# Concise Encyclopedia of Comparative Sociology

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## Family Systems in Comparative Perspective

*Stephen K. Sanderson*

**Basic Dimensions of Family Life**

The family and marriage are universal social institutions, but their specific form has varied considerably in time and space. One of the most fundamental dimensions of family life involves who the relatives are and how one relates to them, in other words, "patterns of descent". Descent patterns organize groups at various hierarchical levels, from nuclear families to lineages and clans. Lineages are groups of relatives who can definitively demonstrate their genealogical connections, whereas clans are usually collections of lineages whose members assume, but cannot actually prove, their relatedness.

"Unilineal descent" is descent through a single parental line, either that of the father or that of the mother. Descent through the father's line is known as "patrilineality" and is the most common type of descent organization the world over. The *Ethnographic Atlas* put together by George Peter Murdock (1967) is a huge compilation of ethnographic data on 1,267 preindustrial societies, including data on the family and marriage. Of these societies, some 52 percent are patrilineal. Patrilineages or patriclans are groups of fathers, sons, and brothers who organize the affairs of the group. Since most unilineal descent groups impose a rule of exogamy—i.e., prohibit marriage within the group—patrilineal groups must import wives from other groups. Whether or not these wives give up their identity in their original groups or become fully absorbed into their husbands' groups varies; sometimes there is something of a compromise. Descent groups define who the most important relatives are and the rights and obligations of these relatives toward one another. One of the most crucial of these is inheritance. In patrilineal descent, inheritance passes from fathers to sons.

Some societies (about 14 percent) organize descent "matrilineally", or through the mother's line. This produces the unusual but very interesting institution known as the "avunculate". Since males generally take the lead in all societies, even though matrilineal groups are organized through mothers, males as brothers of the women organize the group's affairs. In matrilineality, men invest more in their sister's sons than in their own sons, and thus a key relationship develops between a mother's brother and a sister's son. The mother's brother (maternal uncle) is responsible for his nephew and passes inheritance to him.

The third major form of descent is "cognatic descent". Here groups form that are affiliated to both the father's and mother's lines. There are two types of cognatic groups, "bilateral kindreds" and "ambilineages". Bilateral kindreds constitute about 25 percent of the *Atlas* societies. They result when the main form of the family is the nuclear family and extended kin groups are relatively small. Father's and mother's relatives are of equal importance in social rights and obligations. Ambilineages are unilineal kin groups that derive from both fathers' and mothers' lines. These groups, sometimes called "ramages" or "conical clans", have been found mostly in Polynesia and make up only about 4 percent of the *Atlas* societies.

With descent goes residence or household organization. Over two-thirds of the world's societies (69 percent) have been organized "patrilocally", meaning that women move upon marriage into the households of their husbands and the husbands' extended kin. "Virilocality" is also a residence pattern in which women do the moving, but in this case households are nuclear families rather than extended kin groups. Patrilocal and virilocal residence are found mostly in patrilineal societies, 97 percent of which have one or the other of these residential forms. "Matrilocality" occurs when the men move at marriage into their wives' extended households; if there are no extended households, the residence form is known as "uxorilocality". These residence patterns are most common in matrilineality or where there are bilateral kindreds. "Avunculocality" means residence with the mother's brother; a common pattern is for a boy to live matrilocally or uxorilocally with his mother and father, but then move at puberty or marriage into the household of his maternal uncle. Avunculocality is found only in matrilineal societies, for obvious reasons. Matrilineality goes with matrilocality/uxorilocality or avunculocality; 74 percent of matrilineal societies have one or the other of these household patterns.

How do people marry? "Monogamy", or the marriage of one man to one woman, is the form familiar to the members of modern industrial societies,

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but most societies (about 84 percent of *Atlas* societies) have permitted or encouraged "polygyny", which is the marriage of a man to two or more women simultaneously. In most polygynous societies only a small number of men (perhaps only 3 or 4 percent) may be polygynously married, but there are societies in which the percentage is much larger. It is not uncommon to find societies in which more than 20 percent of men are in polygynous marriages, and sometimes the figure actually exceeds 50 percent (mostly in African and Australian Aboriginal societies; Binford 2001). When a large number of men are polygynous, and especially when some of the men have numerous wives, the inevitable result is that many men will not be able to marry at all, because the polygynists monopolize the women. The other possible form of marriage, quite rare, is "polyandry", or the marriage of a woman to two or more men. Polyandry has been found in only about 0.5 percent of the world's societies. The best-known cases are found in Tibet and adjacent regions, where polyandry is fraternal. A group of brothers collectively marry a woman and bring her into their household. In a few instances in polyandrous societies, "polygynandrous" marriages are formed. Here polyandrously married men bring another wife into the marriage.

Because of the nuclear family incest taboo, and the extension of this taboo to wider categories of kin, people must acquire mates from other groups. In societies with lineages or clans, in the vast majority of cases marriage within the group is prohibited. This might be limited to the lineage, but often is extended to the clan as well. This is the well-known practice of "exogamy". When a group gives up its sisters and daughters to the men of other groups, some sort of compensation is expected. The most common form of compensation is "bridewealth". Here the groom's group must pay a sum of valuables to the bride's group, the amount usually determined by the perceived reproductive value of the bride. The valuables that are transferred are usually those things that count most heavily as wealth in the particular society. For example, in East African pastoral societies, cattle are the most important form of wealth, and thus bridewealth takes the form of transferring so many cattle. The payment of bridewealth is usually said to "compensate" the bride's group for the loss of her reproductive value. The vast majority (81 percent) of patrilineal societies pay bridewealth, but about half of matrilineal societies do as well. In societies with cognatic kin groups, whether bilateral kindreds or ambilineages, bridewealth is less common, and in these groups there is often no marriage payment expected.

In societies with little or no real wealth, bride service may replace bridewealth. Bride service, for example, is most common in hunter-gatherer societies or societies that subsist by a combination of hunting and gathering and horticulture.

A far less common, but nonetheless quite important, form of marriage payment is "dowry" (only about 3 percent of societies in the *Atlas* practice dowry). Here the bride's group assists her in building up a sum of valuables that she can use in order to try to contract the most favorable marriage possible. Dowry is most common in patrilineal societies, especially those that practice some sort of intensive agriculture (86 percent). In terms of region, it is most common in the Circum-Mediterranean region (the Middle East and North Africa) (58 percent) and in East Eurasia (36 percent). It is unknown in sub-Saharan Africa and in North and South American societies. Goody (1976) argues that when wives are costly to support (because, say, they contribute little economic labor) women bring dowry into a marriage in order to offset these costs. Bridewealth by contrast, exists where women are less costly or even economically valuable, usually because they are the principal cultivators of the land. Goody contends that this is the reason bridewealth is unknown in Africa (where "female farming" is the norm) and more common in Asia (where "male farming" predominates). Gaulin and Boster (1990), however, claim that the key factors are a society's level of social stratification and whether it is monogamous or polygynous. In highly stratified polygynous societies, rich men generally take many wives, and it may be relatively easy for women to become one of the wives of these men. But when highly stratified societies are monogamous, the competition for rich husbands is much more intense, and dowry may be demanded by the prospective husband's group.

If we look at all of these marriage and family patterns in broad evolutionary perspective, we see something like the following. Hunter-gatherer societies are most commonly organized into bilateral kindreds (66 percent), are patrilocal or virilocal (59 percent), most commonly do not have marriage payments (47 percent), and have only occasional or limited polygyny (53 percent). Small-scale

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horticultural societies are most commonly patrilineal (65 percent), patrilocal or virilocal (79 percent), pay bridewealth (74 percent), and frequently engage in more than just occasional or limited polygyny. Societies with intensive agriculture are predominantly patrilineal (68 percent), patrilocal or virilocal (75 percent), pay bridewealth (67 percent), and are more likely to have monogamy (29 percent) than any other type of preindustrial society. Pastoralists are overwhelmingly patrilineal (82 percent) and patrilocal or virilocal (91 percent). They are also somewhat more inclined toward monogamy (22 percent) than any other type of preindustrial society except for intensive agriculturalists. Every single pastoral society in the *Atlas* engages in bridewealth payments. With the shift to modern industrial societies, the last remnants of unilineal descent groups, extended family households, polygynous marriage, and marriage payments disappeared. Japan was the last society to outlaw polygyny (doing so in the mid-19th century) and the latest to retain elements of its old patrilineal system, known as the *ie*.

**Family Patterns in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Sub-Saharan Africa is by far the most polygynous continent in the world. About 99 percent of its societies permit or encourage polygyny. Moreover, this region clearly leads the world in the frequency of polygyny within any given society. In the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (Murdock and White 1969), a representative sample of the *Atlas* containing 186 societies, there is a variable entitled "cultural basis for polygyny". If we concentrate on one of its categories, "polygyny preferred and attained by most men", the regional figures are striking: 75 percent of sub-Saharan African societies fall into this category compared to only 29 percent of Circum-Mediterranean societies, 25 percent of native South American societies, 13 percent of Oceanic societies, 12 percent of native North American societies, and 3 percent of East Asian societies.

Also using the Standard Sample, Douglas White (1988) has calculated the percentage of males in every society that is polygynously married. The figures are again striking: 31 percent for sub-Saharan Africa, 17 percent for native North and South America, 5 percent for East Asia, 4 percent for both the Circum-Mediterranean and Oceania, and a mere 2 percent for South Asia. In addition, the number of wives polygynous men have in sub-Saharan Africa is considerably greater than in other regions. Polygynous men have 11 or more wives in 57 percent of sub-Saharan African societies, but that many in only 22 percent of East and South Asian societies and in only 14 percent of West Eurasian societies (Betzig 1986).

Another common feature of family life in sub-Saharan Africa that is seldom found elsewhere is the residential arrangement between a man and his co-wives. A man's co-wives not only tend to live separately from each other, but also separately from him. Whiting and Whiting (1975), using the Standard Sample, found that in 70 percent of sub-Saharan African societies a man did not live with any of his wives, but this was the case in only 22 percent of Oceanic societies, 20 percent of West and East Eurasian societies, 19 percent of native South American societies, and just 6 percent of native North American societies.

Sub-Saharan Africa is also the world leader in unilineal descent, with 71 percent of societies having patrilineal descent and 18 percent matrilineal. Another 7 percent have so-called double descent (or double unilineal descent), wherein there are both patrilineages/patriclans and matrilineages/matriclans parallel to each other. This leaves only 4 percent of African societies with cognatic descent. By contrast, cognatic descent is found in 11 percent of East Asian societies, 13 percent of Circum-Mediterranean societies, 32 percent of Oceanic societies, 68 percent of native North American societies, and 70 percent of native South American societies.

Goody (1976) calls attention to the fact that sub-Saharan Africa is distinctive in another important way: women seldom inherit property regardless of the form of descent. Goody uses the term "diverging devolution" to denote a situation in which both sons and daughters inherit property (this may occur in patrilineal, matrilineal, ambilineal, or bilateral societies and is thus not to be equated with cognatic descent). Using the *Atlas*, Goody finds that in only 6 percent of sub-Saharan African societies do daughters inherit property along with sons. This contrasts dramatically with the Circum-Mediterranean region, where diverging devolution is found in more than half of the societies, with Oceania (41 percent), and with native North and South America (20 percent). Goody points out that in many Eurasian societies, a close female relative would sometimes have priority of inheritance over a more distant male relative.

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**East and South Asia**

China, one of the two great civilizations of the Asian continent, has been for countless years a strongly patrilineal and patrilocal society. In such societies, there is always the question of the extent to which women, as in-marrying wives living with the husband's kin group, are incorporated into their husband's group or retain important ties to their natal patrilineage. The traditional view of Chinese kinship is that women were fully incorporated and essentially severed from their natal groups. However, this view has been challenged by a number of scholars (Goody 1990). Women have often made visits, sometimes long ones, to their natal groups, and a woman's patrilineal kin maintained an interest in her children.

Dowry was common in China, but much more so in families of higher status. Lower-status groups were more likely to pay bridewealth. In fact, this is a common situation not only in China, but also in many other highly stratified societies with intensive agriculture (agrarian societies) as the main mode of economic production.

The status of women in China has been the subject of much commentary, and it has usually been assumed that this status has been very low. But this traditional view, like that above, must be qualified. It is true that the Chinese practiced footbinding, and that men dominated activities outside the household; in addition, widow remarriage was generally forbidden, as was spinsterhood, a common practice in preindustrial Europe. Goody (1990) contends that the reason for the absence of spinsterhood is that an unmarried sister remaining in her natal patrilocal household would lead to a great deal of tension with her in-marrying sister-in-law. Nevertheless, the status of a woman inside the household could be relatively high. The normal pattern has been one in which a young bride has had a very low status in her husband's patrilocal group. Upon motherhood, however, her status rose, and when she became a mother-in-law her status rose even higher. At this point she often became a tyrant, "ruling her son's bride with the same rod of iron that had been applied to her" (Goody 1990, 33). Women could also own property, sometimes even inheriting land from their natal patrilineages.

Much of what has been said about China can also be said of India. It has been strongly patrilineal and patrilocal, and family patterns have often differed considerably between higher-status and lower-status groups. As in China, dowry has been the primary form of marriage payment among higher-status groups, whereas lower-status groups have tended toward bridewealth. Higher-status and lower-status must here be seen in its cultural context. India, of course, is unique in being a society heavily organized around caste, and caste endogamy has been the long-standing rule. But even in any given caste within a community, there would be richer and poorer families, and the richer have tended to practice dowry and the poorer bridewealth (Goody 1990). In the case of lower castes, even bridewealth has often not been possible, so families have had to resort to some sort of sister exchange unaccompanied by any type of payment (Goody 1990).

Gaulin and Boster's (1990) contention that dowry is a means whereby a girl's family attempted to secure for her the best possible husband is well exemplified in India. At a minimum, dowry was necessary to maintain the girl's status and that of her family, and an enhancement of status through marriage to a man of even higher status required greater dowries. In recent years in India, increasing wealth due to greater monetization and commercialization of the economy has led many families to demand ever greater dowries such that a kind of "dowry extortion" and accompanying "dowry inflation" has resulted. As Goody remarks:

> With the expansion of consumer products in recent years, the demand for material goods has become more explicit, more vulgar, more secularized, more commercialized, and the dowry items fall more closely under the husband's control with less protection for the wife coming from her own family. (Goody 1990, 192)

Even after marriages have already occurred and dowries been paid, the groom's family sometimes demands additional sums on pain of the bride's being harmed or even killed. A widespread practice of "wife burning" has sprung up for those families who could not or would not pay additional sums.

Neither dowry nor bridewealth can be fully understood without relating them to the widespread practice of "hypergyny", or the marriage of women to men of higher status. Hypergynous marriage has been idealized by women all over the world and its opposite, "hypogyny", although occasionally found, is virtually never idealized. Dowry, as we have seen, is often necessary for a family to contract a hypergynous marriage for

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their daughter. But what of lower-status groups? Here there is difficulty for them to marry off their sons, who are far less desirable to other families' daughters, and so bridewealth is often necessary for marriage to take place at all.

In traditional China and India, as in nearly all agrarian societies, the extended family has been the basic residential unit. Regardless of the mode of descent, the household could be either a "joint" family or a "stem" family. A joint family, or undivided family, consists of three generations living together under a common roof, pooling resources, and headed by the eldest male. All of the brothers live together along with their fathers, sons, and in-marrying wives, and inherit equally at the father's death. A stem family is a segment of a joint family; it consists of a couple, their unmarried minor children, and one married son and his wife. Under this system, only one son (usually the oldest) inherits the farm and continues to live with his parents. Other sons normally leave the household and work for others, as, say, farm hands or servants, or in some cases join monasteries. Both joint and stem families have been found in China and India, but the joint family has been more common (Therborn 2004).

India, and China as well, permitted polygyny, and there could be a good deal of it. While among Chinese peasants and other subordinate classes polygyny was rare or nonexistent, as much as one-third of the gentry could be polygynous, and in upper- or upper-middle strata some genealogical records show that polygyny ranged from 8 to 26 percent (Therborn 2004). In India a similar pattern prevailed.

**The Arab World**

The Arab world has been culturally distinct from both Europe and South and East Asia in numerous respects, kinship being no exception. Containing many pastoral societies, the Arab world has been strongly, often intensely, patrilineal and patrilocal. As noted above, throughout the world most lineages and clans are exogamous, regarding marriage with one's group as tantamount to incest and thus strongly prohibited. But the Arab world has often departed from this widespread social practice. In societies where individuals marry first cousins, they almost always marry what anthropologists call a "cross cousin". A cross cousin is someone who is the offspring of siblings of opposite sex, either the mother's brother or the father's sister. Some societies show preference for a son's marriage with his mother's brother's daughter (known as "matrilateral cross-cousin marriage"), whereas a few show preference for the father's sister's daughter ("patrilateral cross-cousin marriage"). Far more common is marriage with a cross cousin who is simultaneously a mother's brother's daughter and a father's sister's daughter, which is known as "bilateral cross-cousin marriage". This is a natural outcome of a mode of marital exchange in which groups exchange sisters reciprocally in every generation. The other type of cousin is known as a "parallel cousin", who will be a father's brother's daughter or a mother's sister's daughter. The vast majority of societies prohibit marriage with a parallel cousin? The reason is quite straightforward: a parallel cousin will be a member of one's own lineage or clan, whereas a cross-cousin belongs to another lineage or clan. Cross-cousin marriage is thus a natural outcome of the exogamy principle.

But in the Arab world, parallel cousin marriage is often allowed, indeed is frequently encouraged. And it always takes the form of sons marrying father's brother's daughters, which is known as "patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage" (for short, FBD marriage). There are 23 societies in the earlier version of the *Atlas* (containing 862 societies) that practice this form of marriage, and all of them are found in the Arab (or at least the Muslim) world. It is not clear why this form of marriage, regarded as incestuous and thus intolerable to the rest of the world, is found at all, and exclusively limited to Islamic societies. It probably reflects the intense patrilineality of this world as well as its intense patriarchy. FBD marriage keeps sisters within the patrilineal group and thus allows the men of their natal patrilineage or patriclan to continue to exercise control over them. However, whether this is a cause or only a consequence of FBD marriage cannot be said at this point in our knowledge.

The other distinctive feature of the Arab world is the remarkably low status of women. No other region exhibits the degree of domination and control of women that is found in this region. In the most extreme cases, women have traditionally been excluded from virtually all activities and pursuits outside the household, are required to remove themselves to other parts of the household when men return at the end of the day, are not allowed to go out in public without male chaperonage, and are required to wear veils and long concealing garments when they do. Control

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over female sexuality is a strong preoccupation, which is much of the basis for the customs noted above. Women can be killed for premarital sex and adultery. Like FBD marriage, it is not known why the status of women is so low in this part of the world. It may stem in part from the unusually dry and desert or desert-like environment of the region, and the widespread existence of pastoral societies, the most intensely patrilineal of all societies. But why such ecological conditions would lead to these outcomes is unclear, and the whole argument speculative. This remains an important question for further research.

**European Families**

Family relations in European societies have differed in important ways from those in China and India, indeed, from most of the rest of the world. Roman society in its early stages had a patrilineal bent, but in time it evolved into a more bilateral system. There was also more emphasis on the conjugal relationship between husband and wife than elsewhere, and on the nuclear family as the basic residential unit (Goody 1990). There appeared to have been more of an affectionate relationship between husband and wife than was the norm in other highly stratified, agrarian societies. In Asia and elsewhere marriage was typically very early, with girls being married off at puberty, boys somewhat later. But in Rome marriage occurred later, sometimes much later. The status of women was also generally higher when compared to China and India. In addition, Rome had legally imposed monogamy from an early period, and this applied to everyone, senators and emperors included (Betzig 1992a, 1992b). However, concubinage was permitted, and men of sufficient means often had several concubines. A concubine was a sort of companion and sexual partner who did not have the rights to property and inheritance granted to the wife.

After the Roman Empire collapsed and was overrun by the Germanic tribes, polygynous marriage reemerged because it was a common practice among these tribes. However, the Church strongly opposed it, and within a few centuries monogamy became the universal rule (MacDonald 1995). The medieval, feudal society that gradually formed in the centuries to come was, of course, an overwhelmingly rural society with peasants of various levels engaged in subsistence farming but having to pay rent, taxes, and labor services to their overlords. Within this context, the stem family, usually with primogeniture, was the norm. Here Europe was distinct as well, for in the rest of Eurasia the joint family was far more common and all males of the patrilineal household inherited land equally.

Moving ahead to modern times, we see that the European family, or at least the Western European family, remained distinct. Goran Therborn (2004) refers to a "rule of universal marriage" that prevailed throughout the non-Western world at the beginning of the 20th century. Nearly all women married and marriage for women normally occurred very early. In China, for example, only one-tenth of one percent of women aged 34 or older had not married. In India, 96 percent of women aged 20–24 were married, many of them having married much earlier than this. The average age of marriage for Indian girls was 13, but in some of the states of north India the age of betrothal was 11. Marriage was also universal in the Dutch East Indies and in the Muslim world. In Egypt, for example, 94 percent of girls had married by age 29, with most of these having married before age 20 (Therborn 2004).

In Eastern Europe we find essentially the same universal marriage pattern, although the age of marriage was somewhat higher. In 1900 only about 2 percent of women never married, and the average age of marriage was just over 20. But in Western Europe, things were different. Some 13 percent of women never married, and the average age at marriage was just under 26. (For Western and Eastern European countries combined, age at marriage and percentage of women never marrying were very highly correlated, at $r = .865$.) Western Europe was also characterized by greater sexual informality: more premarital pregnancies, more births out of wedlock, and more cohabitation in place of marriage (Therborn 2004). This Western/Eastern divide was not a recent development; it probably existed as early as the late Middle Ages (Macfarlane 1978, 1986).

**The Evolution of the Modern Family System**

Sociologists of the 1950s and 1960s interested in the evolution of the modern family attributed the new developments largely to the effects of industrialization (Goode 1963). However, some of the most important changes, such as the shift from extended to nuclear family households, began well before the Industrial Revolution. Alderson and Sanderson (1991) used a world-systems approach to study European family patterns in the 16th century. Drawing on research undertaken by numerous

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historians of the family (in particular Laslett 1977, 1983, and Laslett and Wall 1972—see Sanderson 1995, Table 16.1), they found that in two countries of the capitalist core (England and northern France), an average of 81 percent of people were living in nuclear family households. In Belgium the average for two villages was 77 percent, and in Colonial America a striking 97 percent. At the other extreme, the capitalist periphery (Russia, Serbia, Estonia, and Hungary), only 39 percent of people were living in nuclear families. Here the large extended family was still dominant. In Serbia the most common family unit was the *zadruga*, a large extended household containing perhaps three or four nuclear families under the control of a patriarch and functioning as a single economic unit. Any given *zadruga* could contain as many as 30 people. In the Russian Baltic province of Kurland there was a similar type of extended household, the *Gesind*, whose average size was about 14 members (Plakans 1975; Shorter 1975). In the capitalist semiperiphery (Italy, southern France, Austria, and Germany), slightly more than half of the population was living in nuclear households. The rest were living in extended households, but in this case the smaller stem family household rather than the joint households common in Eastern Europe (Shorter 1975).

Other important changes also began early (Shorter 1975; Stone 1979). The traditional European family was largely an economic and reproductive unit. Companionate marriage with strong affection between husband and wife did exist, but it was not the principal basis for marriage. This was to change. Children increasingly rejected arranged marriages and, indeed, any interference by their parents in the choice of a spouse. Romantic love increased in importance as the basis for choosing a spouse as well as the basis for holding a marriage together (Coontz 2005).This "sentimental revolution" in marriage carried over to the relationships between parents and children. Mothers began to breast-feed their children rather than send them out to wet nurses, and also showed increasing concern with advice on good child-rearing practices. Sexual behavior changed as well. There was more premarital sex and more erotic significance given to marital sex.

Another change was what Shorter (1975) has called the "rise of domesticity". The modern family was becoming increasingly private and the boundaries between it and the rest of society more closely drawn. By the mid-19th century the family had evolved into a unit increasingly separate from the outside world. It was becoming, in the words of Christopher Lasch (1977), a "haven in a heartless world", a refuge from the increasingly competitive capitalist marketplace and its stresses and strains.

**Industrialization and the Family**

Yet despite the earliness of these changes, the traditional view of industrialization's impact on the family is not entirely wrong; the full flowering of advanced industrial capitalism has continued many of these earlier trends and introduced several new ones. These can be summed up essentially as follows:

1. *The emancipation of women*. In the 20th century there were two major waves of feminism, the first in the 1920s and the second beginning in the 1960s. This has led to a huge increase in the number of women in the labor force, especially married women with children, including their entry in growing numbers into the learned professions, middle to upper reaches of the business world, and government.

2. *The sexual revolution of the 1960s and on*, although this had begun on a much smaller scale at least as early as the 19th century and perhaps a century or two earlier (Shorter 1975).

3. *Dramatic declines in childbearing and family size*. This has occurred all over the world, but has gone furthest in Western Europe, North America, and East Asia. The average fertility rate necessary to maintain a society at its existing population size—keep it just at replacement level—is approximately 2.1 in the advanced industrial countries, and between 2.5 and 3.3 for less-developed countries. (It is higher in less-developed countries because lifespans are shorter and infant mortality rates are higher.) In 1965, all of Europe, North America, the British settler colonies, and Japan were above replacement level. By 1980 most of these countries had dropped below replacement level, and by 2000 all of them had (Therborn 2004, Table 8.3). As of 2009, 107 of 183 countries were below this level, and another 9 only modestly above it (*CIA World Factbook* 2009). Even some very poor countries with traditionally very high birth rates have experienced significant fertility declines, although the majority are still above replacement level. India's fertility rate, for example, declined from 3.80 in 1993 to 2.72 in 2009 (*CIA World Factbook* 2009; Allen 2006).

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The part of the world where fertility has reached extremely low levels is East Asia. The fertility rate for Japan is 1.21, for South Korea 1.21, for Singapore 1.09, and for Hong Kong 1.02. The lowest fertility rate in the world is in Macau, a tiny island off the coast of China whose population is Chinese. The fertility rate there is a mere 0.91 (*CIA World Factbook* 2009). At the other extreme is sub-Saharan Africa, where the vast majority of countries are far above replacement level. However, in nearly all of these countries fertility has been dropping, although not dramatically in most instances. As recently as a generation ago there was much concern about world overpopulation, but the problem within the next two generations may become one of *under*population. In most countries population continues to grow, even in those that are below replacement, because of something known as the population-lag effect. But in a generation or two population growth will stop and decline set in. Of course, in those less-developed countries that are still far above replacement level, population continues to grow rapidly. World population growth has therefore not come to an end, but it may very well do so by mid-century.

4. *Increasing cohabitation in the absence of marriage or as a prelude to marriage*. In the United States in 1970 there were approximately 500,000 unmarried couples who were cohabiting, but the number exploded to nearly three million by 1990. In Canada in the early 1970s, 16 percent of first unions were cohabitations, but that had more than tripled, to 51 percent, by the late 1980s. In England in the 1960s about 25 percent of couples had cohabited prior to marriage, but the figure had soared to some 70 percent by the 1990s. In Austria in the 1990s, 40 percent of first unions of women in the age cohort 25–29 were cohabitations; corresponding figures for Switzerland and Germany were 37 percent and 46 percent, respectively (*International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family* 2003; Cherlin 1992).

However, there is also a great deal of variation among Western societies in the prevalence of cohabitation. The European countries where cohabitation is most prevalent are Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and France. In 1996, an average of 30 percent of women in the age group 25–29 were cohabiting. In southern Europe cohabitation is much less common. In Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece in 1996 barely 3 percent of 25–29-year-old women were in a cohabitating relationship (Kiernan 2001). In the former set of countries, cohabitation is considered a legitimate type of relationship regardless of whether it leads to marriage. But in the latter set cohabitation is regarded as at best a prelude to marriage (Schuck and Wilson 2008).

5. *More out-of-wedlock births and single-parent families*. For example, in the United States in 1980 18.4 percent of births were to unwed mothers, but that number had increased to 38.5 percent by 2006; the corresponding figures for the Netherlands are 4.1 and 37.1 percent, and for the United Kingdom 11.5 and 43.7 percent. During the same period, the number of single-parent households (mostly headed by mothers) doubled in Canada, Japan, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, and more than tripled in Ireland.

6. *Rapidly rising rates of divorce*. Although divorce is hardly a new phenomenon—it was already increasing as early as the middle of the 19th century—it began to surge in the 1960s, and between the middle of that decade and the mid-1980s increased dramatically. It continued to increase until about 2000, although more slowly. After that, it either stabilized or actually declined in the United States, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark (US Bureau of the Census 2010).

7. *Postponement of marriage*. Both men and women in many European countries and in North America are now marrying later than at any time in at least the last fifty years. In the 1950s people commonly married in their early to mid twenties, but marriage is now being postponed until the late twenties (Kasearu 2007). And because divorce and cohabitation rates remain high and rates of remarriage have declined, a larger proportion of adults are unmarried than at any time in the past. For example, in Sweden in 1996 only about 30 percent of women in the age cohort 25–29 were married, and in Denmark and France the numbers were about 35 percent.

8. *Increasing family diversity*. The dramatic increase in cohabitation and single-parent families, along with gay and lesbian partnerships (sometimes including children), raises the question whether the “family” must have culturally recognized biological or marital relationships. In most cultures, a cohabitating couple living with a child or children would be considered a family.

**Conclusions**

Some social scientists have speculated that the family is eventually headed for extinction; it is an institution that has outlived its usefulness. This

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seems unlikely. Not only is the family a universal institution in time and space, but it may well be that humans have innate tendencies to mate, reproduce, rear children, and favor kin over nonkin (van den Berghe 1979). Families of some type will always be with us so long as humans continue to live in organized societies. What form they will take in the future, however, is both difficult and hazardous to predict.

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