



Northeastern University
Online



Week 2: Part II

Diversity of Family Form



Variations across time and societies

- Global variations:
 - Primitive Societies
 - Traditional agricultural societies

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• Since early human times, families have been changing because they must change and adapt in order to survive. There were even many types of hunting and gathering societies. In general, in those types of societies, the women gathered edible plant materials and the men hunted. The women usually supplied a majority of the calories consumed by the group. However, the Inuits who lived in a harsh, cold, environment relied primarily on hunting for their food, especially during the winter months. They hunt seals. This meant that women played a much less important role. For example, their job was to chew their husbands' shoes to keep them soft when they came back from the hunt.

• As societies became agricultural and the extended family became the norm, the issues of where people should and how descent should be defined tended to be patrilocal and patrilineal. However, there is at least one example of a society in which it was the mother's brother that was responsible for the care of her children. In this case, the model was patriarchal but matrilineal and matrilocal. The mother stayed with her family of origin and her brother helped to raise the children, played the role of male parent and the father was living with his own family and taking care of his sister's children.

• These are variations that occurred prior to industrialization. At that time societies were very homogenous and members shared the same norms and values including religion.



Modern Variations

- Social class
- Race

After Industrialization, social change accelerated and the types of pressures on families changed. In the United States, the most diverse industrialized nation, there is tremendous variation in family form based on social class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Rapid social change forced change on families. They had to develop new strategies for economic survival. Jobs were multiplying and changing and it became increasingly important to live in a city in order to find employment. Eventually industrial society was placed by postindustrial society and the service sector began to dominate the economy. Service jobs tend to be “good jobs” or “bad jobs” and people get stuck at one level of employment. Social classes became much more separate with different life chances and different lifestyles.

•**Social Class:** modern American society is now one in which there is an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. This gap was very large during the Golden Age in this society and the last two decades or so have sometimes been called the “new golden age.” Some say that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and the middle class is disappearing. Whatever the case, middle class and poorer families are having to face many challenges. For the middle class, home ownership, the cost of education for children, health care costs etc. have becoming increasingly difficult to accomplish and/or afford. The poor have been facing increasing challenges. The dominance of the service economy has made it increasingly difficult to find employment without a good education. Now, with the economic downturn even the middle class is losing ground.

•**Race and racism** have had a dramatic impact on families. The reading provides some interesting comparisons between African American families. Since slavery it has been more difficult for African American men to find employment. Women could find work as domestic workers etc. As more African Americans moved to cities, industrial jobs became less available and have virtually disappeared from the “inner city.” As employment opportunities declined, the divorce rate increased and many people did not form families at all.



Variation by

- Ethnicity
- Gender

• Ethnicity or culture plays an important role in the shape that families take. Different ethnic groups have different norms and values including beliefs about the role of other kin, the age of marriage, parenting responsibilities, parenting styles, etc.

• The big changes that have taken place in terms of gender mostly involve who works outside the home, the number of hours worked outside the home, the time spent with children, etc. Since the 1950's women have become more and more likely to work outside the home and to work for longer hours. This change is largely a reflection of the increasing difficulty of supporting a family on one income. The poor have always struggled with this, and even during early Industrialization, immigrant families usually relied on wages from both parents and even children. In Boston, for example, poor women worked as domestics or ran boarding houses and had small stores. Now most middle class families have two working parents or are single parent families. Women now work a "second shift" of housework and we hear about "latchkey children."