

# **CHANGING IDENTITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE FAMILY**

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Changes in family structure have implications for changing the identity and well-being of individuals and families. The identity of people in families today is quite different from the identity acquired in families of the past. Their experiences, which are not the same as those of ten or twenty years ago, change the way people think and the way they do things.

Three types of family changes significantly affect the experiences people have and how they think: 1) family composition, 2) role expectations and 3) family economy.

## **Family Composition**

### **Family Structure**

Family structure includes changes brought about by marriage and divorce. Only six percent of baby boomers will live in the assumed family—father, mother, a boy and a girl child. The reasons are: contraceptive failure, 13 percent; involuntary childlessness, 6 percent; miscarriage, 20 percent; two children of the same sex, 50 percent; an unwanted birth, 30 percent; divorce within 20 years, 43 percent; and, death of a child/parent, 4 or 9 percent (Russell).

In the past, most people followed the life cycle from beginning to end in an orderly way—marriage, child bearing, child rearing, empty nest and retirement. Since 1970, households have splintered into a variety of living arrangements (Townsend). Cohabitation, delayed child bearing, divorce and remarriage all change the cycle, the characteristics of families, and experiences people bring to families. The result is that any part of the cycle may be initiated several times (Russell). Each time a cycle is initiated a new set of experiences evolves with new perspectives of family life.

The following describes the pattern of life relative to baby boomers as they approach age 65: 90 percent will have married once; 50 percent will have married twice; 33 percent will have di-

vorced once; 20 percent will have divorced twice; and 5 percent will have divorced three times (Russell). Townsend identifies this trend as “. . . the 3-Ds lifestyle pioneered by the baby boom; delayed marriage, deferred child bearing, and divorce.”

From another perspective, the decline in the proportion of people living in families is due to three main factors: delayed marriages among young adults, higher divorce rates, and an increased number of widows because women live longer (Marshall). Two different household structures are growing at a rate faster than others, single persons and single-parent households. Single people and single-parent households number in the millions.

The proportion of single persons living alone has increased from 17.1 percent in 1970 to 24.6 percent in 1990 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1991a). Furthermore, almost all increase in households resulted from an increase in households other than traditional families. Also increasing is the living-with-nonrelatives group which shows an increase from 1.7 percent of households in 1970 to 4.6 percent of households in 1990.

Single-parent households increased from 10.6 percent of households in 1970 to 14.8 percent of households in 1990. The fastest growing household type is the female-headed household. This household type represented less than five percent (4.4%) of households in 1960, but increased to 16.5 percent in 1990. Married couples with children have decreased from 40.3 percent of households to 26.3 percent of households. With such diversity in family composition, it is increasingly difficult to develop public policy that serves all.

## **Birth Rates**

Changing birth rates are also modifying the family profile within society. As indicated earlier, most Americans will marry and have children, but families began downsizing in the mid-1960s from almost four children to fewer than two children per family today (Townsend). The biological drive for parenting continues with some modification associated with two societal forces, economics and values (Family Service America). To farm families in the early part of this century, children were seen as assets, as additional workers. In contemporary society children may be seen as liabilities. The cost of education is one reason families give for choosing to have smaller families.

As would be expected, birth rates in the United States are not the same for different races, different religions, different cultures or different subgroups within races or cultures. The overall birth rate is 1.8 children per female. The birth rate for blacks is 2.4 children per female while the birth rate for whites is 1.7 children per female. On the other hand, the birth rate for persons of Hispanic origin varies substantially: for Mexican-Americans the rate is 2.9 per female; for

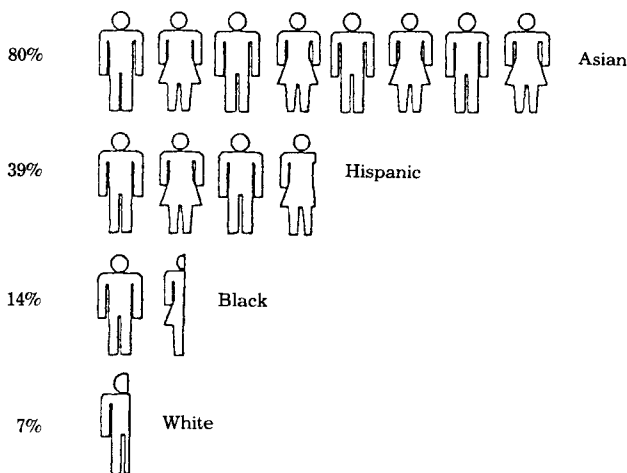
Puerto Ricans it is 2.1 per female; and for Cubans it is only 1.3 per children per female (Hodgkinson).

White America often assumes that ethnic groups are homogeneous. As can be seen with the birth rate for persons of Hispanic origin, the reality is that there are as many differences within the aggregate groups of Hispanics, blacks and Asian-Americans as there are within the white population. Take as a further example the composition of ten persons of Hispanic origin. In a typical group of ten persons of Hispanic origin there would be six Mexicans, one Cuban/Puerto Rican, and three other South Americans, including Columbian (Family Service America).

In 1985 we were a nation of 14.6 million persons of Hispanic origin and 26.5 million blacks; by 2020 we will be a nation of 47 million persons of Hispanic origin and 44 million blacks. See Figure 1 for the percentage increase in minorities for the last ten years.

A third growing nonwhite sector of our nation is Asian-Americans. While they numbered only 3.7 million in 1980, their numbers are growing rapidly through immigration (Hodgkinson). The Asian population has seen an 80 percent increase in the nine-year period since 1980 (Myers). Again the diversity within the Asian-American population is great, with significant differences in education, language skills and vocational training among Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese or

**Figure 1. U.S. population growth rates by race and Hispanic origin<sup>1</sup> from 1980 to 1989**



<sup>1</sup>Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

Source: Hollman, F.W., 1990, *U.S. Population Estimates, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1989*, Current Population Reports, Population Estimates and Projections, Series P-25, No. 1057, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1991A, p. 3.

Malaysians. At the turn of the century the United States will be a nation in which one-third of the people will be nonwhite (Hodgkinson). Public policy for the future must reflect these diverse ethnic and cultural values for the roles within families.

### **Life Expectancy**

A fourth factor changing the shape and form of the family is life expectancy. People are living much longer. Children born in 1989 can expect to live to be 78.5 years of age. Life expectancy for females is 81 and for males is 76 (Cetron). The fastest growing population segment is people 85 and older. These older individuals have varying degrees of closeness to families (Townsend), but we know that, as more and more people live to be older than 75, households are seeking responsible care and support of older family members through a range of in-home, nursing home, or shelter care services. Public policy affects how satisfactory these arrangements are from a legal, health, economic or family relationships perspective.

## **Role Expectations of Family Members**

### **Education**

There are many things that change expectations about the roles of various family members. One of the most significant is education. Both formal and informal education change the way people think. Each new experience changes us. It changes how we think, live, vote, buy and believe. While there are many criticisms of the educational system today, education continues to change the perspective of the people.

Inequity in education is a growing concern. The evolution of a dichotomy of haves and have nots relative to formal or higher education is frightening. In an increasingly interdependent and technologically sophisticated world, people will either be economic assets or liabilities. Healthy, educated, motivated people are assets to society, but people without these characteristics are likely to become serious economic liabilities (Marshall). As the role of parents in supporting learning of children within the home deteriorates, there is an acceleration of risk associated with an optimal educational experience which costs the whole society.

Informal education and other experiences cannot be ignored as a source of change in family roles. Television is an informal educational technique which may change attitudes and modify values in both positive and negative ways. Violence, theft, other crimes, and dysfunctional behavior are prominent in television today. The long-term effect on young minds of seeing these actions on television is not known. Does behavior seen on television supersede the influence of parents on values development by young minds? There are

negative case examples, but we do not know the general or overall effect.

### **Cross-Cultural Interactions**

A second major influence on changed expectations of family member roles is interaction with persons from different cultures. These contacts can be between citizens within the boundaries of our country or through international travel. Forced international travel and news reporting associated with war provides another set of experiences with other cultures, i.e. Korea, Vietnam, and Iran. People in these cultures see the roles of men, women, family, religion, government and leadership in different ways than those who have lived with the north European structure which has dominated the United States. A public policy based on north European culture has less acceptability to many Asians, persons of Hispanic origin, or even blacks who have lived in this society for a lifetime.

### **Employment, Work and Role Patterns**

Employment, work and role patterns for men and women alike define who they are and how they live their lives. The reality at the turn of this century is that fewer than one in eight families consists of a married couple with children in which the mother does not work outside the home (Marshall). Thus, few women define their work role in terms of household and family care. Women are defining their work and roles in several ways. Women who seek self-fulfillment through gainful employment have different expectations from the multiple roles they fill than those who seek self-fulfillment exclusively through family and motherhood roles. A third group of women want the satisfaction of both roles and often find it difficult to meet the expectations of both roles adequately. There have always been conflicts and choices necessary between roles—work, career, education, family and personal activities—but the number and complexity of those conflicts and choices are greatly accelerated for all family members when women assume gainful employment roles.

Disappearance of the housewife has been rapid with fewer than 11 percent of women being in the role of homemaker today. By 1995, only one in seven women younger than age 45 will be full-time homemakers (Russell). Table 1 shows the change in women's labor force participation rate since 1970 (*U.S. Department of Commerce*).

Women with children under six years of age have entered the labor market at a faster rate than women with children aged six to twelve. In all cases, women who were separated or divorced participated in the gainful employment with greater frequency than married women.

A number of forces are associated with increased employment of women. One has been the increase in service and light manufactur-

**Table 1. Gainful Employment Participation Rates by Women (in percents), 1970-1988**

| Year                                | Children<br><6 | Children<br><6 | Children<br><6 | Children<br>6-18 | Children<br>6-18 | Children<br>6-18 |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                                     | Married        | Separated      | Divorced       | Married          | Separated        | Divorced         |
| 1970                                | 30.3           | 45.4           | 63.3           | 49.2             | 60.2             | 82.4             |
| 1980                                | 45.1           | 52.2           | 68.3           | 61.7             | 66.3             | 82.3             |
| 1988                                | 57.1           | 53.0           | 70.1           | 72.5             | 69.3             | 83.9             |
| Percent Increase<br>1970 to<br>1988 | +88%           | +17%           | +11%           | +47%             | +15%             | +2%              |

ing jobs that are appropriate for women. Another has been the technology associated with increased life expectancy. With knowledge of birth control, it has been possible to control more effectively the number and spacing of children. In addition, technology has reduced the amount of time necessary to do housework. All of this has changed how men and women expect women to spend their time. More women now expect to participate in gainful employment (Marshall).

### Single Parenthood

Single-parents who work outside the home have particularly difficult roles. They must be worker and parent *and* assume complete responsibility for the coordination and management of resources for the family. Because of this, single-parent families are less likely to have the necessary physical and emotional resources to nurture their children (Marshall). The demand of the multiple roles and the conflict that occurs between these roles culminate in extraordinary demands on energy and emotional well-being for the worker-parent-household head.

## The Family Economy

### Changing Income Sources

The economy and well-being of families are integrated in a symbiotic relationship. Without a stable economy the family is at risk. Without strong healthy families, the economy of the nation is at risk. In addition to the general economy, the economic well-being of the family reflects the income generation, the consumption and/or expenditure needs, and management skills of family members.

Russell indicates that the single best predictor of family income is whether there is more than one worker. At the same time, marriage is most frequently cited as the best predictor of income. In 1950, 70 percent of families had income whose sole source was from a male head. Today only about 10 percent of families have income solely

from the male head. The two-worker family represents the same economic necessity for the stability of today's economy and marriage as did the husband-and-wife combination for the family farm earlier in this century (Russell).

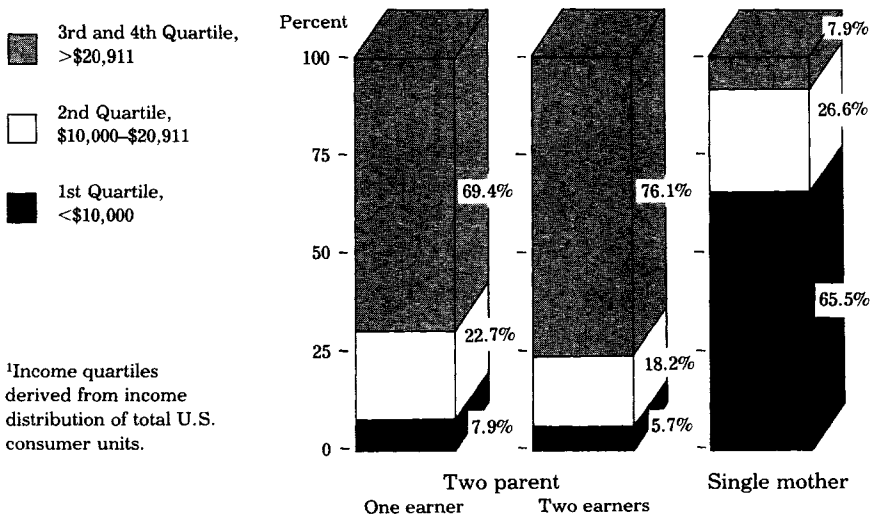
Two-parent families with women workers have a median weekly income more than double that of families with only one earner (\$841 versus \$387). Married-couple families had much higher weekly earnings if both husband and wife worked (\$836) than when the husband only worked (\$490) or the wife only worked (\$267).

**Effects of Family Structure and Roles**

Changes in income are linked more to marriage and divorce than to any single characteristic or skill. For most women, divorce frequently moves them immediately to poverty income levels. See Figure 2 for data on income distribution of families with children.

Female-headed households more frequently have incomes at or near the poverty level or are in the first quartile for income. In fact, nearly 66 percent of single mothers have annual incomes of less than \$10,000. About 75 percent of the families have incomes greater than \$20,911. In two-parent families with only one earner, only 8 percent had incomes less than \$10,000; nearly 70 percent had incomes greater than \$20,911. Data from 1989 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1991b) indicate that the poverty rate for both male and female households is higher than married couple heads. See Table 2.

**Figure 2. Income distribution<sup>1</sup> of families with children, 1987**



<sup>1</sup>Income quartiles derived from income distribution of total U.S. consumer units.

Source: Schurchardt and Guadagno, 1991, p. 10.

The poverty rate for female-headed households is nearly six times that of married families. Families of male household heads are in poverty about twice as often as married couple families. See Table 3.

The rate of poverty for children under age 18 is greater than for older persons. In fact, there are nearly twice the number of children living in poverty as older persons.

Related to the composition of families and the roles of family members is the issue of care of the elderly and young. Although the problems are different they are similar. With women working outside the home, the services necessary for care of the young and elderly must be purchased through a variety of contractual arrangements in the marketplace. Data are not readily available for older persons, but data for day (and night) care of children indicate that 3 million children (37%) are cared for by non-relatives and 1.9 million children (23%) are cared for in organized day care centers. In 1986, the average weekly cost of child care was \$45 per week or \$2,340 per year. When income of single-parents is considered, the relative cost is exorbitant.

**Table 2. Poverty Rates for Families, 1989**

| Type of Family          | Percent in Poverty |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| All Families            | 10.3               |
| Married Couple Families | 5.6                |
| Female-Household Head   | 32.2               |
| Male-Household Head     | 12.1               |
| Unrelated Subfamilies   | 51.4               |

**Table 3. Poverty Rates for Persons, 1989**

| Persons                  | Percent in Poverty |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| All Persons              | 12.8               |
| Race and Hispanic Origin |                    |
| White                    | 10.0               |
| Black                    | 30.7               |
| Other Races              | 16.4               |
| Hispanic Origin          | 26.2               |
| Age                      |                    |
| Under 18 Years           | 19.6               |
| 18 to 64 Years           | 10.2               |
| 65 and Over              | 11.4               |



## **Family Wealth**

The economic welfare of families is determined by wealth as well as by income. Inequities in wealth distribution are similar to those of inequity in income. In 1983, more than half of families (54%) had negative or zero financial assets (Marshall). Minority families own few interest-earning assets (Myers) and thus become more vulnerable to employment changes for source of income.

Intrafamily transfer of wealth is changing for several reasons. There is declining influence of traditions on how wealth should be distributed. What worked with one marriage and one set of in-laws does not necessarily work with multiple family structures—divorce, remarriage, step-families, blended families (Family Service America). Another factor affecting the timing and nature of transfer of wealth is related to life expectancy. Because people live longer they may delay or transfer wealth in different ways to assure that their personal needs are met.

A final factor in the income and wealth patterns for families is tax law changes. In recent years changes have shifted much of the tax burden from higher- to middle- and lower-income families.

## **Conclusion**

If public programs are to serve individuals and families effectively it is essential that a holistic perspective of the individual and family be considered. All dimensions of life—economic, physical, and social—are important. As a society the United States typically operates on a crisis model. When there are problems, the appropriate specialist is brought in. This is an adaptation of the medical model in which the specialist works with one illness or condition, thereby focusing on one dimension. We expect to get the best help from the specialist who knows the most about the specific situation. The reality is summarized in an old saw, "People have problems, universities have departments (or specialists)." We must understand the multiple aspects of the situation if we are to effectively help individuals and families. Too often in contemporary society, individuals and families or parts of families become adversaries not team members.

Policies that deal with children only and do not focus on the way the family can support the child (or the ways the family contributes to the problem) will not contribute to long-term reduction in the problems.

In a recent metropolitan newspaper, I found a section advertising self-help group meeting dates. I thought it was an interesting commentary on the nature of problems families are experiencing. Some of the groups were: displaced homemakers; keeping kids drug free; alzheimer support group; families anonymous—focusing on drug related behavior problems; grandparents rights; adult children of dys-

functional adults; lesbian/gay support groups; alcoholics anonymous; and so on. These support groups validate the idea that the specialist is not the only means of help. It is apparent that sharing ideas and problems is an important means of improving the quality of life. Understanding the changing family environment which is nurturing the young of the society is crucial to proposing solutions that accommodate the cultural values and context in which the individual lives. Looking at the whole person and the environment in which he/she lives should facilitate the greatest payoff for the individual, the family and the society.

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