

## **FAMILY OVERVIEW**

Although most view the family as one of the basic building blocks of any society, there has been much difference of opinion as to the development and definition of family. The nuclear or conjugal family, composed of biological parents and their children, is certainly not the experience of all today. Social scientists once thought of the modern nuclear family as an end-product evolved from earlier extended and polygamous families. That view is generally rejected today. Current opinions see any collection of people living together under one roof as a family. Still, of the three historic forms of marriage (extended, polygamous, and nuclear), the global trend, because of urbanization, has been toward a nuclear family of parent(s, or relative) and children.

Family is the cradle of all cultures because it informs the larger society regarding the specifics of human needs in a given environment, and then, conversely, interprets that particular cultural solution to a coming generation through initial socialization of a child.

Each of the basic types of family has advantages and disadvantages. The extended family included grandparents and other relatives living together or in close proximity. A child was surrounded by adults who had clear roles to play in its life. Polygamy matches one man and several women (polygyny) or less commonly, a woman with several men (polyandry). Polygyny served the purpose of birth control, the bonding of child (day and night) with mother for 2-4 years, as well as placing a woman at each of a man's several farms. In societies with an extreme shortage of men, polygyny has been a boon to women who might not otherwise have marital possibilities. In one Indian society polyandry provided stable homes for children in a society where men were away serving as warriors most of the year.

Monogamous societies sometimes look down on polygamous societies, and yet there is not black and white distinctions in the complex cultural realities. Actually a great deal of monogamy exists in polygamous societies, and "serial-polygamy" (or many spouses through divorce and remarriage) goes on in monogamous societies. Even in monogamous societies there are pockets of sects or individuals practicing polygamy. (An estimated 60,000 polygamous families are said to exist in North America.)

Alternatives to the family include religious and secular communities such as the kibbutz (where families may or may not continue to exist), state or charitable homes for children, and homelessness. The communities referred to here may have long histories or traditions, be highly structured, or may be temporary and informal. After extensive study of their attempt to eliminate the family, Soviet social scientists concluded that children needed parents and families.

Is the institution of family necessary? In *Society Today* (Roe, R.L. [publisher]. [1971]. Del Mar, CA: Communication Research Machines, Inc. p. 261) the authors conclude:

And yet despite all these speculations (on the necessity of family), family institutions are found in every society catalogued by historians and ethnographers. The existence of a family system is one of the relatively small number of true cross-cultural universals. Whatever the form or internal structure of the family, however, it performs a number of absolutely essential functions for the society as a whole, chief among which are the care and socialization of young children and the management of adult personality tensions. In

some contemporary societies...these functions are virtually the only ones that a family performs, but in other societies the family may also be an important economics producing and consuming unit as well as an important political unit. It may also serve important religious, educational, medical, and social welfare functions. The less differentiated a given social structure, the more likely that the family or extended kinship group will serve a greater number of critical functions. Finally, the family also serves to establish and maintain the solidarity of its members and their ability to act together as an entity; but as such solidarity necessarily excludes as well as includes, it tends to create hostility toward those who are not members of the family group and thus can make it difficult for its members to develop broader and more encompassing loyalties.

It is likely that, despite criticism and alternative experiments, the family will endure as a bridge between individuals and the larger society. It is a nest in which children are socialized and a haven to which harried adult retreat. This family group needs connection and commitment, sensitivity and healthy communication if it is to remain strong.

The connections that bind us to others are varied. Some are as thick as blood while others are as thin as a promise. There are bad connections that destroy the human spirit and there are good connections that create joy and hope. In this book we will explore these connections in the context of the marvelous, complicated, and often contorted human family. (Anderson, R.S. & Guernsey, D.B. [1985]. *On being family: A social theology of the family*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, p. vii)

The dysfunctional family (an overused buzz word) is a family not functioning for the growth and welfare of all its members. Someone's problem or need for control is depriving others of family support for the fulfillment of their personal needs. A family secret (of antisocial behavior) is too much to discuss openly in the family and to allow into the light of the outside world. In fact, each member of any family has unique needs and goals. The functional family discusses and considers how each member can receive support for goals of growth and well-being while contributing to family welfare.

James Garbarino has studied generational cycles of family abuse. Abused children can become abusive parents. Elderly family members can be abused as well as children by those who have physical superiority.

Finally, we should neither idolize nor demonize the institution of family. It is too valuable to undermine, but as important as the family is, we don't want to idealize it into something neither human nor attainable. Thomas Moore warns against romanticizing or over-diagnosis of family function. (Moore, T. [1992]. *Care of the soul*. New York: HarperCollins, pp. 26-27)

Today professionals are preoccupied with the 'dysfunction of the family.' According to the Bible, Adam was formed out of the mud of the earth. His parentage, his 'family,' was earthy, moist, dirty, even slimy. Starting with Adam, at our very root, we are not fashioned out of light or fire; we are children of mud...Our own families recapitulate this mythic origin of our humanity by being close to the earth, ordinary, a veritable weed patch of human foibles...If we don't grasp this mystery, the soulfulness that each family has to offer each of us will be spirited away in hygienic notions of what a family should be. The sentimental image of family that we present publicly is a defense against the pain

of proclaiming the family for what is—a sometimes comforting, sometimes devastating house of life and memory.

In my practice I've worked with many men and women whose families were intolerably violent and abusive, and yet all that pain has been redeemable, able to become the source of much wisdom and transformation. When we encounter the family from the point of view of the soul, accepting its shadows and its failure to meet our idealistic expectations, we are faced with mysteries that resist our moralism and sentimentality. We are taken down to the earth, where principle gives way to life in all its beauty and horror.

As the most intimate and universal of human enclaves, families are bound to reflect dramatically the beauty and the ugliness of human existence. There will always be rebellion against the family of origin in some teenagers, and there may be growing ambivalence about starting a life-long family on the part of young adults. But the more effort that goes into healing family hurts and encouraging the support family can give its members, the greater our appreciation of family life—and healthier our society.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How do you define family? Do you mainly agree or disagree with the emphases of this article? How would you re-write this general discussion of family? What in this article would you most like to discuss in a small group?
2. Are you able to talk with others about what family life gave you, or robbed from you, as you were growing up? Could you draw or enact a family scene which would represent the dynamics of your family life?
3. How would you like your family of procreation to differ from your family of origin? How do you want your children to be treated differently than you were treated, and what do you want them to learn in the family that you didn't?
4. How do you think the definition, place and protection of family in our society should be changed? In what family values do you deeply believe? Should the media reflect family dysfunction or seek to strengthen weak family ties and responsibilities?

### IMPLICATIONS

1. Family is a universal and critical social system. On the other hand, it is not the only social system and must work in interaction with other economic, educational, media, and religious systems.
2. It is counterproductive to lay all social ills on the family as it is to blame the schools or the media for problems that afflict us socially. It is important that family be neither be relieved of all blame and responsibility in the raising of children and support for all family members.
3. Families are profoundly significant in the growing up process; yet it is important that individuals who have left family hold themselves responsible for "parenting" and nurturing themselves.

Dean Borgman cCYS