Three Perspectives on the Changing Family

We've defined the family, examined how families are similar and different, and then considered some of the current myths about family life. Let's now look at three views on how the American family is changing.

Several national surveys show that Americans place a high value on family. For example,
- Among high school seniors, 80 percent of girls and 72 percent of boys say that having a good marriage and family life is "extremely important" to them (Wilcox and Marquandt, 2011).
- Almost 74 percent of first-year college students (both women and men) say that raising a family is "very important" in their lives (Pryor et al., 2010).
- Almost 7 in 10 Americans are optimistic about the future of marriage and the family (Morin, 2011).

Despite such upbeat findings, many Americans believe that the family is falling apart. Some journalists and scholars refer to the "vanishing" family, "troubled" marriages, and "appalling" divorce statistics as sure signs that the family is disintegrating. Others contend that such hand-wringing is unwarranted.

Who's right? There are three schools of thought. One group contends that the family is declining; a second group argues that the family is changing but not declining; and a third, smaller group maintains that the family is more resilient than ever (see Benoliel, 2000, for a discussion of these perspectives).

The Family Is Declining

More than 100 years ago, the Boston Quarterly Review issued a dire warning: "The family, in its old sense, is disappearing from our land, and not only are our institutions threatened, but the very existence of our society is endangered" (cited in Rosen, 1982: 299). In the late 1920s, E. R. Groves (1928), a well-known social scientist, warned that marriages were in a state of "extreme collapse." Some of his explanations for what he called the "marriage crisis" and high divorce rates have a surprisingly modern ring: self-indulgence, a concern for oneself rather than others, financial strain, and incompatible personalities. Those who believe that the family is in trouble echo Groves, citing reasons such as individual irresponsibility, minimal commitment to the family, and just plain selfishness.

Many conservative politicians and influential academics argue that the family is deteriorating because most people put their own needs above family duties. This school of thought claims that many adults are unwilling to invest their psychological and financial resources in their children or that they give up on their marriages too quickly when they encounter problems (Popkoe, 1996; Wilson, 2002).

Some adherents of the "family decline" school of thought believe that marriage should exist for the sake of children and not just adults. Simply telling children we love them is not enough. Instead of wasting our money on a divorce industry that includes lawyers, therapists, and expert witnesses, the argument goes, we should be investing in children by maintaining a stable marriage (Whitehead, 1996).

People who endorse the "family is declining" perspective point to a number of indicators. Much of the recent data show, for example, that fewer adults are married, more are divorced or remaining single, more are living together outside of marriage or alone, more children are born out of wedlock, the number of single-parent homes has surged, married women have fewer children, and many parents are spending less time with their children now than during the 1960s (Pew Research Center, 2010; Wilcox and Marquandt, 2011; Jacobsen et al., 2012).
The Family Is Changing, Not Declining

Others argue that the changes we are experiencing reflect long-term trends. For example, more women have entered the labor force since 1970, but the mother who works outside the home is not a new phenomenon. Mothers sold dairy products and woven goods during colonial times, took in boarders around the turn of the twentieth century, and held industrial jobs during World War II (see Chapter 3).

Many analysts also contend that family problems have always existed. Family studies published in the 1930s, for example, included issues such as divorce, desertion, and family crises resulting from discord, delinquency, and depression (Broderick, 1988).

Similarly, there have always been single-parent families. The percentage of single-parent households has doubled since 1980, but that percentage tripled between 1900 and 1950 (Stannard, 1979). Divorce, also, isn’t a recent phenomenon; it became more common in the eighteenth century. Among other changes at that time, parents had less control over their adult married children because there was little land or other property to inherit and the importance of romantic love increased (Cott, 1976).

How do Americans feel about the sweeping changes in the structure of U.S. families that have unfolded over the past half century? The reactions are mixed: 31 percent believe that the changes are generally good for society; 32 percent believe that the changes are generally bad for society; and 37 percent are tolerant, but skeptical, particularly about more mothers of young children working outside the home and more gay and lesbian couples raising children (Morin, 2011).

Many researchers maintain that there is little empirical evidence that family change is synonymous with family decline. Instead, data support both perspectives—the belief that the family is in trouble as well as the notion that most families are resilient despite ongoing changes in gender roles, divorce rates, and alternatives to marriage such as living together (Amato, 2004).

The Family Is More Resilient than Ever

According to a third school of thought, families are more resilient, loving, and stronger than in the past. Consider the treatment of women and children in colonial days: If they disobeyed strict male authority, they were often severely punished. And, in contrast to some of our sentimental notions about the good old days, only a small number of white, middle-class families enjoyed a life that was both gentle and genteel:

For every nineteenth-century middle-class family that protected its wife and child within the family circle . . . there was an Irish or a German girl scrubbing floors in that middle-class home, a Welsh boy mining coal to keep the home-baked goodies warm, a black girl doing the family laundry, a black mother and child picking cotton to be made into clothes for the family, and a Jewish or an Italian daughter in a sweatshop making “ladies” dresses or artificial flowers for the family to purchase (Coontz, 1992: 11–12).

Those who espouse the “family is more resilient” perspective contend that changes in family life have strengthened family relationships, including marriages. In the past, many people stayed in unhappy marriages because of strong social norms and legal divorce obstacles. Today, in contrast, adults can more easily get a divorce, establish a new relationship, and raise children in a happier home (Hull et al., 2010).

As you’ll see in later chapters, the happiest families are those in which adults (married or unmarried, and with and without children) share domestic and work
responsibilities. Especially among employed mothers, a greater equality of sharing housework and child care increases both the husbands’ and wives’ marital satisfaction.

Some social scientists also argue that despite myriad problems, families are happier today than in the past because of the increase in multigenerational relationships. Many people have grandparents, feel close to them, and often receive both emotional and economic support from these family members. The recent growth of the older segment of the population has produced four-generation families. More adults in their 60s may be stressed out because they are caring for 80- to 100-year-old parents. On the other hand, more children and grandchildren grow up knowing and enjoying their older relatives (see Chapter 16).

Each of the three schools of thought provides evidence for its position. Which perspective, then, can we believe? Is the family weak, or is it strong? The answer depends largely on how we define, measure, and interpret family weakness and strengths, issues we address in Chapter 2. For better or worse, the family continues to change.

### MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Which of the three perspectives on the family is closest to your own views? Why?
- Do you think that marriages are becoming obsolete? Why or why not?

## How Are U.S. Families Changing?

Each chapter shows how the family is changing. Demographic transitions, shifts in the racial and ethnic composition of families, and economic transformations all play a role in these changes.

### Demographic Changes

Two demographic changes have had especially far-reaching effects on families. First, U.S. birthrates have declined. Since the end of the eighteenth century, most American women have been bearing fewer children, having them closer together, and finishing child rearing at an earlier age. Second, the average age of the population rose from 17 in the mid-1800s to nearly 37 in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Both of these shifts mean that a large proportion of Americans now experience the empty-nest syndrome—the departure of adult children from the home—at an earlier age, as well as earlier grandparenthood and prolonged widowhood. In addition, as Americans live longer, many adults must care for both children and elderly parents (see Chapters 11, 12, and 16). Other changes include more nonmarital births, more people living alone, more working mothers, and more older people (see Figure 1.2). We’ll take a brief look at these changes now and examine them more closely in later chapters.

### CHANGES IN FAMILY AND NONFAMILY HOUSEHOLDS

The U.S. Census Bureau divides households into family and nonfamily. A family household consists of two or more people living together who are related through marriage, birth, or adoption. Nonfamily households include people who live alone or with nonrelatives (roommates, boarders, or cohabiting couples). In 2010, 34 percent of all households were nonfamily households, a substantial increase from 19 percent in 1970 (Fields, 2004; Lofquist et al., 2012).

The number of married-couple households with children under age 18 declined from 40 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 2010. The percentage of children under age 18 living in one-parent families more than doubled during this same period (Lofquist et al., 2012). A major reason for the increase in one-parent families is due to the surge of births to unmarried women (see Figure 1.2a).

### SINGLES AND COHABITING COUPLES

Singles make up one of the fastest-growing groups for three reasons. First, many young adults are postponing marriage. Second, and at the other end of the age continuum, because people live