

## Chapter 2

# Approaches to Understanding Families

Mainstream approaches to globalization primarily focus on its economic and political manifestations. However, it is within families that globalization is realized. Ideological and material changes in the national and transnational arena intersect with personal decisions that are arrived at in family contexts. As globalization accelerates, so do the choices, dilemmas, opportunities, and outcomes that are accompanied by this dynamic process. Given the volatility of markets, the speed of communication, and the intersection of labor force demands with transnational forces, it is becoming increasingly difficult to predict familial responses to fluctuating economies and policies, as well new representations of alternative lifestyles and roles. The traditional blueprints, that so many individuals rely on in their societies, are increasingly challenged, negotiated, and revised.

Specific phases of the life course, crossgenerational and intergenerational relationships, and accepted forms of private living arrangements are in the process of transformation. As women and men negotiate breadwinning and domestic labor, and as children, youth, and the elderly increasingly occupy new ideological and productive roles, family arrangements are modified and reconceptualized. These transformations, however, are not happening in an equivalent or sequential manner. In the West, differences exist between and within countries in attitudes toward varied lifestyles such as single parenthood, same sex couples, and cohabitation. However, more stark are the differences between the West and the developing world. While representations, ideologies, and even practices, pertaining to different family forms and lifestyles are spreading globally, in some areas, they have been met with nationalistic and fundamentalist responses. This has resulted in a worldwide focus on the intimate arrangements of individuals in the family arena.

Around the globe, virtually, every Western and non-Western society identifies some form of family as part of its basic foundation. Crossculturally, members of contemporary families are engaged with each other in various forms of material, economic, emotional, and ideational exchange. Families also function as the primary site for the early socialization of children, and as a source of identification for adults. Despite ethnographic documentation about the wide variety of family arrangements found in different parts of the world, almost every society privileges certain family forms over others. In fact, as Coontz (2000) explains,

Almost every known society has had a legally, economically, and culturally privileged family form that confers significant advantages on those who live within it, even if those advantages are not evenly distributed or are accompanied by high costs for certain family members. Individuals, who cannot or will not participate in the favored family form, face powerful stigmas and handicaps. History provides no support for the notion that all families are created equal in any specific time and place. Rather, history highlights the social construction of family forms and the privileges that particular kinds of families confer. (p. 286)

The concept of family is imbued with symbolic meaning and lived experiences. And whatever its form, families provide the earliest types of nurturance, protection, and socialization for its members. Families provide the initial foundation for entering into community and societal relations, and they reflect meanings, trends, and conflicts in specific cultures. As we become increasingly interconnected through globalizing forces, family issues and relationships remain of consistent, universal interest and concern to most individuals. In fact, in many places, family issues are often elevated into the public arena and are thought to symbolize the basic health of the larger society.

In some areas of the world, fears about societal change have resulted in large scale movements toward “maintaining” or “restoring” family values”, while in other places, the recognition of a plurality of family forms and relationships has become valorized as reflective of an ever increasing and enriching form of diversity.<sup>1</sup> Families have also been the site for significant feminist critiques, who have questioned the “naturalness” of traditional family arrangements and have highlighted the tie between the ideology of a monolithic family form and the oppression of women. These critiques have elicited widespread, intense cultural disputes, above all, around men’s authority in families, and women’s responsibilities for nurturance (Thorne 1982).

Despite controversy around family forms and functions, kinship and family organization form the basis for much of human existence. Many of the earliest philosophical and ethical writings reflect a preoccupation with family life. For example, Confucius wrote that “happiness and prosperity would prevail if everyone would behave ‘correctly’ as a family member” (in Goode 1982). The microcosm of the family, while perceived as of utmost importance, was also thought to symbolize relations in the larger society. Thus, behaving correctly as a family member also meant fulfilling one’s obligations to the group or society. This same notion of the importance of familial and community relationships is reflected in the Old and New Testaments, the Torah, the Qur’an, and in some of the earliest codified literature in India, the Rig-Veda and the Law of Manu. All emphasize kin relationships and the role of the individual in fulfilling his or her responsibilities to others. Even in distant and historical tribal societies, kinship relations play a crucial role in social structure. From an anthropological perspective, these relationships and accompanying obligatory responsibilities are part of the social fabric that joins individuals together and forms the basis for what we call society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in the U.S. where opposing movements juxtapose “traditional family values” against “new” family forms such as same-sex couples.

In contrast, in contemporary Western and non-Western societies, kinship relations are just one out of a multiple set of affiliations. Today, for many individuals, families are constructed and maintained through social bonds and support networks instead of biological ties. Individuals are forming “families of choice” to whom they turn for emotional, financial, and physical assistance. Global communications such as the Internet, e-mail, and satellite linkups are facilitating these relationships over space and time. While in the past, locale mattered, today social relationships are maintained over great distances with ease. This leads us to a new perspective on families, one that is less mired in the static nature of a family’s form and structure, and, instead, focuses on its dynamic nature. Carrington (2001) suggests that in today’s globalized environment, families need to be recast as open, nebulous systems. “Conceptualizing family as a fluid and dynamic sociospace removes its status as a foundational and enduring social structure. It places emphasis on the activities and shared symbolic systems of people and clearly articulates a vision of individuals moving across various sociospaces in the course of a day or a lifetime.” (p. 193).

More dynamic conceptualizations of families allow us to understand that individuals and their families are actively engaged in constant dialectical negotiations with larger forces that shape their interactions from within, and also with external entities. In contrast to more historical perspectives on families as a unified interest group, today, we recognize that individuals are active agents within families who are engaged in a constant production and redistribution of resources. From this perspective, the family “is a location where people with different activities and interests in these processes often come into conflict with one another” (Hartmann 1981, p. 368). In a globalized context, there is growing uncertainty about which choices will primarily benefit the individual versus those that are of advantage to the familial group, and it is increasingly more difficult to determine whose interests should dominate. Interestingly, however, with all the choices and variations with respect to families that we recognize and acknowledge in our contemporary world, even in the West, individuals still continue to segregate themselves into separate family groups, living in close dwellings (Carrington 2001). In order to understand why the phenomenon of family life persists as a critical aspect of the human experience and the current changes within and around family life, it is instructive to examine some of the debates surrounding who and what are families.

## 2.1 Defining Families

Despite agreement about the pervasiveness and continuity of some form of familial relationships throughout human history, in the current context, there is no single uniform agreed upon definition of what a family is. The revolution in social thought with respect to family issues in the West that had its origins in the upheaval of the 1960s has continued to exert influence on contemporary discussions on families by breaking down unified concepts of “the family.” Despite this conceptual problem,

social scientists and policy makers continue to debate which individuals constitute family and why that should matter.

One of the earliest social scientists to be concerned with identifying the structure and processes of families, Emile Durkheim, emphasized in his work that families took on many forms and yet, formed a core social institution (Lamanna 2002). This concept was elaborated by George Murdock (1949) whose classic crosscultural treatise on families dominated the social sciences from the middle of the twentieth century onward. Using data from both Western and non-Western societies as his basis, Murdock concluded that every society was characterized by family units that are organized around economic cooperation, sexual reproduction, and common residence. His definition, while still in use by some, has been widely criticized due to its functionalist nature. Contemporary theorists point out that the concept of family is really an ideological construct with moral implications (Collier et al. 1992).

Conceptualizations about the form, function, and utility of families change over time and result out of a unique interplay of historical, political, economic, and social forces. We can see this process at work in the current discourse on families. For example, contemporary discussions range from structural definitions of “nuclear” families as composed of men, women, and children to representations of families as emotionally bonded social groups. Different groups emphasize different definitions of families based on a wide range of factors. In surveys, most Americans define family as individuals living together who share close emotional ties and who identify with this group in significant ways. However, Americans are also quite divided on the issue of equating same sex couples with a “legitimate” family form. In contrast, in contemporary Europe, standard understandings of families include gay and lesbian couples. While sentimental and open ended definitions of family, such as in the American case, evoke poignant images, the lack of uniform agreement on family definitions has resulted in much controversy in the social sciences about using family as an analytic category. These debates have also spilled over into the realm of policy formation, with some sides arguing for individual rights instead of family rights, and others standing firm that only certain types of families should be considered as recipients of social benefits. In a more conciliatory fashion, Bogenschneider and Corbett (2004) suggest that “no single definition of family may be possible”. Existing definitions of family might be categorized in two ways: (a) structural definitions that specify family membership according to certain characteristics such as blood relationship, legal ties, or residence; and (b) functional definitions that specify behaviors that family members perform, such as sharing economic resources and caring for the young, elderly, sick, and disabled.” (p. 453).

In the United States, the Census Bureau defines family as two or more people living together who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. In agreement, most Americans indicate that for demographic and policy purposes, families should be defined as a unit made up of two or more people related by blood, marriage, or adoption, who live together to form an economic unit, and raise children (Bogenschneider and Corbett 2004). However, these definitions are at odds with

contemporary manifestations of families. Narrow definitions of family exclude relationship units such as cohabiting couples, homosexual and lesbian couples, foster parents, and grandparents raising children, just to name a few.<sup>2</sup> The debate and controversy around family definitions has taken on political connotations in the United States, with many conservatives advocating the “traditional” family as defined by the census (or even the breadwinner-homemaker form), and most liberals supporting the notion of multiple family forms.

Apart from political debates, a working definition of family is deemed necessary by many, both from a policy as well as a lay perspective. Currently, places of employment, government programs, and other institutions in the United States issue benefits based on a clearly delineated definition of family. However, as we have moved away demographically speaking from the post World War II breadwinner/homemaker family type, that pervades so much of the public consciousness, it has become increasingly difficult to determine who should be the beneficiary of family based benefits. For example, many employers now offer same sex partner benefits, suggesting that when a couple has lived together for a certain period of time, the partner of the employee is entitled to retirement benefits, educational credits, health insurance, etc. The debate about who actually constitutes family is reflected in the variation between employers as to how these benefits are allocated, and who the beneficiaries are. Still, the most prevalent assumption, underlying work, school, and social benefits, presumes a male in the household who acts as its head, and the presence of children (Smith 1993).<sup>3</sup> Current statistics, however, indicate that it is highly problematic to create policies based on outdated notions of family forms. Today in the U.S., fewer than 25% of households are married couples with children, and of these only 7% represent families where the parents have not been divorced, the father works outside of the home and the mother takes care of the children. In order not to get mired in this issue, some analysts suggest that it may be more useful to define families in a manner that reinforces the goals of specific programs or policies (Moen and Schorr 1987).

In a later chapter, we will examine the radically different perspective on the relationship between policies and families underlying the Scandinavian welfare state system. In the Scandinavian model, the rights of individuals, rather than families or “groups” are understood as the fundamental unit for allocating social programs and welfare benefits. While this is an approach that is not particularly popular in the United States, it serves to move the debate away from definitional issues and, instead, focuses attention on the basic needs and rights of all individuals. In order to understand the nature of the debates around families, it is useful to turn briefly to a historical overview of the scholarly study of families.

---

<sup>2</sup>In a symbolic gesture, that acknowledges the multiplicity of family types, the flagship journal on the study of families changed its name from *The Journal of Marriage and the Family* to *The Journal of Marriage and Family* in 2001.

<sup>3</sup>See Smith (1993) for a pivotal article on SNAF – the Standard North American Family and its ubiquitous presence in school and benefits policies.

## 2.2 The Formal Study of Families

The formal study of families commenced in the United States in the period between 1880 and 1920, during the same period of time that home economics and sociology were becoming formal disciplines. While a wide variety of scholars and professionals were concerned with the study of families, the formative period of studying families was most closely intertwined with the development of North American sociology (Boss et al. 1993). This era was characterized by significant interest and concern about social issues that had come about through urbanization and industrialization. Families were viewed as fragile, and subject to social pressures that could, potentially, destroy them. Of particular interest was the problem of community disintegration, which was seen as coupled with vulnerability of family. A landmark work (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–1920) published during this period suggested that family goals needed to be realigned with individual ambitions in order to strengthen the role of the institution of families in all societies around the globe. Emile Durkheim writing shortly before the development of these suggestions had also argued that families, as they had been conceptualized through the Middle Ages in the Western world, were moving to new configurations that worked less to serve the group and, instead, increasingly only benefited the individual (Lamanna 2002). Social scientific treatises on the family began to focus on to the socialization aspects of families and how families could be harnessed in such a manner as to produce solid, committed citizens that would uphold the values of society. These arguments, now over one hundred years old, are important to reflect upon in current analyses of families. While superficially, contemporary arguments may seem similar (that families are disintegrating, and individuals are increasingly governed purely by loyalties to themselves and not the collectivity), it is important to note that the social context within which these disputes are taking place has changed quite dramatically.

While early family scholars were concerned with the sociology of Western families, in the field of anthropology, ethnographers became increasingly interested in the varied family forms that they encountered in far away corners of the world. However, a preoccupation with matrilineality vs. patrilineality, kinship, descent, and marriage forms in non-Western settings led to relatively separate discourses on families. Nonetheless, Bronislaw Malinowski, concerned with the nuclear family, introduced the functionalist notion, later adopted by most family scientists, that family was the basic unit of all societies, historically and crossculturally, and served to fulfill individuals', especially childrens' basic needs (Parkin et al. 2004).

The 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of the study of families that set the stage for our current context. During this period, an increasing interest in the “personal” and the “private” developed. The discipline of psychology flourished, and public attention focused on the self, the unconscious, and that which was “unseen.” Concurrently, family scholars turned toward understanding internal family dynamics as a means of explaining why some families seemed to be stronger than others, what factors could be used to understand the stability and instability of marriages,

how to prevent divorce, and the implications of family life for personal well-being. In 1926, Ernest W. Burgess published his pivotal article, in which he termed the family as “a unity of interacting personalities” and, thus, set the contemporary parameters for studying families from a psycho-social perspective. His work influenced other family scholars as they became increasingly preoccupied with marital adjustment, and how individuals could attain satisfaction from their membership in families (Boss et al. 1993).

World War II and the ensuing period saw a slight shift among scholars concerned with family issues. The topic of national security became paramount, and strong families were seen as the key to a strong nation. Families were the institution that could produce loyal, committed citizens. Replete with a strong ideology that advocated early marriage and traditional gender roles as crucial components for the foundation of families, family scholars emphasized the need for “normalcy” and complete assimilation to the “American way of life.” One of the most dominant voices of that time, the sociologist Talcott Parsons, impacted the study and theorizing about families with his analysis of the role of nuclear (or conjugal) families. From his perspective, nuclear families were of utmost importance in industrial societies due to their small size and lack of obligations to kin which allowed for greater mobility. Importantly, Parsons focused on the conjugal tie between husband and wife, suggesting that this had become the central family relationship in the Western world (Parsons 1943). Simultaneously, he intimated that the bond between parents and children would decrease in significance, resulting in the erosion of kinship ties. In Parson’s version of the contemporary nuclear family, a strong division of labor was the key; thus, the breadwinner/ homemaker couple represented a critical differentiation of sex roles. He postulated that competition between spouses for occupational status would, otherwise, negatively impact the solidarity of the marital relationship (Parsons 1949). In his description of sex roles he depicted, the man as the “instrumental leader” of the family and the woman as the “expressive leader.” In accordance with the popular notions of his time, sex roles resulted from the “natural” biological bond between mothers and their children. Arguing from a social structural and functionalist perspective, Parsons indicated that the contemporary family would be imbued with only two remaining functions: the socialization of children and the “personality stabilization” of adults. His perspectives, while criticized and refuted today, still permeate certain sectors of the family literature.

The 1950s are often described as the “golden age” of family; media and scholarly images of families depicted a situation where families were “stable,” and characterized by low divorce rates, few single-parents raising children, and a limited number of children born out of wedlock (Mintz and Kellogg 1988). “Psychologists, educators, and journalists frequently repeated the idea that marriage was necessary for personal well-being. Individuals who deviated from this norm were inevitably described as unhappy or emotionally disturbed” (Mintz and Kellogg 1988, p. 181). The traditional perspectives from this period continue to exert a surprisingly strong influence even in contemporary scholarship. While not overt, these beliefs and ideals are often embedded into family related research questions and analyses that mask the inherent value orientations of the researchers (Smith 1993). The significance of



these value laden ideologies extends far beyond Western borders, as scholarly and lay publications now reach every part of the globe, perpetuating a unique brand of family life and concurrent acceptable behaviors (Ambert 1994).

More contemporary scholarly approaches, however, have negated the depiction of the “ideal” breadwinner/homemaker, stable white family of the 1950s. Coontz (1992, 1997) has persuasively argued that this so-called 1950s family which today is contrasted with the “deteriorating” twenty-first century family does not take into account the millions of families of that period who did not fit this uniform representation: the poor and those with low-incomes, African-Americans, immigrants, single-parents, and widows and widowers, just to name a few. Coontz has also noted that despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary, families of that period which did not fit this uniform depiction were perceived as dysfunctional at that time. The ideal nuclear family that formed the core of significant scholarship and media portrayals, continued to be conceptualized as a father who worked outside of the home for pay and a homemaker mother whose primary responsibilities were to her husband and children.

These portrayals of families became popular during the post World War II period in the midst of a major demographic shift that encouraged white middle class families to relocate to the suburbs. Simultaneously, their homes in urban areas became occupied by African American families moving north. The ideal of ethnic kin networks that had characterized depictions of urban life, became replaced by the “non ethnic,” suburban family (Boss et al. 1993). Now, “other” types of families were suspect and perceived as deviant or pathological. Of particular concern were “ethnics” and immigrants, who brought diverse family traditions with them that were at odds with the ideals being advocated by scholars and the popular media. Assimilation to the American way of life was advocated as the key to successful integration – and this integration was to be achieved, at least in part, by socializing families into the middle class ideal characterized by a nuclear family with a bread-winning father and homemaking mother.

The 1960s introduced new social perspectives that had their roots in the civil rights movement, the expansion of sexual behavior outside of marriage, the Vietnam War, the revival of feminism and a general antiauthoritarian stance. The divorce rate started to climb to unprecedented rates and women with children flocked into the work force. While statistics indicate an increase in the percentage of two-parent families during the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Seward 1978), Masnick and Bane (1980) point out that it was only in the late 1970s that the number of nuclear families affected by divorce began to exceed those disrupted by death. As the prevalence of divorce, and mothers with children under age 18 entering the work force increased, American families began to deviate from the 1950s and 1960s concept of the “typical” family. Other notable family trends also accompanied ideological changes: fertility decreased while cohabitation increased, and “other” forms of families such as step-families, female-headed households, and gay and lesbian families became increasingly common.

By the mid-1970s, the theoretical convergence that resonated through much of the research and writing on families collapsed. The societal changes that were



impacting every aspect of American life also became reflected in the academic focus on families. The postwar consensus on “ideal” families broke down and, instead, scholars started to criticize the patriarchal hierarchical model that had been the unexamined basis of virtually all perspectives on families. Interdisciplinary foci on families became more common with fields as diverse as psychology, home economics, communication, and history concentrating new efforts on understanding family life and composition. For example, historical scholarship on families introduced a new analytical dimension: families needed to be differentiated from households. This was an important step forward in family research since it directed the focus away from relationships based on biological ties, and redirected it to an emphasis onto domestic groups (households) which could contain nonrelatives as well (Seward 1978).<sup>4</sup> Conversely, families were now understood as also encompassing members that extended beyond the household (Goody 1972; Hareven 1974, 2000). Reconceptualizing families and separating them from households allowed scholars to focus on macro-processes such as urbanization and migration and their effects on family life (Hareven 2000).

In more recent decades, feminists and minority group scholars have teamed together to criticize the white middle-class breadwinner/homemaker family model that had dominated the study of families. The “traditional” Parsonian family became a hotbed for discussions by Marxist feminists who argued that this family type is the most fundamental site of women’s oppression. They also ascertained that the cohesive system of fixed sex roles that had been promoted by social scientists, benefited men while oppressing the talents and rights for self-expression of women.

This deconstruction of the “traditional” family and “natural” sex roles introduced a new dialog about families, gender roles, and the place of patriarchy in society. Feminist analysis highlighted the gendered experience of family life and brought to the forefront the experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups (Osmond and Thorne 1993). By emphasizing a postpositivist philosophy of science, they also suggested that a researcher’s values and culture could color research, analysis, and the dissemination of findings.

Throughout the late 1970s and in the 1980s, gender, patriarchy, and inequality became widely recognized aspects of family scholarship. However, American scholars of color and feminist researchers from non-Western societies increasingly argued that universal analysis of families and the subjugation of women obscured and misinterpreted the experiences of marginalized groups. Instead, they proposed that in certain contexts family life provided a safe haven for women; a place where they could be protected from the inequalities and persecution they faced in the outside world (Baca Zinn 2000). These scholars suggested that it was precisely through the relationships with men in their families, that women were empowered

---

<sup>4</sup>In the field of anthropology the study of family has continued to be tied to “kinship” studies and social organization. See Parkin et al. (2004) for a detailed overview of kinship and family studies from the nineteenth century onwards. Thus, there is little intersection today between the fields even though both could benefit from much more cross fertilization.

to resist social, political, and economic pressures. They highlighted the perspective that, for marginalized men and women, gender was not of the same import as it was for white middle class women. Gay and lesbian feminists added their view to these approaches, illustrating that heterosexuality dominated family scholarship and that even feminist discourses were normative and value-laden (Baca Zinn 2000).

More recently, multi-cultural feminists have introduced the concept of the “matrix of domination” (Collins 1990). This analytical tool allows us to conceptualize families as part of a multiplicity of forces that include race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality, each intersecting and functioning, as determinants of lived experiences. Utilizing this perspective of a “matrix of domination” allows for an insight into the varied experiences of individuals and families, despite occupying the same socio-historical timeframe. This analytical tool introduces the concept of social positioning. Social positioning is related to issues such as the access to power, social class, discrimination, and cultural values. All of these factors affect every aspect of family life from marital relations to parenting, to the division of labor. Yet, despite the theoretical contributions of feminist scholars, contemporary writings on families continue to be critiqued, because of a persistent lack of focus on the interrelationship between families and macro forces. Daly (2003) depicts the state of current empirical research on families as if “...they are suspended in time, space, and culture” (Daly 2003, p. 774).

Currently, in other parts of the world, the study of families tends to be an under-developed field and, as Segalen phrases it, “under the influence of a consciously empirical American sociology....without precise references to its social and cultural environment and not as a domestic group undergoing change within a specific historical framework” (1986, p. 3). “Family” is approached as a natural unit, not to be pursued as an object of study and in need of analysis.<sup>5</sup> Family related research in much of Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and China concentrates on the demographic impacts of fertility, mortality, and labor force participation of men and women. Generally speaking, most of this research never makes it into the dominant scholarly discourse on families.<sup>6</sup> The exception to this trend is the work that has originated in Northern Europe focusing on the study of the history of the family.<sup>7</sup> While stemming initially from historical demographers such as Louis Henry and the *Annales* group, working out of the Institut National des Etudes Demographiques, this research has been expanded by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, established in 1964 under the leadership of Peter Laslett. The focus on households has probably garnered the most interest in terms of a more transnational approach to research on families and domestic groups

---

<sup>5</sup>I first became aware of this fact in graduate school. I was very interested in pursuing the study of non-Western families but was discouraged by conversations with scholars from various parts of the world who told me that “there was no new knowledge to be gained from pursuing this topic.”

<sup>6</sup>In fact there is a growing hegemony of thought stemming from the U.S. This will be seen later on in the chapter on children and childhood.

<sup>7</sup>On a personal note, this body of scholarship provided the impetus for all of my future research on non-Western, and consequently Western families.

(Comacchio 2003). While today there is some intellectual crossfertilization especially with scholars from English speaking countries, most current scholarship on families continues to be dominated by research based in the United States.<sup>8</sup> We shall return to this issue of dominant hegemonic discourses that flow from Western parts of the world to non-Western regions, and the ensuing consequences, in later chapters.

## 2.3 The Current Situation

The current segmentation in the West of “the family” into varied family forms has superseded the unified concept of the family that dominated through the 1980s. Recognition of multiple family configurations has broken down the notion of a monolithic “natural” family form. This trend has been accompanied by the slow deterioration of the patriarchal foundation of the Western family, defined as a unit under the care and responsibility of the father who is accorded primary decision-making rights. In the formerly traditional model of the family, the homemaker/breadwinner model can be imagined as a pyramidal power structure where decision-making flowed from the father to the mother and the children. The family unit could be conceptualized as a “centralized hierarchy of relationships” (Oswald 2003, p. 311). According to some scholars, today’s family can be imagined as a “decentralized network of relationships where decision making tends to flow in all directions” (Oswald 2003, p. 311). Allegiances are not focused just on the well-being of the family but are, instead, interspersed with pertinent generational affiliations and specialized interest groups. In other words, young people may identify with the “Millennial Generation,” the “Generation X,” or the “Generation Y,” while older people may be “Baby Boomers,” or “Traditionalists.”<sup>9</sup> In this model, individual allegiance is not necessarily just bound to familial relationships but, instead, is interspersed among multiple groups.

As scholarly perceptions of families have multiplied, so have their more mainstream depictions. As has been noted, throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, scholarship and the popular media celebrated a particular version of family. This family was white, married, lived in the suburbs, had children and was characterized by a clear, gendered division of labor. Families that deviated from this dominant model

---

<sup>8</sup>There are many reasons for this issue including the inability of most English speakers to read other languages and the domination of journals published in the English language. Even when books and articles on family issues are published in other countries, they are rarely included in bibliographies, book reviews and the like.

<sup>9</sup>There is a great deal of debate about the usage of terms like Millennials or Generation X’ers. The question centers around stereotyping of generalizing about large groups of individuals who are characterized by differences of social class, race, religion, education and other variables. Nevertheless, a life course perspective suggests that individuals born in the same cohort do experience and internalize certain world events such as wars, technological change and other such phenomena with a somewhat similar effect. See Elder (1999), for example.

– families that were characterized by divorce, race and ethnicity, sexual preference, or any other type of difference – were not part of the popular representation. This ideal of a strong unit characterized by a clear hierarchy and division of labor that was to be either included or excluded from the mainstream, has in the contemporary Western social landscape, been replaced by a recognition of plurality (Oswald 2003). Today, particularly in the West, there is a much greater acceptance of a multitude of family forms that range from single-parent, to same sex to cohabiting families, among others. Some even attribute this pluralism in families to an emerging paradigm of culture that includes ever more subcultures (Talbot 2000). This phenomenon also pertains to other forms of social life in the West. For example, today, many places of employment emphasize multiple team projects and shared responsibility, instead of a top down hierarchical model of work. The movement of corporations from urban centers to suburban locations is also perceived as part of this larger social movement. In fact, some argue that we are witnessing a decentralization of power, with urban areas not exercising the same amount of political and social power as in the past (Thomas 1998).

From a global perspective, a similar phenomenon is, in the process, of taking place. As corporations shift their activities from the West to other parts of the world, power relations are being rearranged. Economic and political power is no longer just concentrated in one or two areas in the world. Instead, power is increasingly synonymous with multiple locations, and even with shifts between locations. In other words, power has become decentralized and may be fluid and diffused to different places, individuals, groups, or entities. This makes any analytical discussion that primarily focuses on bounded units of analysis, such as “the family,” “the nation-state,” or “the corporation” in isolation, obsolete. Instead, in order to understand contemporary phenomena such as globalization, we need to examine interactions between entities, between micro and macro levels, and the multiplicity of changes that may result from these interfaces.

## 2.4 Crosscultural Perspectives on Families

Families continue to exert a strong cultural presence world-wide. Some form of kin relationships including parents and children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins constitute varying forms of acknowledged families.<sup>10</sup> In many North European countries and Canada, family conceptualizations now include same sex marriage which became legal, beginning with Denmark’s officially enacted registered partnership law in 1989, followed by the extension of legal rights to registered same-sex couples in Norway (1993), Sweden (1994), the Netherlands (2001), Belgium (2003), Spain (2005), Britain (2005), and Canada (2005). Moreover, an extensive anthropological literature has documented domestic groups and families that differ radically

---

<sup>10</sup>When using the term “kin relationships” I am not implying just blood lines. I include all types of relationships including adoption, foster children, and other bonded units.

from Western conceptions of families.<sup>11</sup> However, for the purposes of this discussion, the focus is on families as they are most commonly defined in both Western and non-Western societies; by traditional kinship, legal, and/or emotional ties.

In order to gain a broader perspective on the relationship between globalization and families, it is instructive to examine conceptualization of family in non-Western societies. In many non-Western societies, the reference group for an individual today, continues to be his or her kin, relationships that extend far beyond the ties of the nuclear family that form the norm for so many in the United States and Europe (Sherif-Trask 2006).<sup>12</sup> In these societies, families are often drawn into the decision-making process that influence individual lives on issues that would be considered, in the West, an individual “private matter.” However, in many non-Western places obligation to kin is of utmost importance, and any deviation from caring for the collective group can ruin the reputation of an individual. For example, in many African and Middle Eastern societies, there is both cultural and religious pressure for men to take care of their large extended families, no matter what their financial situation may be. Family responsibilities are taken extremely seriously and despite economic, social, and political changes, some form of the extended family remains central to individual’s lives (Sherif-Trask 2006).

This situation challenges earlier proponents of modernization theory such as William Goode, whose classic writings in the 1960s proposed that the introduction of industrialization to less developed areas of the world would eventually render the extended family obsolete. According to this popular framework at the time, modernization was accompanied by the evolution of extended family forms to more flexible nuclear families. Scholarships, both from the fields of the sociology of the family, as well as history of the family, have disputed this prediction. Specifically, historical studies illustrate that in the West, from preindustrial times onward, extended families did not devolve into nuclear families. Instead, the Western nuclear family has continually played an important role in society and is part of a particular constellation of ideologies and legalities peculiar to this part of the world (Goody 1972). Conversely, extended forms of families are not disappearing, as is so often suggested by scholars and mainstream perspectives, but instead are changing through their articulation with contemporary factors. For example, communication technologies can facilitate regular interactions between family members in a manner that could not have been predicted even just 20 years ago.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Anthropology is replete with examples of marriage and families that differ quite radically from contemporary family forms, such as ghost marriage among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940) and a specific culturally sanctioned type of adult-child marriage among a northern Russian tribe (Levi-Strauss 1956). Most anthropological readers have many such fascinating examples, indicating the cultural nature of relationship formation.

<sup>12</sup> A significant issue in many countries in Europe and in the US, Canada, and Australia is the infusion of immigrants from societies with very different notions of who is and who is not “family.” This issue promises to grow in the future with continued mass migrations.

<sup>13</sup> The popularity of free Internet services such as Skype allow individuals to video conference with one another creating new linkages to far away places.

## 2.5 Fertility

A major shift in family life, primarily in the West and also increasingly in non-Western regions of the world, is related to fertility. Fertility is dropping at unprecedented rates, especially in Europe. In fact, there is ever increasing concern throughout European societies that extremely low fertility rates could bring about unintended consequences such as a dwindling labor supply and the lack of care for the elderly. According to recent statistics, in the Western world, family size has decreased to 2.8 individuals per household, while in the non-Western world household size has decreased to 5.7 in the Middle East and North Africa, 4.9 in Southeast Asia, 4.1 in the Caribbean and 3.7 in East Asia (United Nations Programme on the Family 2003). It is important to note that national fertility rates subsume variations between and within countries, and also between urban and rural areas. Nevertheless, from a global perspective, fertility has decreased significantly and at a faster pace than demographers have predicted (Bulato 2001).<sup>14</sup>

The significance of a rapidly dropping fertility rate revolves around the major changes that this phenomenon implies with respect to the family and the role of women. This point is poignantly made by R.M. Timus (1966) in Easterlin (2000, p. 39) in his description of working class women in England.

The typical working class mother of the 1890s married in her teens or early twenties and experiencing ten pregnancies, spent about 15 years in a state of pregnancy and in nursing a child for the first years of its life. She was tied, for this period of time, to the wheel of childbearing. Today, for the typical mother, the time so spent would be about 4 years. A reduction of such magnitude in only two generations in the time devoted to childbearing represents nothing less than a revolutionary enlargement of freedom for women.

The intentional limitation of family size in the West is one of the most significant changes affecting contemporary families and gender roles. Throughout the twentieth century, fertility control has been accomplished primarily through the use of contraception or abortion. In contrast to the past and even today, to other parts of the non-Western world, most people in the West no longer attempt to have as many children as they are able to. Instead, they deliberately limit the size of their families by using technologies or practices that were non-existent 50 years ago.

This radical shift in women's roles in the family, which has occurred in a relatively brief period of time, historically speaking, has not come under much scrutiny or debate in the family or gender literature. Instead, an overwhelming focus continues to emphasize the division of labor, gender roles, and women's working outside of the home. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that there are still regions of the world, where, despite the introduction of a variety of birth control methods and a general decline in fertility rates, women are bound primarily by their childbearing roles. Specifically, in rural areas in the developing world, many young women spend virtually their whole youth and far into mid-life,

---

<sup>14</sup> In Chap. 8 we examine the link between women's fertility, employment and nation-state policies more closely.

pregnant, nursing, and caring for children. This impedes their opportunities for furthering their lives through education, training, and participation in their communities (Trask and Hendriks, 2009).

## 2.6 Gender Role Trends

The worldwide trend of very high numbers of women working outside of the home has set the stage for an unprecedented degree of debate about the appropriate distribution of roles in families. From a historical perspective, in the United States, until the early 1960s, most women who sought employment outside the home were poor and women of color. White women only participated in the labor force in their early twenties, stepping out once they married and had children. A short deviation from this pattern occurred during World War II when women were needed in the labor force because of a shortage of men. However, with the return of large numbers of GI's, women were encouraged to once again take up their domestic roles. Beginning in the late 1960s, a new trend emerged: women entered into the labor force and remained through their child bearing years (Bianchi et al. 2007).

In the United States, the debate about women's and men's roles has taken on strong political connotations. It is primarily referred to as the "family values" debate even though, in reality, it focuses on women's paid employment and the resultant changes in family life. For example, one prominent scholar has suggested that "families have lost functions, power, and authority; that familism as a cultural value has diminished, and that people have become less willing to invest time, money, and energy in family life, turning instead to investments in themselves" (Popenoe 1993, p. 527). This particular scholar has gone on to perpetuate the argument that the institution of family is in decline. In order to strengthen families, he suggests that we need to return to a traditional model of one partner being a wage earner, and the other caring for the children and other dependent family members. What this model of family life does not adequately address is the concern that one family member will, thus, be economically vulnerable, and that many households both in the United States, and worldwide, are either dependent on multiple incomes, or are composed of only one head of household (McGraw and Walker 2004). Embedded in this suggestion is the notion that women are at fault for the "decay" of societies, as their appropriate role should be as primary caretakers of the home and family.

In the West, opponents of a traditional distribution of roles in families advocate a family institution that is less hierarchically organized, that allows for greater personal growth for its members, and that allows women to pursue educational and employment opportunities which benefit both individuals and society as a whole. From this perspective, societies need to be restructured to provide greater social benefits such as adequate child care, universal health insurance, and flexible work schedules in order to accommodate care giving and formal labor force participation.



Some of the trends with respect to gender roles that we see in the United States are mirrored in both industrialized and developing nations around the globe. In most regions of the world, women increasingly constitute a significant percentage of the labor force. For example, between 1960 and 2000 the labor force participation of women jumped from 31 to 46% in the North American continent, from 32 to 41% in Western European countries, from 26 to 38% in much of the Caribbean, from 16 to 33% in Central America, from 17 to 25% in the Middle East, from 27 to 43% in the countries of Oceania and from 21 to 35% in South America (Heymann 2006). It is striking that even in North Africa and western Asia, areas where historically women did not work outside home due to cultural and religious norms, participation in the labor force has risen to over 20% (United Nations 2000). One implication of this movement of women into the paid labor force is that children are increasingly being raised in households where both parents are now working in the paid labor force (if there are two parents present). This phenomenon, which will be explored in greater depth in a subsequent chapter, is one of the most pivotal social changes that has taken place in the late twentieth century.

Through increased educational opportunities, and by participating in the formal and informal labor force, certain groups of women acquire the necessary economic resources to postpone marriage, gain greater power vis a vis their spouse in marriage, and are able to leave abusive and exploitive marriages. However, for many women, particularly those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale in Western countries and the developing world, participating in the formal and informal labor force has not led to self empowerment and autonomy. Instead, their employment outside home or away from traditional means of subsistence has translated into low-paying and, at times, risky jobs. For example, in certain areas of Africa, where women remain primarily employed in agriculture or tend to pursue the option of beginning small-scale businesses such as selling food supplies in open air markets, becoming involved in export production has worsened their lives. In order to provide for themselves and their families, these women now have to take on multiple forms of employment in order to make ends meet. For other women, their economic engagement has come at a high personal cost. Men socialized into “traditional” social roles may become embittered and downright abusive, due to feelings of inadequacy about not fulfilling their provider role. This phenomenon occurs in both Western and non-Western societies but is downplayed due to a dominant emphasis on women’s empowerment through work.

Increasingly, women are also the likely heads of household, and potentially, even the primary breadwinners. This phenomenon can be attributed to a multiplicity of reasons including widowhood caused through wars, HIV/AIDS, or disease, the longevity of women as a result of longer lifespans, and rising rates of divorce. Out of wedlock childbearing is also becoming increasingly common in Western societies and some, but not all developing nations.<sup>15</sup> As women and men adjust through a wide

---

<sup>15</sup> In fact, a recent New York Times article detailed how a growing number of American women are choosing to have two children on their own, through new reproductive techniques, in the quest for the “perfect” family.

variety of responses to these new possibilities and representations about appropriate roles in families and societies, national and transnational policies have not been able to keep up with these transformations. In fact, some scholars have termed the current global situation with respect to family arrangements as a worldwide crisis (Mattingly 2001). This pattern of labor force participation has taken hold not only in the United States, but also Europe and Australia. The large number of working women has spurred similar worldwide debates revolving around parenting issues, social policies to support working parents, and the issue of “appropriate” gender roles. However, the cultural, political, and economic contexts within which these debates are held differ widely, eliciting at times very diverse responses. In shifting complex environments, individuals tend to draw on both time-honored values and present-day contexts in order to create innovative, negotiated identities for themselves.<sup>16</sup> These findings alert us that we need to be careful about making universal assumptions about how individuals and families will react to shifting circumstances and conditions.

## 2.7 Changes in Families

While globalization continues to draw together individuals into new types of relationships, communities, and social groups, not dreamed of even just one or two decades ago, we actually know little about how individuals are experiencing these changes. There continue to be many unexplored aspects of family life both in the West and in the other areas of the world (Daly 2003). For example, in order to extend scholarly frameworks and understandings of family dynamics, it is necessary to delve into the actual crosscultural experiences of marriage, parenthood, singlehood, aging, intergenerational relationships, same sex couples, and childhood, in order to begin to understand how these social processes interact with globalizing forces. Little is understood about the role that communication technologies play in the lives of families and, in particular, in the lives of transnational families. Moreover, research needs to be directed to understanding the relationship between economics, markets, and family life. What propels individuals in and out of the labor force at different stages in life? How does the family economy influence the market economy and vice versa? How is fertility in the industrialized world related to fertility in the developing world in the context of migration matters? Also, of interest should be the role of multiculturalism in the family realm. As societies become, more diverse, new concepts about families, gender roles, childhood and aging are introduced and debated. Simultaneously, as individuals from different groups interact, they may form new associations based on shared interests, proximity, and the like. We need to know how this growing diversity is absorbed, interpreted and acted on, in the family realm. In the United States, the growth of home schooling is a direct reflection of the values of certain religious families who do not wish for their children to be exposed to what they consider, “deleterious” or

---

<sup>16</sup> This phenomenon will be described in greater detail in Chap. 3.

“dangerous” values. These types of behaviors indicate that there is an immediate and close connection between value systems, transformations, and behavior.

To further gain insight into the relationship between globalization and family life, we also need to highlight the association between women’s participation in the formal and informal labor force in *both* the industrialized and developing world. The current dominant Western social scientific focus does not allow us to understand the multiplicity of conditions under which families negotiate and come to terms with changing economic, political, and cultural conditions (Edgar 2004). Moreover, the unprecedented large number of women working outside home worldwide is only one of a number of factors affecting significant family change. Issues of migration, the aging of the global population and changing intergenerational relationships are also important components of these transformations. Moreover, family change varies, depending on a multitude of factors influenced in part, but not only, on region, religiosity, culture, social class and access to opportunity structures.

Ethnographic and crosscultural examples illustrate that we need to be cautious in hypothesizing and investigating that which is deemed to predict or constitute “family change.” Until relatively recently, most explanations of family change focused mainly on structural influences such as innovations in technology, the movement of individuals from rural to urban areas, and declines in mortality and disease. However, an increasing number of researchers are now accounting for family change by focusing on international networks, interpersonal relationships, and ideational factors (Jayakody et al. 2008). As Daly (2003) explains, “Examination of families as a cultural form is all about understanding families as they change. It is also about understanding families as they perform in relation to perceived collective codes and beliefs. Family members draw on the rituals, practices, and expectations that are available in the cultural toolkit, and in the process they create themselves as a cultural form that expresses systemic beliefs and ideals. They draw meaning from the cultural matrix of which they are a part and express meanings about the kind of family they wish to appear as, all in the service of creating a definition of who they are as a family.” (p. 774).

As broad norms and values such as an emphasis on freedom, equality, and individualism continue to spread through globalizing forces, they translate into new ideas about the place and role of individuals in relation to their families and larger communities. These new concepts are integrated into new perspectives on marriage, the roles of women and men, the relationship between generations and the role of children in families. As we begin to examine the relationship between globalization and families it should be noted that historians of the family have carefully proven that despite stereotypical depictions of the decline of family life, the modern nuclear family has remained dominant in the West. These scholars have highlighted the fact that kinship patterns have not necessarily lessened in value, despite social change, and that the process of industrialization, while impacting family life, was itself impacted by families (Hareven 2000). We can, thus, learn from historical patterns and assume that as globalization and its concomitant forces play an ever greater role in family lives, the phenomenon of globalization itself will also be impacted by families, however they may be defined.



<http://www.springer.com/978-0-387-88284-0>

Globalization and Families  
Accelerated Systemic Social Change  
Trask, B.  
2010, XVII, 220 p., Hardcover  
ISBN: 978-0-387-88284-0