

1. The changing American family: an overview from 1965 to 2015

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INTRODUCTION

With the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that welcomed same-sex marriage in June 2015, the concept of the American family was once again reformed. The turnabout on marriage reflects society's changing opinions, values and attitudes toward same-sex marriage; and, I might argue, the American 'family' as we know it. Indeed, the changes in marriage, childbearing and family formation have been equally dramatic (and not confined to the United States). The long-standing link between the initiation of sex and marriage has broken down. Marriage, at least as we have known it, has weakened in most nations. Cohabitation has become more widespread and acceptable in almost all Western countries. Rates of non-marital childbearing have risen; childbearing, especially in marriage, occurs much later; rates of childlessness are growing quickly; and as I will discuss, social class differences in family formation in the United States have become more pronounced with growing inequality.

Although many lament the passing of the 'traditional' family, one wonders if there ever was such a thing. Certainly from my perspective – a student of family change for the past half-century – the bedrock 'traditional' family was never really evident, save perhaps for a short-lived time in the mid-twentieth century; a time we now hold up as the 'golden era' of the family. But a closer look reveals that this golden era was not only short-lived, but perhaps an anomaly.

This chapter chronicles the rapid changes in the American family from my own particular vantage point as a sociologist and family scholar. I have witnessed and studied changes in the American family system from the time I was in graduate school in the mid-1960s to the present, and the change that has occurred over the past half-century was simply unimaginable back then. Indeed, my mentor and thesis advisor, William J. Goode, arguably the most influential family scholar of the past century, missed the mark when it came to foreseeing the future of the Western family

system. When he published his landmark book on family change in 1963, it was impossible to fathom the changes that would take place. In this chapter, I provide an overview of these changes, a set of reasons why the changes occurred, and a commentary on the underlying sources of tension created by the new, more class-based family system that has emerged in the United States.

THE 'IDEAL' VANISHES

In the mid-1960s, when I began my study of teenage parenthood in Baltimore, the marriage pattern of the post-war years – romantic, almost impetuous early marriage – was still largely intact. Little did I know then, but I would have a ringside seat to the breakdown of this standard of early marriage. The changes that I was witnessing among black teens would foreshadow trends in non-marital childbearing that would soon sweep through the rest of the lower-income, less-advantaged population.

At the time, almost all the pregnant white teens in my study (about one-fifth of the sample) married before their child was born. The few that did not, gave up their children for adoption. Black pregnant teens, however, faced a different set of choices shaped by a lack of steady employment and poor prospects for finding jobs in the immediate future among the fathers of their children. At the time, well-paying, low-skilled jobs were beginning to leave American shores, a trend that would also affect white working males within just a few years. Mothers frequently counselled their daughters to postpone marriage until they and the fathers had completed their education and found employment. 'I told her not to marry him just to give the child a name', was a phrase I heard often in the interviews. 'Wait until he has something more to offer you', mothers counselled. The daughters did not always take their mothers' advice, but almost all confessed later that they wished they had (Furstenberg 1976).

It was becoming clear that the 'logic' of early marriage was beginning to no longer make sense to the most disadvantaged women and their families, and as more African Americans began to eschew early marriage, rates of non-marital childbearing among them soared. Had I begun my study 15 or 20 years later, I would have heard the same discussions among the families of the white teenagers. By then, the trade-off for pregnant women between a precipitous marriage and having a child outside of marriage had changed for the vast majority of American women, and the stigma of non-marital childbearing had all but disappeared.

So how did we get from here to there, and why did the changes unfold so rapidly? The story is complex and certainly not caused by a single event or

action. A transformation in cultural norms and attitudes interacted with structural upheavals in work, wages and gender roles. But the first ripple in the changing landscape became apparent with the burgeoning women's movement that accompanied women's greater participation in the labour force.

In 1963, before I began my work in Baltimore, William J. Goode predicted a general convergence to the conjugal family of two parents and their children with well-defined gender roles. How wrong he turned out to be.¹ Elsewhere I have argued (Furstenberg 2013) that Goode simply did not see what was practically staring him in the face in the 1960s: an impending gender revolution that unsettled the seeming inevitability of the conjugal family. Even before Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* unleashed a movement, scholars (Bernard 1942; Komarovsky 1946) had detected a restlessness among women, born of a cultural contradiction in well-educated families. In such families, parents had been sending their daughters to college in growing numbers, only to expect them to go from college directly to their husband's home as a homemaker. The growing frustration with this role led many young women directly into the workforce for the first time. Meanwhile, among the less affluent and those without college degrees, women were entering the workforce as well; for other reasons, in part to supplement eroding male wages to maintain rising living standards that had characterized the post-war era. Some were also supporting children, with the rise in non-marital childbearing and divorce rates. As an indication of just how rapid a change this was, in the 1960s, 38 per cent of women were in the workforce. By 1980, more than half were in the workforce; and in 2000, six in ten women were working outside the home, and with greater frequency when they had young children.

At the same time, the availability of widespread family planning services and, especially, the advent of oral contraceptives, allowed women to exercise greater control over the timing of their children's births (Furstenberg 2007). For the first time, unmarried women could initiate sex without the fear of getting pregnant. In 1973, the Supreme Court affirmed the right to legal abortion, giving women another strategy for managing ill-timed and unwanted pregnancies. The growing practice of family planning facilitated and extended the work lives of women who increasingly were being counted on as supplementary wage earners or household heads. Increasingly, white women began to hedge their bets against dependency on men, much as African American women had long done, by becoming more economically self-sufficient.

Although demographic and historical scholars have not completely sorted out all of the precise paths of influence, what we do know is that from the late 1960s to the present, in a broadly linear fashion, women

entered the labour force in growing numbers, marriage age began to rise, women began to feel more empowered and even compelled to pursue careers and full-time employment, use of contraceptives steadily increased, and the fertility of married couples declined accordingly.

THE EMERGENCE OF A TWO-TIERED FAMILY SYSTEM

As these changes took hold, a split began to appear between families in the upper- and low-income brackets, as inequality rose sharply from the 1980s to the present. As a result, the United States began to move toward a two-tiered family system. In the top tier of well-educated and affluent Americans, couples typically do not marry until late in their twenties or early thirties. There is now usually an extended period of cohabitation where the relationship is time-tested before they marry and before having children.

This delay occurred for a number of reasons. The time it takes to complete education has increased as children from privileged families, (financially) supported by their families, now expect not only to complete college but also to gain experience in the labour market and then return to university to receive further graduate training. They have come to regard early adulthood as a staging period for launching a career and family, but they are in less of a hurry to do so than they once were. Marriage itself is no longer the signal event that used to be, the mainspring in the transition to adulthood. If anything, it has been relegated to a second stage that occurs once education has been completed and economic autonomy is established.

As I have written elsewhere (Furstenberg 2011), marriage is increasingly regarded as less of a pledge to commitment than a celebration of commitment that has already been demonstrated. Marriage is also a transition, signalling that the couple is ready to have a family. They have acquired, in the words of some, 'the marriage mentality' (Kefalas et al. 2011). In other words, they are ready and able to settle into family life because the couple have deemed that they are emotionally well suited to each other and have sufficient resources to support a family, even if they have not decided that they want children immediately or, for that matter, ever. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that when marriages occur, their prospects of surviving are greater than they were 50 years ago (Goldstein and Kenney 2001).

In the second tier, couples generally begin forming unions – though rarely marriages – earlier than their well-educated counterparts; almost as

swiftly as happened 50 years ago (Manning et al. 2013).² Often a pregnancy is involved. Although in the past an impending pregnancy typically meant marriage, today that is less likely to occur among those with less education. Forty per cent of women with only a high school degree have a child before marrying. And it is here that we see another divergence from their better-off peers: only 10 per cent of those with a college degree have a child before marrying (Cherlin 2009).

These higher rates of non-marital births arise for several reasons. Lower-income and less-educated couples are far more likely to have an unintended birth because they are less adept at practising contraception and have less access to abortion in the event that they become pregnant (Guzzo and Payne 2012). Arguably, they are less motivated to avoid a birth, too, if only because they have less to lose if an early birth occurs. Elsewhere, I have argued that the political culture in the United States provides less support for pregnancy prevention than in many European nations (Furstenberg 2007). Whatever the explanations, many lower-income couples are more likely than their better-off counterparts to enter partnerships facing impending parenthood. Although the new partnership is often viewed as a prelude to an eventual marriage, their hopes usually go unrealized. Most of these unions do not survive the test of time; indeed, they frequently end before children even enter school (Carlson et al. 2011).

Why has the family system of poor Americans diverged so sharply from that of their better-off counterparts? Often this debate splits into two camps: the cultural explanations and the structural explanations (see, for example, the debate generated by Charles Murray's book *Coming Apart*; Murray 2012). In my view, this debate is crudely constructed. Individuals and the family systems that they build must adapt to changing circumstances. Doing so often involves altering time-honoured practices that no longer work or have become unattainable. Both these behavioural adaptations and the accounts that people provide to explain their behaviour are likely to change over time more or less simultaneously. Cultural change usually accompanies – sometimes preceding and sometimes lagging – changes in economic circumstances (see Small et al. 2010). This adaptive process usually feeds itself as cultural norms adapt to current structural realities, and vice versa. This is surely part of the reason of why cohabitation in the United States became so prevalent over such a short span of time and is quickly becoming an alternative to formal marriage among couples with limited means and prospects.

The larger backdrop under which the two-tiered family has emerged is the growth of economic inequality. Though much of this growth has been driven by the rapid increase at the very top of the income distribution, it has also been fed by the economic stagnation of incomes in the bottom

two-thirds of the income distribution. The median earnings (inflation-adjusted) of all working-age men, including those who are not currently working, have declined by 19 per cent since 1970, despite sharp productivity growth and rising gross domestic product (GDP). Men with less education saw even sharper declines: 41 per cent between 1970 and 2010 for those with just a high school education.³

The growth in inequality has made the family system that was in place 50 years ago far more difficult to sustain for lower-income and less well-educated couples; in other words, they are compelled to settle for cohabitation because they believe that a successful marriage has become something that is out of their reach (Edin and Kefalas 2005). This, in turn, leads young adults to question the wisdom of marrying before they are 'settled'. In a recent paper that examined the process of settling into permanent relationships, young couples told of the difficulties of becoming committed when they are still trying to complete their schooling and enter a job with some future prospects (Kefalas et al. 2011). The problem for many couples in the bottom and even the middle one-third of the socio-economic distribution is that they may never enjoy the level of security that their counterparts expected or had 50 years ago.

Young adults facing financial insecurity today face considerable churn in their relationships; the relationships are less likely to survive because of the very reason that leads couples to cohabit rather than marry: the absence of resources. Lower-income couples are under constant economic pressure, a source of guilt and resentment that not infrequently leads to conflict and recrimination. Often, these recriminations take the form of 'gender mistrust'. Women complain that men are not ready to stop running around and settle down; men, in turn, complain that their partners expect too much from them (Furstenberg 1995; Waller 2002). As the cultural norms began to erode, problematic marriages were less likely to survive because community and religious disapproval softened. At the same time, cohabitations became a route to marriage, an alternative to marriage, or merely a temporary arrangement. The strong American propensity for 'choice' largely eclipsed the ideal of 'till death us do part'.

Communication, problem-solving skills, the development of trust – particularly when these attributes are not cultivated in childhood – are in short supply in families where parental education is low, work is unstable and life is stressful. These interpersonal skills can be acquired in later life through education, work life and experience in relationships, but lower-income couples do not easily develop them, especially when they enter relationships early in life and especially with offspring on the way, as is amply demonstrated in both the Fragile Families Study and the Baltimore Study. The result of this churn is a growing complexity in family forms, including

'blended' families and children from multiple partners. What this holds for the American family is as yet unclear.

THE GROWTH OF COMPLEX FAMILIES

In the Baltimore Study, I saw the beginning of a new form of family: children from multiple partners. There, both men and women who had children from an early relationship often moved on quickly to have additional child in a new partnership (which typically occurred soon after the earlier relationship dissolved). Whether they did so deliberately or not, they appeared to regard another child as a means of securing this new union; hoping that parenthood a second (or third) time would generate a sense of commitment to the new family on the part of their current partner (Furstenberg and King 1998; Furstenberg et al. 1987).

This effort frequently fails. If anything, having children with their new partners only reduces their prospects of forming a stable second union. Multi-partnered fertility brings a series of new challenges to couples who are often ill-suited to manage them by dint of their limited resources and interpersonal skills. Of course, college-educated couples also have children with more than one partner (usually after divorce and remarriage), but far less frequently than among those with less education and income (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Evenhouse and Reilly 2010; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007; Qian et al. 2005).

The impact on children is still debated. There is little evidence that household complexity per se creates greater problems for children's development and welfare. However, cross-cultural studies show that characteristic strains exist in families created by plural marriages or joint families. As far as I know, there is no evidence that children growing up in complex households in family systems across the globe experience more problems in later life; indeed, there are reasons to expect just the opposite if multiple caregivers (parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts) provide more attention and care to children in the household. The greater the number of parent figures, one might hypothesize, the greater the investment in children so long as the attention and care is stable and coordinated. There are institutionalized patterns of authority, control and caring in joint families and in households with plural marriages in parts of Africa and Asian countries, where these family systems are common (Altman and Ginat 1996; Hill and König 1970; LeVine and New 2008). Moreover, complex family systems are generally associated with the presence of greater – not fewer – resources, in stark contrast to the pattern of multi-partnered fertility that characterizes the family formation patterns of lower-income

Americans. But this is all still speculation, as very little is known about how such families in the United States function: whether and how biological parents and step-parents or social parents (parents formed by cohabitation) collaborate, how they relate to biological and non-biological children, and the practices of extended kin in family systems created by multi-partnered fertility.

However, there is a great deal of research on the complex family systems created by divorce and remarriage (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Ryan et al. 2008; Sweeney 2010). And much of it points to distinctive problems in terms of conflict for couples and negative behaviour among their children (Smock and Greenland 2010).

One reason for these poorer outcomes is greater competition for fewer resources in these families. Parents (mostly fathers) must allocate money, time and emotional support to biological children with whom they may not be living, and stepchildren who may be part of their current household but with whom they have tenuous relationships. Given the limited supply of these resources, the average investment in children is likely to be lower than it is in a comparable nuclear family, if only because of the greater number of obligations that must be managed across different households (Thomson and McLanahan 2012). Similarly, organizing time and establishing regular routines across households is difficult, especially among parents who may harbour misgivings or jealousy. Parenting responsibilities are complicated to work out when ex-partners feel aggrieved and supplanted. Divorce and remarriage also frequently disrupt intergenerational exchange. Grandparents may not see their biological grandchildren (especially if they reside with the other parent). They may be reluctant to treat their step-grandchildren equally to their biological grandchildren. This can produce tensions across the generations.

All of these issues arise in a much more acute form among unmarried couples who have children in successive partnerships for a variety of reasons. For example, bonds between cohabiting couples are often weaker than they are for married couples. The lack of institutionalization among cohabiting couples suggests that parenting problems surrounding authority and control in the family could be more common. For example, social parents might be inclined to defer to biological parents even when the latter are uninvolved in childrearing. Or, conversely, they might find themselves competing with biological parents living apart from their children. They may expect their partner's ex to help out in supporting his children and resent the financial burdens imposed if he does not. The unclear boundaries of parental responsibilities may create conflicts that undermine the relations in both new and former partnerships.

Children may receive even less investment from social parents than they

do from stepparents. In addition, extended kin may withhold support that they would otherwise provide in the event of a marriage. The parents of the surrogate partner may invest as much in the grandparent role as they would if the couple were married. Finally, we know relatively little about the ties that develop between full and half siblings in childhood and beyond.

Possibly, as legal and social conventions respond to the new realities of provisional families, relationships across households and the obligations they entail may become more institutionalized. In the meantime, they constitute both a less stable and a less well-established form of the family. Although many developmental researchers, not to mention social critics, think that the complexities of multi-partnered fertility contribute to poorer prospects of children's success in later life (Brown 2010; Sassler 2010), at this stage, our speculations outrun the data required to test them.

INEQUALITY AND THE TWO-TIERED FAMILY SYSTEM IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The changes in the family system that have occurred in the United States, notably the weakening of marriage and the increase of non-marital child-bearing, are widespread throughout Europe and other Anglo-speaking nations. However, it is not as clear whether the two-tier family system that has emerged in the United States is as evident elsewhere. Nor is it clear that the emergence of multi-partner fertility is as common in Europe. Thomson (2012) finds that the rate of multi-partnered fertility is far lower in Sweden and several other European nations, for example, though she suggests that multi-partnered fertility may be more prevalent in some Eastern European nations that have very high rates of union instability.

It is entirely possible that local conditions such as culture and public policy, the strength of religious institutions, and the quality and openness of the educational and employment systems, will and do moderate the impact of family change in Europe. In the United States, the volatility of relationships occurs in part because young adults, especially those who are more economically disadvantaged, are far less adept at practising contraception and preventing unwanted pregnancies than their counterparts in Canada, Australia and most of Europe (Mosher and Jones 2010). In addition, Americans' greater geographic mobility, which can dilute family authority, and the higher levels of poverty and economic disadvantage in the United States, may weaken commitment to existing partnerships (Cherlin 2009). Yet how long this US distinction will prevail is uncertain.

CONCLUSION

Since my early years in Baltimore observing young women on the cusp of adulthood, I have been witness to an unprecedented change in the American family. The most recent manifestation – the validation of same-sex marriage – is a capstone of sorts, symbolizing the rapid changes in the family. More change is no doubt ahead, as inequality continues to widen and in many respects solidify the trajectories of the more and less affluent young adults. The path to family formation reflects and has different consequences for young adults from families in different economic brackets. Among the affluent, the family system has become more stable; while just the opposite has occurred among young adults from more disadvantaged circumstances.

In large measure, the timing and conditions of first births (the age of the parents and the level of resources that they possess) create the diverging pathways. When births are delayed until first unions have been tested by cohabitation (often leading to marriage), the likelihood that parents will have children by two or more partners declines greatly. If first births are unplanned and occur before the partners have much experience of living together, the union is much less likely to survive and the chances of having a child with another person grows. We still know far too little about the consequences of more complex families for children. For the time being, it makes good sense not to rush into a judgement on the question of whether or how family complexity affects child well-being. Nonetheless, both for theoretical and structural reasons, the chances for children who grow up in complex families may be hindered, because they receive not only less (not more) attention from the parents who assume responsibility for them, but also less material support: resources are often slim in families where child-bearing across partnerships is common.

NOTES

1. In his defence, Goode was correct about many things. Paradoxically, he was able to foresee the global changes in the developing world far more clearly than he did in assuming stability in the West (see also Cherlin 2012).
2. As a signal to declining marriage rates among the less-educated, the Pew Research Center reported in 2010 that for the first time, college-educated young adults were more likely than young adults lacking a bachelor's degree to have married by the age of 30 (Pew Research Center 2010). Although marriage rates are delayed among young adults with college degrees, marriage is more often sidestepped completely by those with less education.
3. Though it may come as a surprise to many, the majority of Americans do not have a college degree. Among those aged 25–34 today, (only) 47 per cent had a post-secondary degree (associate, BA, or graduate) in 2013 (White House 2014).

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