

# CHAPTER 3

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY



Every semester for the last 8 years in my family class I distributed a survey. Two of the questions read:

The state of my family is: (circle one) poor, fair, good, excellent.

The state of America's families is: (circle one) poor, fair, good, excellent.

Without exception, every semester, the majority of students rank their own families as good or excellent and the nation's families as poor or fair.

So I ask them to account for that discrepancy. Initially, they frequently respond that Marquette University (a university in the Jesuit Catholic tradition) students originate from quality families. I point out to them that this response pattern is replicated at the national level as well. When national surveys ask respondents to rate their family, school, or neighborhood and then compare it to the nation's families, schools, or neighborhoods, the outcomes consistently indicate that Americans are generally satisfied with their own condition but think that everyone else's is dismal. The other common explanation proffered is that the students are lying; they don't want to admit that their families are bad too. Okay, that's a possibility and one I can't easily test, though most students swear they're not lying.

So then I ask them whether they think American families are deteriorating or were they always poor or fair. The answers are not so clear this time; but frequently, many, if not most, think American families have worsened. Typically, they point to divorce, teen and nonmarital births, single-parent families, working moms, and kids in day care centers as evidence of deterioration.

Most of these indicators are higher than they were 50 years ago, but some are lower than they were 10 years ago. Americans often think the rates of violent crime, teen births, and divorce continue to skyrocket when in fact each has been declining for at least a decade. Other indicators have improved as well. As *U.S. News & World Report* pointed out in 1997, more children finish high school and go to college than did in the 1950s; a lower proportion of children live in poverty than in the 1950s; today's teens are much less likely to smoke, be involved in alcohol-related traffic accidents, or die of drug overdoses than in the 1970s; a higher percentage of families have plumbing and electricity than ever before; and both infant mortality and life expectancy have improved (Whitman, 1997; also Skolnick, 1991).

The American public's propensity to depend on media sound bites for their information about the country's state of affairs exacerbates the tendency to idealize past family life. People rely on the headlines instead of the whole story, and by their nature the media focus on the exceptional or sensational.

It's cliché but true that the dog biting the man would not be considered newsworthy but the rare situation of the man biting the dog would make the news.

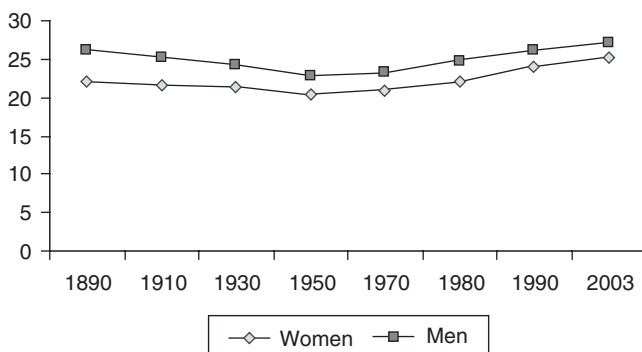
In short, the way one perceives the state of American families is in part affected by how one conceives the past, to which point in history one chooses to compare the present, and how well one understands the information presented in the media. This will become more clear as we go through the following historical overview of American families.

## American Families Through the Centuries

American families are not stagnant entities. Rather, fluid and dynamic, they have adapted to a swiftly forming country encountering major social and economic transformations. These transformations are beyond any one person's control; they may even be beyond one's consciousness. Yet individuals and families are impacted by them and inevitably respond to them. Individual and societal values change, sometimes precipitating these transformations, sometimes subsequent to them. Frequently, however, what is perceived as a value change may merely be an adaptation in the means by which one fulfills the same underlying value. For instance, the median age at first marriage has risen in the last 50 years. As you can see in Figure 3.1, in 1950, women were about 20 years old and men were about 23 when they first married. In 2003, women were about 25 and men were about 27 when they married. Some might interpret this as evidence that young people no longer value marriage; they postpone it as long as possible to fulfill their own individualistic interests. But if we look back to 1890, we find that women married at 22 and men at 26. Were they more selfish than people in 1950 too? Maybe, but the most reasonable explanation was that in 1890, many men had to wait to inherit land before they could establish their own families. Others were immigrants who needed to settle before they could send for a wife. But in 1950, the post-World War II economy was such that men could obtain a decent-paying job and establish a family immediately after high school. In 2002, young people, women included this time, needed more education to ensure financial stability sufficient to marry. The underlying value remained constant; people want to start their family lives on the best financial footing possible. But the means to that end keep shifting. As we go through the history of American family life, keep in mind that societal forces, such as the economy, political events, and technological development, interact with human needs to produce various family forms and practices.

For simplicity's sake, I divide American history into three economic eras—agricultural, industrial, and service. These eras have no distinct time

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**Figure 3.1** Median Age at First Marriage by Gender, 1890 to 2003

SOURCE: Fields (2004)

boundaries; the country gradually transitioned from one to another. For practical purposes, however, we can say that the agricultural era largely coincided with the colonial period in America, from the 1500s through the 1700s. Industrialization began in the early 1800s and experienced its demise by the 1970s, when manufacturing jobs were supplanted in significant numbers by service occupations.

### The Agricultural Era (Colonial Period 1500 to 1800)

Even in the agricultural period, America was racially and ethnically diverse. At the beginning of this era, several million indigenous people lived throughout the territory. By the mid-1600s, Africans began entering the country primarily as slaves, and the Europeans who immigrated were largely from northern Europe. By 1790, when the first census was taken, Blacks were more than 16 percent of the U.S. population. The number of Native Americans had been greatly reduced through disease and fighting, so they were less than 13 percent of the population (Schaefer, 2004). The Europeans battled for political dominance and territory, and the English won. As the Europeans confiscated more Native American land, other Europeans were encouraged to immigrate for low-priced, sometimes free, plots of land. Near the end of this period, the American Revolution occurred, and the country changed in status from a British colony to the self-governing United States of America.

Most colonists made their living in agriculture, either by owning and farming land or working on someone else's. The majority of colonists would have been considered self-employed but fairly poor. Wages were not a

significant part of the economy at this time, because most colonists ate what they grew and made their clothes and other products. They didn't need to purchase nearly as much as we do today, and frequently they could barter for commodities they needed. Their health was poor by today's standards. Life expectancy was about 45. Mortality rates (death rates) were high at most ages, especially infancy.

In these tumultuous times, a shortage of women resulted in high numbers of single men. Those who married formed what today's sociologists would call *co-provider* families. Essentially, the household was a place of production. Each member's labor was valued, as it helped to sustain the family. Although this was clearly a patriarchal society, with men having more legal power than women, wives' labor was valued as an economic contribution to the survival of the household as was the husbands'. Men sought strong, skilled wives who could make the journey across country and/or endure the rigors of a low-tech farming life. A gendered division of labor existed, with men usually plowing and planting the fields and hunting, and women tending gardens and chickens, processing foods, and milking cows. To bring in some cash, women and children often did piecework, such as sewing items for sale, in the home.

In such an economy, households were large, but not because they were multigenerational. In fact, contrary to popular myths, multigenerational extended households have never been a common phenomenon in the United States. The reasons should be obvious by now: People didn't live long, and the largely immigrant population was relatively young, as most elders remained in their country of origin. Once here, many families moved again, either west of the Mississippi River or from rural to urban areas. In those migrations as well, it was more likely the young who made the journey and the elders who remained in the rural areas.

Households were large because of high birthrates and the common practice of taking in non-related people. Families gave birth to many children for several reasons: First, they needed children's labor on the farm; second, high infant mortality rates meant a high probability that several of one's children would not survive to adulthood; and third, birth control was rudimentary or nonexistent. Also, families commonly took in "strangers"—boarders, hired hands, slaves, or servants; other people's children hired as apprentices; or people for whom institutions had not yet been invented, such as orphans, the ill, and "ne'er do wells."

Although households were large in terms of members, most American houses were small, only one or two rooms that served an array of functions. At one hour, people might cook and dine in a room, and the next hour sleep there. Privacy was scarce within the family as well as in the community.

Everyone knew what everyone was doing, and if someone violated social norms, punishment was public as well. The stocks, branding, dunking, and whipping were common ways of publicly shaming deviants.

During these centuries, childhood was short, due either to death or to taking on adult responsibilities early. It is estimated that about 10 percent of children died in infancy (one third in poorer communities) and another third died before their 10th birthday (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). Those who survived became economic contributors at an early age. Children were often regarded as adults at the age they would now be starting elementary school (Demos, 1970). Therefore, they often did farm chores, cared for younger siblings, or did piecework on the homestead. Preteens were commonly “put out” to apprentice or serve in wealthier homes. Children were exposed to “adult” behavior. In fact, they often accompanied parents to observe local hangings on a Friday night (Coontz, 1997).

Ironically, the parenting of children was in some ways more egalitarian than it is today. The abbreviated childhood meant neither parent spent as much time doting on each child’s development as modern parents do. Moreover, the extra individuals in the household helped supervise or train the children. In addition, because fathers were viewed as owners of their children, if children exhibited unproductive behavior, the father—more than the mother—was held accountable. Since men were more likely than women to have an education, they were the ones most likely to educate and train their children, particularly their sons. According to family historian Stephanie Coontz (1997), fathers emceed social gatherings, and the small amount of available child-rearing advice targeted fathers, not mothers.

Though divorce was uncommon (it was illegal until 1632), marriages were relatively short. Marriages were entered at relatively late ages (mid- to late 20s) and were frequently terminated by death, desertion, or separation; so the average length of marriage was about 12 years (Coontz, 1992; Laslett, 1971). Although arranged marriages were not practiced by the majority of families, some families advertised or hired matchmakers to locate spouses for their children. The basis for marriage was much more pragmatic than romantic. Unsupervised dating of the kind we know today was virtually nonexistent, but because of poor transportation, couples were occasionally allowed to “bundle,” a practice allowing the couple to sleep together as long as one of them was encased in a duffle bag (Ingoldsby, 2003). Evidently, some of the sacks were threadbare, as it has been estimated that about one third of marriages were precipitated by a pregnancy (Demos, 1970).

Contrary to common perceptions of the past, single-parent families and remarriages creating step-relatives and half-siblings were also quite common, not because of divorce or nonmarital births, which are the main

causes today, but because of the high mortality rates. It is estimated that in the late 1600s, most children in the colonies experienced single parenthood at some point in their childhood, and about one third lost both parents (Darrett & Rutman, 1979). In short, family life during the agricultural era was relatively unstable and unpredictable. One could not count on the presence or the support of one's siblings or parents into adulthood.

Of course, families varied along race and class lines. During these years, Native American families were declining rapidly due to disease and forced assimilation. The existence of African families was largely determined by slave masters' desires. (I will speak in more detail about Black American and Native American family histories in Chapters 9 and 10.) Life expectancy was longer and mortality rates lower among the middle classes, but this was a small segment of the American population.

### The Industrial Era (About 1800 to 1970)

The Industrial Revolution started in Europe and then spread to America, accompanied by a number of other revolutions: technological, medical, and demographic. New scientific discoveries gave birth to new machinery, thus creating the Industrial Revolution, making wages the main source of income, and shifting residential patterns to the city. By 1900, 40 percent of the U.S. population lived in urban areas. These revolutions also produced new medical advancements, vaccines, and antibiotics, which, in turn, lowered the mortality rates of both infants and adults and lengthened life expectancy, thus creating exponential population growth and new stages in life development (childhood, adolescence, old age, retirement, grandparenting).

During this period, the United States expanded through land purchases and annexations to encompass most of North America and several islands off the continent. One of the largest additions was the annexation of half of Mexico after the 1848 Mexican-American War. This and the 1898 Spanish-American War introduced large numbers of Latinos into the United States. Two large waves of immigration also occurred during the industrial era, adding at least 38 million people to the United States. Although the vast majority of these immigrants were Europeans, from the mid-1800s through the early 1920s a significant number of Asians also entered the country. The Civil War and the end of slavery occurred in the 1860s, but they were followed by another century of legal segregation. Although new jobs proliferated with the Industrial Revolution, most of them went to new immigrants, rather than to the newly freed slaves who had resided and labored in America for generations. Two major world wars were also fought, with the United States on the winning side each time, thus catapulting America into

a major geopolitical player and leading some observers to call the 20th century the century of “American Empire” (Smith, 2003).

Families reluctantly accommodated themselves to these rapid, sometimes painful, transformations in the lives to which they were accustomed. Many who had made their livelihood in farming and had expected their children would do the same were displaced by technological advancements that increased agricultural production while eliminating the need for so much human labor. If these displaced people wanted to survive (and most of them did), men who had seen themselves as autonomous, their own bosses, had to move to the city, where they attempted to sell their labor to new manufacturers in what seemed to them alienating working conditions. At first, women and children, especially among new immigrants, took similar jobs, though they were paid less. It is estimated that in a number of cities, children contributed 20 percent of family income (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). Production became increasingly separated from the home, and the home became viewed as one’s private haven in a dog-eat-dog world.

Consequently, a number of changes slowly occurred within American families. First, with the growth of unions, which fought successfully for increased wages and reduced working hours, many male laborers could make enough to support a family. Child labor laws were passed in the late 1930s to prevent children from working under harsh conditions. A mandatory public school system developed to teach new generations enough skills to obtain jobs in this new occupational structure. Eventually, children were considered children at least to the age of 16, when they could lawfully drop out of school. These social and economic changes transformed children’s role in their families from “economic contributors” to “economic burdens.” Thus, childhood became viewed as a critical period of development, frequently divided into psychosocial stages: infant, toddler, preteen, adolescent, and so on.

The separation of work from the home, and the rise in wages, meant that many families became single-provider families. By the 1960s, about 60 percent of families were able to subsist on one income. More important, the single-provider family became the idealized version of the family; that is, most families strived to achieve that status. Wives and husbands both wanted to be able to say that the husbands made enough money to allow the wives to stay home to do unpaid domestic labor and socialize the children. But many families, disproportionately people of color and new immigrants, could not afford the luxury of one income.

Obviously, this shift in economic provision affected gender roles and responsibilities. Men’s role in the family narrowed to the “breadwinner,” the provider. Outside the home most of the day, husbands became honored, sometimes distant, visitors to their families. Essentially, the men’s realm became the public arena, whereas the women’s became more private and



domesticated. Although certain domestic chores became easier, the standards for cleanliness and decoration of homes rose. Although the washing machine and dryer made cleaning clothes easier, people now bought more clothes and changed them more frequently. Unlike the former outhouse, indoor bathrooms had to be cleaned and color-coordinated. The invention of the car enabled women to become chauffeurs and to run errands for products and services that heretofore had not existed or had been delivered to their door. Unlike their husbands' new line of work, women's new form of labor was not compensated, and frequently its economic value went unrecognized. Women were told that their work was a labor of love with intangible rewards that would arrive later.

The increase in life expectancy and the separation of paid work from the home led paradoxically to both stabilizing and destabilizing trends. The potential length of marriage increased; people could celebrate silver and golden anniversaries. Families were generally more stable in the sense that they could count on their family members being around to support each other for longer periods of time. Fewer husbands and wives were widowed at early ages, and the need for orphanages eventually disappeared. Grandparents more often lived to see their grandchildren reach adulthood (currently, about half of grandparents have at least one adult grandchild [Bengtson & Harooytan, 1994]). People could plan for the future and reasonably assume their plans might actually materialize.

On the other hand, if a marriage was unhappy, the partners could no longer expect that they might be released from their marital discomfort through death (preferably their spouse's). As young adults relocated for work and no longer had to wait to inherit the family farm, they had more control over whom they married. And as it became clear that they might be with their spouses for a long period of time, attraction and mutual interests rose in importance on the list of mate selection criteria. But as companionship and romance became the primary motivations for marriage, the divorce rate gradually increased.

The prevalence of various family structures shifted. Single-parent households decreased with the decline of widowhood. And as life expectancy increased, multigenerational family households became somewhat more common, though they never represented a majority of households. At their peak in the mid- to late 1800s, the proportion of extended-family households reached 20 percent (Coontz, 1992). Most American households were family households, as young people remained in their parents' home until they formed their own family households.

Between 1900 and 1970, the average size of the industrial-era household decreased from 4.6 to 3.11 (Fields, 2004). With the decline in infant mortality, parents could have fewer children and still feel relatively confident

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that most, if not all, of their children would survive to adulthood. And, since most families no longer had their own farms, they didn't require as much labor. These factors contributed to the decline in birthrates and also to the decline of non-relatives in the household. Having boarders in one's home continued into the 1900s as a way for many homemakers to contribute to household income, but the need for hired hands, apprentices, and servants decreased. Slavery ended in 1865, which decreased the number of non-relatives residing in the home as well (though having a maid clean one's house weekly was common through the 1950s). Finally, other institutions, such as old-age homes, hospitals, orphanages, and prisons began accommodating people who otherwise might have been cared for by families.

Home and family life became more private. Ironically, though household population declined, houses became larger with more rooms and hallways separating those rooms, so the idea that kids could and should sleep separately from parents and eventually from one another developed. Old holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving, which frequently had been celebrated as a community, often in carnival fashion (Pleck, 2000), became private family gatherings. Wives prepared the house and cooked, while husbands sat at the head of the table to carve the meat. New holidays, such as Mother's Day and Father's Day, developed to honor new family roles, reflect romantic values, and bring dispersed family members together. All holidays became more commercialized, and the family increasingly became a site of consumerism rather than production.

These changes peaked in the 1950s, following the Great Depression and World War II. The economic boom and various government subsidies that followed the war shaped family trends for a period of time. The GI Bill enabled more men to attend college, thus widening the education gap between men and women. The booming economy and the need to make up for time lost during the depression and war led to a jump in the marriage rate and to marrying at earlier ages. New Federal Housing Association housing subsidies and highway construction funds resulted in an explosion of inexpensive suburban housing, which in turn facilitated "White flight" to the "burbs" and increased birthrates. Hence, the Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1962, were largely a result of the postwar economic boom, and they currently account for 38 percent of the American population.

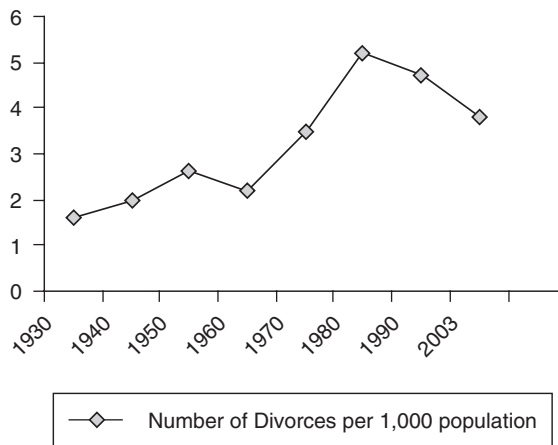
In addition, the divorce rate ebbed and flowed with political and economic upheavals, as you can see in Figure 3.2. The rate increased briefly after World War II (as seen in the 1950 rate), declined again in the 1950s (reflected in the 1960 rate) due to the improved economic situation and the fact that more women were economically dependent on their husbands, unable to consider divorce feasible even if they wanted to. Although the

lower divorce and higher marriage and fertility rates of the 1950s are frequently proffered as proof of family values, it must be remembered that the conditions of the 1950s were unusual.

In many ways, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the hippies of the 1960s were reactions to these changes. The 1950s were good for many White families, but racial segregation in jobs, schools, and public facilities was still enforced. Residential segregation increased with the movement of White families into these newly developing bedroom communities. Prominent women in these suburban communities complained that they felt undervalued, isolated, and disadvantaged educationally and economically. Youth, some of whom joined the hippie movement, saw their families as materialistic, their dads as uninvolved at home, and their mothers as depressed. Songs about the “ticky-tacky, little boxes” (houses in the suburbs) and about fathers who didn’t have time for their kids (“Cat’s in the Cradle”) merged with anti-Vietnam War protests. The American public rode into the 1970s on the tails of these political movements.

### The Service Era (Since the 1970s)

The service era derives its name from the fact that throughout the 1900s, more and more jobs were created in what is called service-sector occupations, such as retail, policing, banking, medicine, computers, social service, janitorial, and so on. Although the transition to service jobs began in the



**Figure 3.2** U.S. Divorce Rate, 1930 to 2003

SOURCES: Clarke (1995); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1988), (2003)

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early 1900s, the process accelerated in the 1970s due to several political and economic events. The 1973 oil crisis increased the price of oil; changes in government policy favored globalization (the movement of jobs and money to other countries); and automation increased the use of computers and other technology and reduced the need for factory workers. The U.S. auto and steel industries declined greatly during the 1970s and 1980s.

Once again, like the transition from agriculture to industrial work, the transition from industrialization to service was a painful period that hasn't yet ended. In the first few years of the new millennium, America lost 2.5 million jobs; 90 percent of them were manufacturing jobs (Uchitelle, 2003). Unions have lost membership and influence. The relationship between worker and employer has eroded. Job security is nearly nil. In the 1940s and 1950s, men could graduate from high school or, for that matter, drop out of high school and still obtain a decent job making enough money to support a family; that is no longer the case. Many manufacturing workers who lost their jobs were forced to retire or re-skill for new service jobs that paid half of their previous hourly wage. It's true that some service professions pay high salaries, but those require more years of schooling, and American higher education is neither mandatory nor free.

Moreover, compared to the 1960s, men's real wages (that is, wages taking account of inflation) have declined. Even though a worker in the 2000s takes home a larger salary than did a worker in 1960, the 2000 salary doesn't purchase as much as the 1960 salary. Also, because service jobs are less physical and more mental, women can do those jobs more easily. These changes have again required families to adjust, whether they wanted to or not.

Consequently, in the last 40 years, we have seen a resurgence of some family patterns prevalent in the agricultural period and the continuation of a number of patterns from the industrial era. Most notably, co-provider (now known as dual-income) families once again are the majority. The percentage of married women in the labor force is now more than 60 percent (as compared with 43 percent in 1970). Although median family income has increased over the past few decades, it has only done so because women are putting in more work hours. Subsequently, gender roles are being renegotiated. Women are sharing men's provider roles; men, however, have exhibited more reticence in adopting domestic roles (as we will see in Chapter 6), thus precipitating a rise in the use of child care providers, maid services, and restaurants.

Second, young people are postponing marriage while they obtain the education necessary to provide financial stability for their families. About 27 percent of the population in 2000 had never been married (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). (Although this is higher than the 22 percent in 1950, it is

lower than the 36 percent who had not yet married in 1900.) Subsequently, women are postponing childbirth by an average of 5 years. In 1980, women ages 20 to 24 had the highest birthrates. By the late 1990s, the majority of women were giving birth between the ages of 25 and 29 (AmeriStat 2003a).

Finally, single-parent households have risen again, representing a higher percentage of all American households now than they did half a century ago. In 1940, female-headed households represented 9.8 percent of all households (10.8 percent of family households); by 2000 they represented 12.2 percent of all households (18 percent of family households). Male-headed households, however, have not increased much as a proportion of all households, remaining stable at slightly over 4 percent. (Fields, 2003).

Unlike in the agricultural era, today's single-parent households are precipitated by divorce and nonmarital births more often than by death. Women's increased access to paid labor has enabled unhappy wives to leave their marriages. Referring back to Figure 3.2, note that the divorce rate increased significantly in the 1960s and 1970s (peaking in 1980) but has since been declining. Nonmarital births, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, have increased continuously throughout this period.

Other trends continue unabated. Household size has continued to drop over the last 25 years to 2.59 people in 2000. One factor has been that birthrates have dropped since the mid-1960s. The fertility rate reached its lowest point of 1.7 per woman of childbearing age in the 1970s. It has since risen a little to 2.1 (AmeriStat, 2003b), but it remains relatively low because workingwomen reduce the number of births they have, and children's dependence on their parents has been extended into their mid-20s due to the need for college.

Nonfamily households have dramatically increased from 19 percent of all households in 1970 to 31 percent in 2000. These households are largely composed of marriage-postponing young adults or previously married elderly living alone or with non-related roommates or cohabiters. The number of elderly living alone has risen due to continued extensions in life expectancy.

Racial diversity also increased during the service era. Immigration laws modified in 1965 resulted in a shift in the racial composition of immigrants from mostly White European to "people of color"; that is, immigrants mostly from Asian and Latin American countries. More than merely reflecting a numerical increase, racial diversity became a more salient social issue as identity politics and multicultural education became more prevalent.

America is not unique in its experience. The service era trends outlined here typify those of many other developed countries as well. For instance, in Canada and many European countries, women now have higher rates of labor force participation than do American women. Consequently, age

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at first marriage for women is 25 to 30 throughout Europe. Whereas heterosexual cohabitation has increased in the United States, accounting for about 5 percent of all U.S. households, the 2000 cohabitation rates in European countries range from 8 percent in Portugal to 55 percent in Sweden. Divorce has increased in most countries, though the American divorce rate still ranks at the top. Although nonmarital births increased to about 33 percent of all U.S. births in 2000, this remains lower than the rates in most of Europe, where they represent up to 75 percent of all births. Divorce and nonmarital births have increased the proportion of single-parent families in most European countries as well. Fertility rates, which have fallen nearly 50 percent in the United States since the Baby Boom, are even lower in many European countries (Kiernan, 2004). Consequently, many European countries are experiencing a labor shortage and an aging population more severely than is the United States.

In sum, the vast majority of societies are in constant flux, forcing families to make subtle, sometimes sudden, adaptations. Even as I describe how a society does family, its way of doing it is changing. American families have responded to societal forces, sometimes unwittingly, other times grudgingly, complaining about how families just aren't the way they used to be while they attempt to hold tight to the old ways of doing things. For instance, even though most married women work outside the home now, many still try to single-handedly prepare the house and food for family holidays, even making the decorations by hand à la Martha Stewart. Most new millennium mothers are now advised to breastfeed their babies, despite the fact that during the 1950s, when most mothers were at home and could have breastfed more easily, formula was the popular method.

Eventually, to relieve the cognitive dissonance that occurs during these periods of transition, family members revise the way they think and feel about the changes. So some co-provider families have adjusted by making family gatherings potluck occasions, or by enlisting husbands' help, or by going to restaurants if they can afford it. Others recognize that divorce, although not the preferable resolution to a bad marriage, may have some advantages for unhappy or abused spouses and provide relief to children caught between inhospitable parents. Every change comes with its costs and benefits.

Taking a historical view "demythifies" family, enabling us to see that some of today's trends are reoccurrences of past trends and that family modifications are as much due to structural forces as they are to cultural values. Such a long-range perspective can help society deal more constructively with problems facing today's families.

## Resources

### Books and Articles

- Coontz, S. (1997). *The way we really are*. New York: Basic Books.
- Mintz, S., & Kellogg, S. (1988). *Domestic relations: A social history of American family life*. New York: Free Press.
- Stacey, J. (1990). *Brave new families: Stories of domestic upheaval in late twentieth century America*. New York: Basic Books.

### Videos

*The changing American family: Decline or transition?* [Motion picture]. (1997). (Available from Insight Media Inc., 2162 Broadway, New York, NY 10024-0621, or at <http://www.insight-media.com>)

This 30-minute video reviews some of the changes in the American family since industrialization.

*Family* [Motion picture]. (1999). (Available from Insight Media Inc., 2162 Broadway, New York, NY 10024-0621, or at <http://www.insight-media.com>)

This 53-minute video takes both a historical and cross-cultural look at family changes.

### Website

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/hiscendata.html>

The U.S. Census Bureau maintains decennial data since 1790 for population and housing.

