th, 1983 edition of *U.S. News and World Report* includes the following description of a family in the year 2033: “On a spring afternoon in the year 2033 the Jones’ are gathering to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to Junior. Present at the occasion is Dad and his third wife, Mom and her second husband, Junior’s two half brothers from his father’s first marriage, his six stepsisters from his mother’s spouse’s previous unions, a one hundred year old great-grandpa, all eight of Junior’s current grandparents, assorted aunts, uncles in-law and step-cousins.”

D. Economic Factors

There are many economic factors which have a substantial impact on the American family.

1. Old Corporate Environment

Work in America is being transformed by forces whose intensity is increasing on a global scale. It seems clear that the period from 1946 to 1974 may be labeled an era of corporate social responsibility. Profit became one of a number of corporate goals taking its place alongside growth, job creation, social responsiveness and a host of other goals. The large corporation was viewed as a social economic institution whose resources and attention should be directed to its constituents—consumers, stockholders, employers (and their dependents), management, community, and society. As long as a satisfactory level of profit could be sustained, management was free to pursue its other goals. Frequently, the community and family benefited from these “other corporate goals.”

2. New Corporate Environment

The combination of fierce foreign competition and lax regulation or deregulation has created a corporate environment that will witness continuing workplace rationalization, that is, the application of scientific management to achieve maximum efficiency. Competitiveness, lean and mean, and down-sizing have become the new terms of success. What once were sources of corporate pride—high wages, community programs and so forth are now frequently viewed as economic wasteful programs that must be reduced or eliminated. The corporate goal of job creation has either diminished in importance or been eliminated. Rationalization often results in

massive employee layoffs, forced wage concessions from unions, two tiered wage structures, plant closings, transfer of work and jobs overseas, middle management layoffs, reduction in research; elimination of amenities, an investment in new technology automation and robotization. The fears of takeover that propel these changes are real and well-founded.

3. Global Economy

Another fear for corporations relates to the global economy. Internationalization of the economy has been accompanied by a global finance capitalism. Finance capitalism is the stage of capitalism that accentuates the making of profit and de-emphasizes the making of goods, delivery of services and creation of jobs. In their search for profits, capitalists in many nations are investing vast sums of money around the world. This internationalization exerts downward pressure on wages and the standard of living in the United States. This has a direct effect upon the family.

It appears that a correlate of increased international economic interdependency of corporations under financed capitalism is a loss of their national and community identity. We will continue to see corporate restructuring that results in community upheavals, job losses, human dislocation, and the closure of profitable companies that could not meet new profit criteria. The negative effects on families are both immediate and long-standing.

4. Corporate Environment and the Family

One result of corporate restructuring is an economic squeeze on middle management, the middle class, and consequently the family. For the past thirty years the middle class has been a continuous anchor of traditional values and forms. That anchor is being further weakened. Social agencies are increasingly seeing first time clients, formerly members of the middle class, come through their doors with problems associated with lower class poverty.

For a majority of Americans work is central to their identity, their self-esteem, and their shared goals. That centrality, however, is shifting in the face of competing values and institutions. Looking ahead we see value conflicts between job and family responsibilities looming increasingly larger. Neither society nor women have been able to resolve the role and value conflicts ensuing from the massive entry of women into the work force, the redefinition of the family and the legitimization of various family living arrangements and raising children. Women who want work, family, and motherhood may find it difficult to perform all roles adequately. Men, too, are torn by conflicts between family and work values. Many men in the work force believe that they sacrifice their careers and ambitions for the sake of their families by foregoing educational opportunities in order to continue to earn a living. They choose existing occupational opportunities rather than holding out for the ideal job, refuse transfer and promotion to other parts of the country, or turn down risky opportunities for the sake of family security. For both young men and women a growing temporary solution to such role conflicts is to postpone or avoid marriage while pursuing a career, although they may live together in the meantime.

5. Future Economic Trends

In the next decade we will see the continuance of the following trends in the workplace:

- a. Further shift from a manufacturing to an information/ service economy.
- b. New technologies requiring relatively few people with professional and technical skills, but many relatively low paid operators and maintenance people who will be competing with foreign pay levels.

- c. Regional shifts and imbalances in employment opportunities.
- d. Rapid obsolescence of professional and technical skills.
- e. A roller coaster economy preceding through two or more recessions.
- f. Growth of entrepreneurialism and new businesses accompanying the downsizing of major corporations.
- g. Finance capitalism promoting a search for profits that accelerates business restructuring.

The percentage of women participating in the work force is expected to rise from the current fifty-five percent to more than sixty percent by the year 2000. With men's participation rates declining women should constitute forty eight percent of the work force by the year 2000. The increased opportunities for women to enter the work force is probably the most important reason for increases in never-married rates, incidents of divorce, number of single-adult-with-children households, and number of households with non-related individuals. The pulls of career, self-fulfillment, and economic independence are often accompanied by the threat of decrease in standard of living and dissatisfaction with the role of homemaker. Full time jobs are held by seventy percent of working mothers.

How is the workplace adapted to the needs of women workers? At best, adaptation has proceeded haltingly and inadequately. From a family perspective, a number of useful benefits could be provided, including flex time, child-care assistance, flexible leave policies of both sexes, job sharing programs, and employee assistance programs.

The mismatching of workplace-skill needs and work-force qualifications should continue through the 1990's. But, the demographic changes in the work force in conjunction with the changing needs of the workplace have created enormous problems for the family. Both the family and the workplace must adapt to these changes—the family by developing new values and relationships to meet their changing roles and conditions and the workplace by providing a better environment and more realistic benefits to meet the current and future needs of the family.

Average wage and salary increases over the next decade should show the same modest growth (approximately four percent) that they exhibited in the past three years. These averages, however, mask a growing inequality in income distribution.

What is happening to middle income groups is to be particularly noted. The proportion of households with an annual income between \$19,000 and \$47,000 in constant 1986 dollars decreased from fifty-two percent to forty-four percent from 1978 to 1986. One third of those who were displaced joined the upper income groups and two thirds fell out of the middle class. Further differences in income will persist on a regional basis. The bi-coastal prosperity split of California and the East Coast, sixteen states with forty-two percent of the population, accounted for seventy percent of economic growth from 1981 to 1985. During this period average wages in the Heartland States declined significantly compared with wages in the bi-coastal States. The Heartland accounts for fifty-eight percent of the population and yet accounted for only thirty-one percent of the share of economic growth between the periods of 1981 to 1985. (The Heartland States have a high percentage of WELS members.)

E. Psychological Factors

What is the purpose of the family unit? What sets it apart from other social systems? Carter and McGoldrick in their book, *The Family Life Cycle*, state the following: "First, membership in a particular family unit, once conferred through birth, adoption, or marriage, is virtually permanent, ending only at death. The second property distinguishing the family from

other social systems is that the relationships are principally affectional in nature. Like all other organizations, families place a high value on competence in instrumental role performance. But unlike all others, the family places a still higher value on attachment, caring, and personal loyalty...so families are unique in permanence of membership and in the primacy of affectional relationships over task performance. What, then, are their needs that are addressed uniquely in the family unit? There are two fundamental orders of such needs:

1. Needs Pertinent to Survival

The family unit is uniquely committed to the physical security of all members, hence to such needs as food and shelter.

2. Needs Pertinent to Development

Additionally, the family is committed to the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development of its members, and hence is committed to creating and sustaining the sense of being valued, the sense of being cared about, the sense of being accepted "As is," and a sense of permanence of affectional ties. The family unit is, in this sense, a primary context for "Need-attainment."

Dr. David Olson and Associates from the University of Minnesota have been studying the functioning of a family. Their model of family patterns include two factors: adaptability and cohesion. Adaptability is the family system's capacity for providing leadership and structure with flexibility. Adaptability is on a continuum with rigidity at one end and chaos on the other. Functioning family systems have the capacity to be adaptable with a flexible structure throughout the various stages of family life. (Family stages are: starting out-new parents-middle years-empty nest-retirement.)

Cohesion refers to togetherness and the connectedness of members within the family system. Cohesion refers to issues of emotional closeness and distance among family members. Decision-making procedures and feelings of support among family members are factors involved in family cohesion. At one end of the cohesion continuum is enmeshed (entangled) and at the other end is disengaged (disconnected). A functioning family develops the capacity for its members to be separate and unique individuals yet emotionally supportive of each other.

Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain in their book, *Secrets of Strong Families*, have listed six characteristics of strong and healthy families. These were determined after much research on healthy families. These words and concepts can help us to focus on the essential qualities that mark healthy family living. The six are: commitment, time together, appreciation, communication, coping ability, and spiritual wellness.

Commitment is the glue which holds the family together even during difficult times. It is lived out through a mutual feeling of trust and a shared sense of responsibility for each other. Time together is an important priority in healthy families. Family members need to make both qualitative and quantitative time available for each other. *Appreciation* is shown by family members in specific, meaningful ways. These create an atmosphere of love and support in which family members feel loved and can express their love to one another and to others outside of the family. *Communication* between family members is direct, caring, and constructive. What is communicated by each person is valued and accepted even if there are differences of opinion. *Coping ability* refers to the families' capacity to deal constructively with stress and crises. Every family experiences difficult times. Members of functional or healthy families support each other during these trying times and are able to accept changes which may need to occur. *Spiritual*

wellness refers to a family's spiritual beliefs. It is interesting to note that the research in this study clearly shows that strong families do share the same spiritual beliefs and values.

A familiar and common wall plaque indicates that parents give their children two things: roots and wings. *Roots* refer to issues of identity and a sense of belonging. *Wings* refer to the capacity to grow and mature and develop into responsible human beings. These two words, roots and wings, tend to capture the essential purposes of parenting and family living.

An article on psychological absence within the family speaks to the psychological issue. In the April 1986 issue of *The Marriage and Family Review*, Pauline Boss states: "Therefore, we generalize to any level that the psychological absence of a component (there, but not there to interact with the rest of the system) will cause more disequilibrium in the system than total absence of that component since total absence would at least permit reorganization of the system where roles could be reassigned to the active components."

Her last hypothesis states: "The lower the level of interaction from a member of a system perceived to be a part of that system, the higher the level of pathology in that system." Think about the example of the birthday party in 2033. Consider all of the low level interactions by various family members in that group who are perceived to be a part of that family system and yet are not actively involved in meaningful connections.

The previous paragraphs clearly indicate the psychological factors which are essential to family life in America. One needs to consider the psychological factors within the context of the social and economic factors which were previously mentioned. Consideration of these three factors within a family unit has been commonly referred to as a "Balancing Act." The American family must be able to balance the aforementioned psychological factors with the impact of the social and economic factors which were previously mentioned. As was stated earlier, the social and economic changes have been so rapid that they have not permitted the family unit to adequately make adjustments to the rapidly changing social and economic issues. At the present time, there are no clear-cut guidelines as to the manner in which the "Balancing Act" can be best accomplished within the family. Since it is predicted that the rate of change will be slowed in the future, it is hopeful that certain changes can be made in order to be able to help the family to better balance the social, economic and psychological factors in the future.

A closing comment. All references to the definition and concept of family include words such as attachment, sharing, intimacy and belonging. Human beings develop a sense of identity from the sociological, psychological and spiritual processes involved in the interactions within the family unit. It definitely appears as though the development of a sense of identity within the family unit is becoming increasingly more difficult. Perhaps the greatest challenge of the "Balancing Act" is to be able to develop significant affectional connections among family members within a society which, for the many reasons already stated, is experiencing dislocations and disconnections.