

Historical Perspectives on Family Studies

This article explores the relationship of historical research to contemporary family studies. Family history was influenced greatly by fields such as sociology and anthropology, leading it to make several contributions to those fields in turn. The continuing collaboration of these disciplines can significantly enrich current family research, practice, and policy making. History's specific contribution lies in its attention to context. Although historical research confirms sociologic and ethnographic findings on the diversity of family forms, for example, it also reveals that all families are not created equal. The advantage of any particular type of family at any particular time is constructed out of contingent and historically variable social relationships. Historical research allows researchers to deepen their analysis of family diversity and family change by challenging widespread assumptions about what is and what is not truly new in family life. Such research complicates generalizations about the impact of family change and raises several methodological cautions about what can be compared and controlled for in analyzing family variations and outcomes.

When I was invited to contribute an article summarizing recent work and new directions in historical research on families, my first thought was to focus on the contributions of historians to the understanding of contemporary families. Almost immediately, however, I realized that the most

striking feature of family history until recently has been its enormous debt to other disciplines. In consequence, I decided to discuss what historians have learned from other fields and to suggest a few areas where we may be able to repay our debts.

For years, historians treated families either as natural, taken-for-granted backdrops to "real" history or as mere epiphenomena, sets of interpersonal relationships far too individualized to accommodate systematic historical analysis. Only gradually did historians learn from sociologists, demographers, and economists to see families as social institutions in which variations could be related to socioeconomic pressures, cultural conflicts, and political transformations.

Initially, historians often drew outdated lessons from these other disciplines, citing early sociologists, for example, on how modernization and industrialization caused the decline of the "traditional" extended family. During the 1960s, however, the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure discovered that from the 16th through the 19th centuries, mean household size had remained fairly constant, averaging about 4.75, and that even the largest households contained relatively few kin. Other researchers found that industrialization actually increased the incidence of extended family coresidence in many regions.

Some historians then went to the other extreme, suggesting that the distinctive feature of Western European and American history was the early and long-standing predominance of nuclear families. Later research, however, demonstrated an important kernel of truth in earlier generalizations about the decline of extended families. Be-

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cause life spans were shorter in the past, comparatively few families had enough living members to potentially reside as a multigenerational household. Even a small number of extended-family households represented a high proportion of all such potential arrangements. Today, by contrast, even large numbers of coresident extended families embody but a tiny fraction of potential multigenerational households, indicating a major shift in preferred living arrangements. Similarly, idealization of nuclear family privacy was a fairly recent historical alternative to a system in which servants, boarders, lodgers, or visiting distant kin moved more freely in and out of the household and in which little value was placed on constructing a special sphere of interaction for the married couple and their children (Hareven, 1987, 1996; Ruggles, 1994).

Nevertheless, as historians returned to their own training—making more precise distinctions among regions, diverse class or cultural patterns, and situational differences in family life and sexuality—their research continued to challenge unilineal generalizations about the impact of modernization on families. Thomas Bender, for example, used ethnographies along with history to complicate older ideas about a transition from “*gemeinschaft*” to “*gesellschaft*” relations. Bender suggested that researchers study the tension, interaction, and sometimes mutual dependence of those modes of social behavior, pointing out that the spread of contractual relations in some areas of life has sometimes strengthened communal relations in another (Bender, 1982).

Other historians demonstrated the fallacy of postulating linear transitions from one family “type” to another. In the ancient Mediterranean world, households and groupings of relatives were so disparate that a single meaning for family could not be discerned. Family membership has since contracted and expanded in different periods, places, and social classes. Averaging out these trends hides the fact that changes in one group often went in opposing directions to changes in another, which makes it difficult to privilege one set of changes as inherently more modern. Thus, historical research on families supports criminologist Michael Maltz’s caution about the problems that arise when the field of statistics is viewed as the study of averages rather than as the study of variation (Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink, & Holden, 1999; Herlihy, 1985; Maltz, 1994; Seccombe, 1993).

By the 1970s, influenced by family systems

theory, historians also began to investigate the processes that have linked family members to each other and to external social institutions. Several researchers pioneered the study of the life cycle, and later of the life course, examining the intersection between individual life histories, family needs, and historical forces. Such collaboration produced studies such as Glen Elder’s investigation of how the family behaviors of individuals were affected by having grown up during the Great Depression and William Tuttle’s study of the effects of World War II (Elder, 1974; Elder, Modell, & Parke, 1993; Hareven, 1987, 1996; Tuttle, 1993). Discussion of family “strategies” gradually has replaced older portrayals of families as passive objects of historical change. This concept was further refined when feminists noted that families have not only joint interests, but also internal conflicts over resources, power, autonomy, and choices (Davidoff et al., 1999).

Historians were among the pioneers of gender studies and developed a rich body of work in this area quite early. Initially, however, many contrasted such “social history” with traditional political and economic narratives, as though the two were unconnected. More recent historical work, taking a cue from anthropology and sociology, has investigated the role of “private” gender and sexual relations in producing public political and economic institutions, rituals, and conflicts (Freedman, 1997; Gordon, 1997; Koven & Michel, 1993).

Early historical work was somewhat naive in its attempt to generate overarching assertions about changing family priorities, power differentials, and relationships. Some historians argued that, in general, parents were uncaring and marriages were loveless before the advent of “affective individualism.” Closer historical examination revealed that such generalizations rested on ethnocentric misreadings of evidence. This led to a spate of studies attempting to establish the essential continuity of family ties and emotions (Graff, 1995; Pollock, 1983; Walter, 1989).

More nuanced investigations, however, revealed that although people in the past were probably not more or less caring than they are today, the object, form, and meaning of their family affections have all varied tremendously. Some of the most interesting new historical work has been on the history of childhood and the variability of parenting practices. Equally provocative has been the finding that contemporary assumptions about sexual identity or orientation seriously distort the

very different mix of romantic and sensual conventions that prevailed in family life as recently as the 19th century. (Freedman, 1997; Graff, 1995; Glenn, Chang, & Chauncy, 1994; Hansen, 1995; Hawes & Hiner, 1991; Katz, 1995; Rothman, 1984; Szreter, 1996).

Other historical research has shown that despite some nearly universal family roles in both social and biological reproduction, nuclear families were less central to people's identity in the past than often is assumed. Sentimentalization of family ties, for instance, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Older definitions of family seldom distinguished the nuclear unit from unrelated household residents, and neighbors were sometimes preferred over kin as sources of aid. Antebellum American evangelists, in sharp contrast to many modern religious definitions of family values, defined character as the willingness to stand against "social sins," such as slavery, in opposition to one's family if necessary (Coontz, 1988, 2000; Dayton, 1992; Epstein, 1996; Mintz & Kellogg, 1988).

Similarly, many of the family rituals and festivities we now think of as traditional developed comparatively recently. Until the late 19th century, civic festivals and Fourth of July parades were more important occasions for celebration and strong emotion than were most family holidays. The sit-down family meal, with its set hours and its high expectations of familial communication, was a mid-nineteenth-century invention (Caplow et al., 1982; Gillis, 1996).

FRUITS OF COLLABORATION: HISTORICAL STUDIES OF FAMILY DIVERSITY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PRIVILEGE

One of the richest results of the interchange between sociology, anthropology, and history has been the huge outpouring of work on family diversity since the late 1980s. Historians of racial-ethnic families have demonstrated that the concept of Whiteness, including "White" family patterns, emerged only slowly in the United States. The Irish, for example, were originally considered a non-White race and in some circles were treated with even more contempt than were African-Americans. In the 19th century, however, the Irish won reclassification as Whites, becoming an ethnic group rather than a racial one. Italians and Greeks were not granted "White" status until the early 20th century (Barrett & Roediger, 1997; Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 1988).

Such findings have interesting implications for internal family roles and processes because the creation and preservation of racial categories historically has involved special controls over women's reproductive behavior and sexual image. They also support claims by many scholars of race and ethnicity that when Whiteness is taken as the norm, and "people of color" are studied as an addition or variation, the study of "diversity" perpetuates a Eurocentric and ahistorical world view (Liu, 1994).

Like race, ethnicity also was socially constructed in a dialectic between dominant groups and successive immigrants to America. The family "traditions" of such ethnic groups were not merely passed down from older generations' memories of their native culture. Rather, different groups drew selectively from cultural resources, often creating new "traditions" as they adapted to or resisted changing economic or political constraints and opportunities. Chinese immigrants to the United States, for example, moved successively through three different "cultural preferences" for family organization as they adjusted to changing historical conditions. Other groups used family ties differently (and frequently more extensively) than they had in their native lands (Coontz, Parson, & Raley, 1999; Glenn, 1999; Sanchez, 1993).

Such historical studies have helped to challenge the multicultural buffet approach to diversity, which records "variations" by race and class rather than examining interactions, conflicts, and mutual influences. The cult of full-time motherhood and protected childhood among the native-born, White middle class of the 19th century, for instance, cannot be understood merely as a distinctive cultural value or even a privilege of higher income per se. It was a historically specific class and ethnic relationship that depended on a supply of cheap labor to take over the tasks that used to occupy the bulk of a middle-class housewife's time. That supply of labor was created by a particular mix of class, race, and ethnic relations. Thus, the secluded domestic family of the middle class was constructed in tandem with child labor in the field and factories and with extended-family household production in the "sweated trades" (Coontz, 2000; Dill and Zinn, 1994).

Similarly, dual-earner families in the contemporary United States depend on a global economy in which many of their consumer goods are produced by families who do not rely primarily on paid employment. The ways in which U.S. middle-class families organize child care and marital

relations, including gender equity at home, are often contingent on the availability of low-wage female workers, many without husbands of their own, to take over middle-class wives' customary household work (Buvinic, 1998; Chang, 1999; Risman, 1998).

Investigation of such interdependencies has aligned historians with sociologists and anthropologists who challenge culture-bound or essentialist assumptions about the "right" way to organize family relations and who refute catastrophic claims about collapse of "the" family. Nonetheless, history does not support the conclusion that "anything goes" in family life. If many conservatives distort the historical record in claiming the universal superiority of a particular family form or value set, some liberals distort it in the other direction. It does not follow that people can simply shrug off the weight of historical sediment that has been deposited all around them to freely create new family relations and values.

Almost every known society has had a legally, economically, and culturally privileged family form that confers significant advantages on those who live within it, even if those advantages are not evenly distributed or are accompanied by high costs for certain family members. Individuals who cannot or will not participate in the favored family form face powerful stigmas and handicaps. History provides no support for the notion that all families are created equal in any specific time and place. Rather, history highlights the social construction of family forms and the privileges that particular kinds of families confer.

For example, women's economic dependence on marriage and the consequent association of single-mother households with deprivation are not immutable. In many foraging societies, women traditionally contributed 60% to 90% of calories, and they were often in charge of household food distribution. They gained access to other resources, such as game brought home from group hunts, through kin redistribution networks rather than through marital ones. In such cases, a man often was more disadvantaged by single status than a woman was (Coontz & Henderson, 1986; Dahlberg, 1981). Colin Turnbull (1962) recounted noticing an emaciated, unkempt man among the Mbuti, normally an egalitarian society. When he asked why the man seemed in such dire straits, he was told that the man was too bad-tempered to keep a wife.

High rates of separation had few ill effects on

women and children in band-level foraging societies in which the ethos was to share food and childrearing with everyone in camp. Even in less egalitarian societies, such as those organized on principles of patrilocal kinship, marriage is not always the main source of protection for women. Often a woman has more call on her brother's resources than on her husband's, and higher status as a sister than as a wife (Amadiume, 1987; Bilge & Kaufman, 1982; Ogbomo, 1997; Sacks, 1979).

Most historians, anthropologists, and economists agree that the eclipse of extended kinship as the main mechanism of production and distribution limited the claims of individuals on resources beyond the household, whereas the development of plow agriculture, along with increased militarization, made women more dependent on men's productive activities. Somewhat later, the early growth of day labor further reduced the economic contribution of women in relation to men. Marriage, however unequal in its burdens and benefits, then became the main form of income redistribution to non-wage-earning individuals, resulting in substantial penalties for women and children not encased in that institution (Acker, 1988; Honeyman & Goodman, 1991; Humphries, 1990; Laslett, 1988).

In some such marital systems, children's labor or wages are redistributed to parents, making mothers a beneficiary, albeit a junior one, of children's work. In others, men redistribute wages to both women and children, but women frequently transform those wages into goods and services that would cost more to buy on the open market than the amount of the initial male contribution.

The historical record shows that the effectiveness of marriage in redistributing the products of wage labor varies, then, according to gender and age relations. In the United States today, women and children generally have a higher standard of living within marriage than they do outside it, although married women with children tend to do more household work than their cohabitating or single-mother counterparts. In other parts of the world, the redistributive role of marriage is severely limited by high levels of male dominance. In several Third World countries, children receive a greater proportion of family resources and get their nutritional needs met more efficiently when the woman rather than the man is the main household earner. Many scholars of Third World development, as well as students of urban poverty in the United States, suggest that higher wages for women therefore would be a more effective strat-

egy than increasing marriage rates for combating the impoverishment of women and children (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996; Dwyer & Bruce, 1988; Horton & Miller, 1987; Ishii-Kuntz, 1994; Kabeer, 1994).

The redistributive functions of marriage also vary by community context. Among poor women, for example, single parenthood reflects painful dilemmas unacknowledged by those who exhort them to escape poverty by getting married. Certainly, a stable, employed, cooperative husband would improve such women's economic prospects and make childrearing easier. On the other hand, getting married can be risky, cutting the woman off from other support networks and linking her fate to a man who may be economically or emotionally unstable. In the absence of a rock-solid marriage and a husband with a job, a poor woman may have more access to support if she remains enmeshed in kin and friendship networks, with the flexibility to switch sexual partners—even if such behavior further limits her long-term prospects for attaining a stable marriage. This may explain in part why some research indicates that infant mortality rates are lower and children's reading scores higher among impoverished young mothers when they remain single than when they marry the child's father (Albrecht, Miller, & Clarke, 1994; Chant, 1985; Cooksey, 1997; Kabeer, 1994).

The organization of the state further complicates the redistributive role of marriage. In many ancient societies, emerging state systems reinforced women's and children's dependence on marriage by explicitly restricting their older claims on a wider kinship network. The ancient Greek state, for example, strove to reduce the authority of the clan (*genos*) and elevate that of the household (*oikos*). Such states also introduced new social and economic penalties for female adultery and for "illegitimacy."

Other types of states, however, organize redistribution and social citizenship in ways that reduce the dependence of women and children on marriage. Countries with a smaller proportion of low-wage jobs or with more extensive child-support systems, for example, have lower levels of female and child poverty. In the United States, according to a 1995 study, 57.9% of female-headed families with children were poor, compared with a rate of 16.5% in the United Kingdom and 7.9% in the Netherlands (Rainwater, 1995).

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Thus far, I have discussed areas in which history, sociology, and anthropology have refined each other's generalizations about patterns of change to take better account of variation, nuance, and diversity. The benefits of collaboration also extend to contemporary studies of family life.

One of the most exciting results of the growth in family research over the past few decades has been the accumulation of longitudinal studies of families. These data sets have enriched immensely the resources of historians. In turn, historians can offer perspective on how representative decade-by-decade variations may be. To a historian, for instance, a 20-year longitudinal study—or even a 40-year study—is relatively short term.

Consider the data that show a decline since the early 1970s in several indicators of child well-being. In 1997, 19.9% of all Americans under age 18 lived below the poverty level, compared with 14% in 1969, 15.1% in 1970 and 14.4% in 1973. But the period from 1969 through 1973 was the low point of child poverty in the entire 20th century because of the unique combination of the Great Society welfare programs coming on top of a period of prolonged rising real wages, high rates of unionization, and low unemployment. The child poverty rate was 27.3% in 1959 and even higher at the turn of the century (Rawlings, 1998, p. 211).

Another area in which historical perspective helps is the evaluation of reports that parents spend less time with their children than they did in the 1970s. This claim should be taken with a grain of salt because many estimates are made simply on the basis that women have increased their work hours and thus have fewer potential hours to spend with their children. But even if there has been a decrease since the 1970s, that decade's practices were far from any "traditional" norm.

In colonial America, families routinely sent young children and adolescents to live in other people's homes as servants, apprentices, or simply as dependent kin. In the early 1900s, thousands of children worked away from their parents in mines, mills, or factories, whereas many others spent more time on the streets than in the family home. Even many middle-class families of the past spent surprisingly little time interacting with their children because they had more children, more time-consuming household tasks, and far lower expect-

tations of quality parenting. In the late 1970s, researchers returned to the "Middletown" studied by Robert and Helen Lynd in the 1920s and found that 1970s parents spent much more time with their children than had parents in the 1920s (Bahr, 1980; Calvert, 1992; Caplow et al., 1982; Coontz, 2000; Kain, 1990; Mintz & Kellogg, 1988; O'Day, 1994). Yet the children raised in those "uninvolved" 1920s families managed to cope with the Great Depression and fight World War II.

Even in comparison with the 1970s, I know of no studies documenting a decline in parents' assistance with children's schoolwork. In oral histories that my research assistants, Margaret Sinclair and Mary Wright-Croes, currently are compiling, informants who reared children in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s consistently report spending less time supervising homework than did their adult children or grandchildren in the 1980s and 1990s (Sinclair, 1999; Wright-Croes, 1999).

Comparisons of contemporary families with those of the 1950s are especially misleading. As many historians and sociologists have demonstrated, the 1950s family was atypical even for the 20th century. For the first time in 80 years, the age of marriage fell sharply, fertility rates increased, and the proportion of never-married individuals plummeted. The values attached to nuclear-family living, including the rejection of "interference" by extended kin and the expectation that family life should be people's main source of personal gratification, were also new—and their hegemony even at the time should not be exaggerated. Furthermore, historian Jessica Weiss recently has demonstrated that what we now call "the" 1950s family was only a single and temporary stage in the family cycle of the generation that formed families during and immediately after World War II (Coontz, 1997, 2000; May, 1988; Meyerowitz, 1994; Weiss, 2000).

In 1950, only 16% of all children had mothers who worked full-time for wages outside the home. Today, 59% of children, including a majority of preschoolers, have mothers who are employed (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). This is a dramatic change in a comparatively short period of time, posing many challenges to existing values and childrearing practices. Nonetheless, exclusive child care by mothers and sole breadwinning by fathers have been exceedingly rare in history. It is far more typical for women to have combined production and reproduction than to have specialized in one or the other.

In 19th-century England and America, child labor was an essential part of the family economy, with the ironic result that when wives did work outside the home, they did so when their children were extremely young, withdrawing only when the children became able to contribute to family finances. It was not until the 1920s that a bare majority of children in the United States grew up in a home in which the father went out to work, the mother stayed at home and was not heavily involved in running a farm or household business, and the children were at home or in school rather than at work. In the 1950s, about 60% of children grew up in this family form, a higher percentage than before or since (Creighton, 1996; Hernandez, 1993; Robinson, 1995; Rotella & Alter, 1993).

WHAT IS TRULY NEW

These examples should not be taken to mean that the more things change, the more they remain the same. Rather, by showing what is not new in a long-range perspective, historians throw into sharper focus the qualitative and unprecedented changes that are occurring in families.

Take the question of whether marriage is a dying institution. In 1999, a report issued by the National Marriage Project declared that the marriage rate had fallen by 43% since 1960 (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999). This dramatic drop in marriage rates, which they calculated on the basis of how many single women aged 15 years and older get married each year, is partly an artifact of the rising age of marriage. In 1960, the median age at first marriage for women was 20.4 years. By 1998, it was 25. The fact that a lower proportion of all women aged 15 and older are getting married each year than in the past does not necessarily mean that a lower proportion of all women will ever get married. As of March 1998, 20.5% of all women aged 18 years and older had never married, compared with 13.1% in 1960. On the other hand, of women aged 35 and older, 7.7 were never married in 1998, compared with 7.2% in 1960 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998, 1975).

This statistic probably overrepresents the proportion of women who are marrying today because it includes earlier generations who were more likely to get married. On the other hand, more and more women are marrying for the first time at age 40 or older. At any rate, a long-range perspective makes recent increases in nonmarriage rates seem much less dramatic. The percentage of unmarried women aged 18 and older in 1998

(20.5%) is much closer to the rate of singlehood in 1900, when 20.4% of women aged 20 and older had never married, than it is to the rate at the end of the 1950s (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975).

Marriage, then, is not a doomed institution, contrary to some predictions. Nonetheless, it is certainly a transformed institution. Over the course of the 20th century, marriage has come to occupy and organize a smaller and smaller portion of people's lives, as well as to be far less permanent once entered. This is partly because of long-range demographic change, partly because of new cultural norms making divorce and nonmarriage more acceptable, and partly because the state and the market have taken over many family functions that used to make marriage more essential for individuals.

The average age of marriage for contemporary women is now 2 years higher than its previous U.S. peak in 1890 and 4 years higher than it was in the 1950s. Meanwhile, rates of nonmarriage for African American women approach world-historic highs (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, *in press*). Despite periodic fluctuations in the number of adult children residing with parents, the tradition of youths remaining in the parental home until marriage is dead. Even apart from divorce, this means that young people experience a protracted period of life outside marriage, either their parents' or their own. Meanwhile, the bewildering array of family relations made possible by reproductive technology—along with the new prevalence of divorce, cohabitation, and unwed motherhood and the new visibility of gay and lesbian couples—has separated childrearing from marriage and challenged customary definitions of parental rights. The eclipse of sequencing, which was the typical way that 20th-century women balanced their growing labor force participation with their continued responsibility for childrearing, has created a crisis in the way that child care has been organized for most of the century.

This decline in the role of marriage and gender specialization in organizing people's lives, which is also occurring in most other parts of the world, may be seen as part of a major economic and political revolution in redistribution and care-giving mechanisms (Acker, 1988; Coontz 1997). Historical perspective is helpful in assessing the causes and consequences, both pro and con, of this revolution. For example, before we bemoan the declining commitment of parents to children, we should recognize that the role of families in co-

ordinating the education, health care, and training of youth is now much more complex than it was in the past and extends over a longer life span.

Once children were considered insurance for parents' old age, and children's earnings frequently were what enabled parents to buy a home. Today, parents provide insurance for their children's entry into or maintenance of middle-class status. This often includes help with home buying or subsidized boarding in the parental home, as well as an increasingly prolonged and expensive investment in education.

Additionally, technology now enables (and health insurance requires) families to provide an enormous amount of medical care at home, much of which formerly would have been provided by doctors or nurses. Fewer people are put in nursing homes, and hospital stays are shorter. In 1997, 21 million people were providing free care to a family member or friend, up from seven million in 1987. As medical ethicist Carol Levine commented, this is "a quantum leap for the responsibilities of families" (Fisher, 1998).

Also unprecedented is the responsibility that adult children bear for their parents, who in previous generations were unlikely to live long enough to require substantial and prolonged assistance. There is little evidence that children's altruism toward parents was greater in the past; witness the elaborate wills that were drawn up in colonial days to prevent neglect of a surviving parent. Until the expansion of Social Security and Medicare in the 1960s and 1970s, elders were more likely than any other age group to live in poverty. There is no evidence that government programs have lessened adult children's commitment to elders. Today one in four U.S. workers gives 11 hours or more unpaid care per week to an aging family friend or relative, and almost 50% say they expect to do so within the next 10 years (Finch, 1994; Shore, 1998).

Nor does history suggest that the distinctive feature of today's changing care-giving patterns involves children's premature exposure to adult roles and knowledge. I have already noted the prevalence of child labor, both in and out of the home, in the past. In preindustrial societies, youths were integrated into—or at least intimately exposed to—most adult activities. In colonial America, children were often in the same room (sometimes the same bed) in which adult sexual activity took place. During the 19th century, middle-class and "respectable" working-class families increasingly sheltered their girls from sexual knowledge,

but prostitution was much more widespread than it is today. As late as 1896, the "age of consent" was 12 or under in the majority of states (Coontz, 1997, 2000; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988; Pivar, 1974).

What does seem new is that youth today are more excluded from productive roles than they were in the past, but at the same time, they are much more fully integrated into consumer roles. With the age of sexual maturity falling and the age of economic and educational independence rising, young people have developed a youth culture that crosses geographic borders, as well as some racial, class, and gender boundaries. Part of the convergence in the life course and social outlook of youth (bearing in mind the countervailing trend of intensification of child labor in some parts of the world) results from adolescents' lengthened period of economic dependence in the industrial world, as extended education becomes the primary route to finding a job that provides a livable wage. This convergence also results from the new independence teens have in their access to information, consumer goods (or at least consumer images) and to a global mass entertainment and advertising culture. Although transnational and multicultural alliances have resulted from some of these changes in the experience of youths, some young people attempt to use their class, race, gender, or heterosexual privileges to compensate for or strike out against the constraints of age inequality, venting their frustrations with the adult world on other youth (Wyn & White, 1997). This changing historical context, not merely the individual characteristics of different families, should form the backdrop to discussion of contemporary youth issues, including the new forms and targets of youthful violence.

Racial and ethnic diversity among families is certainly not new. But Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that racial hierarchies, once imposed primarily through coercion, now rest on "a complex system of compromises, legitimizing ideologies . . . political rules and bureaucratic regulations" (Omi & Winant, 1994, pp. 75–76). Despite the persistence of racial discrimination and the concentration of poverty among inner-city African Americans, racism is no longer monolithic. The fact that there are some arenas in which African Americans or other historically oppressed groups can "play the race card" should not obscure the fact that the odds in the race game still favor Whites, but it does change the ways in which White racial power is exercised. The new diver-

sity of Latin American and Asian immigrants, along with their rapid population growth, has further muddied older racial hierarchies, with complex consequences for family experiences (Coontz, Parson, & Raley, 1999; Rubin, 1994). The result is a "messy racial hegemony," marked by contradictory, conflicted, and ambiguous relationships.

The concept of a "messy" hegemony also applies to changing gender relations, both in society at large and within individual families. Both economically and culturally, it is now easier than in the past for the average woman to survive outside of marriage. Between 1980 and 1994, the wages of women who were not mothers rose from 72% to 95% of men's wages. Occupational segregation has fallen dramatically. Women now comprise nearly half of all midlevel managers, up from 17% in 1970 (Blau & Ehrenberg, 1997), while the cultural acceptance of women's rights, at least as an abstract principle, is unprecedented.

On the other hand, approximately half of women's wage improvement relative to men has come from declines in real wages for low-income men. Since the 1970s, it has also become more difficult to support a family on one salary than in the two decades following World War II. The burdens of child care and housework still fall disproportionately on women, and women are less likely than are men to have access to parent-friendly work policies. Partly in consequence, mothers' wages are only 75% of men's (Blau & Ehrenberg, 1997; Hernandez, 1993; Lewin, 1997; Shore, 1998; Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Meanwhile, young women wrestle with a changing but still persistent sexual double standard, and women still suffer disproportionately from sexual harassment on the job and violence in the home.

Labeling these unequal relations as patriarchy, however, conceals important variations in the form, content, and consequences of male dominance. Most historians would reserve the term patriarchy to describe a family system in which male control over property intersects with the household head's control over the labor of women and children, a situation that historically produced much closer congruence in forms of political, economic, and interpersonal domination than prevails in today's complex and fluid tangle of power relations and gender norms.

EVALUATING FAMILY CHANGE

Few historians are morally or ethically neutral about these rearrangements in family life and gen-

der roles, but most of us are skeptical of either "optimistic" or "pessimistic" assessments of such change. Historical case studies show clearly that change is seldom unitary in its effects and that it almost invariably involves trade-offs rather than unambiguous gains or losses. Just as some researchers argue that ambivalence is built into most contemporary relationships, history suggests that ambiguity and inconsistency are built into social change and family transitions. The "good" dynamic in many transformations is often inseparable from the "bad," and their combined outcome can seldom be interpreted as a clear-cut "step forward" or "fall back" (Coontz, 1996; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Walter, 1989).

In early America, for instance, the traditional insistence on hierarchy, inequality, and the forcible subordination of "inferiors" to "superiors" was undermined by the spread of democratic ideology, resulting in important restrictions on the prerogatives of elites but also producing more insidiously paternalistic and protectionist justifications for social inequality. In the case of women, a new essentialist definition of female vulnerability and domesticity set limits on patriarchal prerogatives and led to a softening of husband-wife relations. Nonetheless, it also reduced the instances in which women could act as "deputy husbands" or *femmes sole*.

Women gained new protections and reverence in their roles as wife or mother, but prejudice against their participation in public life mounted, and women were excluded from several occupations, such as printing and tavern keeping, in which they had formerly been well represented. Yet the essentialist ideology that defined women as qualitatively different from men also created a sense of sisterhood that helped inspire some women to organize the women's rights movement. As Nancy Cott (1977) has put it, the bonds that held women down also linked them together, although the reverse was also true (Coontz, 1988; Gordon, 1997; Gundersen, 1996; Hall, 1992).

It is not just that the "good" features of any change are hopelessly entangled with the "bad." They frequently help create "the bad," and vice versa. In addition, they constantly transform the institution, idea, or relationship that originally gave them birth. The more I study history, the more value I find in a conceptual tool utilized by both Hegel and Marx: the notion of contradiction. In families, as well as in social formations, the same processes that are essential to maintain a particular relationship or institution simultaneous-

ly create oppositions that eventually transform, undermine, or even destroy it.

For example, the American Revolution, which eventually spurred industrialization, initially delayed the development of a distinct manufacturing sector by stimulating rural enterprises and household production. Yet in late-18th- and early-19th-century America, family mechanisms designed to maximize self-sufficiency and reproduce a household economy helped create the very dependence on wage labor and markets that transformed the preindustrial household. The families most likely to be drawn into wage work and commerce were the ones who tried to preserve their traditional household economies by dividing the inheritance, living in close residential proximity, and encouraging supplementary crafts or seasonal wage work of children in their search for self-sufficiency (Clark, 1990; Henretta, 1991).

Similarly, however one judges 1950s family arrangements and values, it is clear that they had built-in tendencies toward self-transformation. The romanticization of family life that pervaded the mass media in that era sanctioned increasing consumerism by families, and eventually by individuals, creating pressures for wives to "supplement" their husbands' wages. As women rushed to get married at an earlier age, the decreasing proportion of single women in the population practically forced employers to change their attitudes toward hiring married women. Even families who moved to the suburbs in pursuit of a nuclear-family oasis helped make households more dependent on the market by removing themselves from kin networks and neighborly exchanges. In the meanwhile, the unprecedented focus on a child-centered family encouraged couples to embrace family planning, paving the way for a recreational sexuality increasingly separated from reproductive constraints (Coontz, 2000; Smith, 1987).

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT: IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY METHODOLOGY

Such complicated interactions provide examples of why historical perspective adds an important dimension to the reevaluation of causality and methodology that is now going on in family studies (Allen, 2000; Marks, in press). This is because history is, in E. P. Thompson's (1972) words, "above all the discipline of context," in which any fact "can be given meaning only within an ensemble of other meanings" (p. 45). Historians

can provide countless examples of how any given phenomenon or "fact" can become something remarkably different, depending on what it is paired with, surrounded by, or opposed to. Our work thus reinforces the cautions that careful researchers have always raised about what generalizations may be drawn from quantitative analysis.

Historians have benefited tremendously from the increasing sophistication of the statistical tools of the social sciences: A content analysis of the *Journal of Family History* over the 1980s found that 75% of the articles used statistical analysis (Schvaneveldt, Pickett, & Young, 1993), and recent historical work continues along the same lines.

Yet history also reminds us that the things we easily can count are not always the things that count the most for families. Thompson (1963) noted that when we survey any society at any given point, we see "simply a multitude of individuals" with a multitude of incomes, years in school, and personal experiences. To find meaningful patterns, Thompson insisted, we must look not at structures, categories, or any easily measured attributes of individuals or institutions, but at the larger relationships among those structures, individuals, and institutions (pp. 9, 11).

When historians use the word "relationships" in this context, we do not mean the habitual or intentional interactions and exchanges between groups or individuals. Rather, the word refers to the mutually constitutive positions that different groups and individuals occupy in the prevailing system of production, distribution, rights, obligations, and legitimacy. There is no such thing as a White person in the absence of the social category of a Black person, and vice versa. Being White or Black is not something that is defined by actual complexion or genetic inheritance, but by a historical relationship between two groups.

As physicist David Bohm (1999, p. 39) notes of science, the task is not just to investigate separate factors, nor even their random collisions and occasional interactions. We must identify those "effectively constant relationships" that structure social interactions in any given social formation even as they transform the participants and the social formation itself.

Such structural relationships are likely to be the most persistent source of conflict and dynamism in a society, but they often operate only as a conditioner of other, more contingent factors that may be more frequent initiators of specific variations. Sometimes, then, what we can measure and

count may be only those comparatively marginal differences that can be distinguished over the huge background noise of the social context.

A relationship that frequently operates in this way is that of class, and this is not easily captured by the kind of controls commonly used to identify socioeconomic status, necessary though such controls may be. As a historian, my experience leads me to see class not merely as a particular income, occupation, or level of educational attainment but as a set of long-term options, privileges, and vulnerabilities that can be defined only in relation to those of other groups. Class involves engagement in a historically specific pattern of interaction with other socioeconomic and political groups or institutions, or with different tiers of the same institutions. To take a minor example of the measurement problems this raises, 4 years at Harvard often represents an entirely different set of experiences and social relations than does 6 years at a state college.

Class status creates, results from, and interacts with other mechanisms of distributing power and resources. In combination, these mechanisms produce complex interactions that cannot be understood by simply adding or subtracting one or another factor. Few societies have constructed material class inequalities without use of racial or ethnic hierarchies. Gender dynamics also help produce class differences. In turn, the experience of gender and race varies by class.

Class therefore involves multifaceted relationships both with economic and political institutions and with prevailing ideologies of difference, including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality, to create historically and regionally specific "social locations" where families and individuals fashion their strategies and meanings (Lamphere, Zavella, & Gonzales, 1993, p. 4). Such social locations are not themselves static. As Renato Rosaldo (1989) pointed out, "our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds" (p. 207). Social borders are constantly redrawn by historical processes that involve people in shifting identities, conflicts, and alliances.

The historical changes that have the biggest impact on family organization and values often emerge when incremental and quantitative changes suddenly produce something qualitatively new. This is precisely when we need to be most suspicious of the commensurability of data that we may be able to collect. As Thompson (1972) cautions fellow historians, "Where the influence of

the social sciences is undoubtedly most fruitful, it is, at exactly the same point, most treacherous: . . . at the point where these 17th-century families become the nuclear family; where these 13th-century Russian peasants and these 19th-century Irish cotters become the peasantry; where these Chartist Plug rioters and those communards become violence in industrial society" (p. 46)—or where the male-breadwinner family system becomes something else entirely.

In my own research, for instance, I am currently grappling with how to usefully compare today's 15-year-olds with those of the 1950s, even after taking into account the different class and racial-ethnic distribution of young people then and now. Can one learn much about "youth" by equating either of these population subsets to 15-year-olds in the early 18th century, when among a host of other differences, the median age of the population was just a year or two older than 15? Youth is not just a biological, chronological, or psychological category, but a historically constructed relationship to families, schools, courts, police, political institutions, public space, adults, and younger children. Commonalities of youth status vary in different periods, and they are always refracted through prevailing hierarchies of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class (Wyn & White, 1997).

Or consider the question of how to interpret what people say about the satisfactions of marriage and family life. On one hand, attention to context reminds us that varying linguistic conventions often imperfectly reflect the actual mix of affectionate and instrumental interactions in families. Peasant and working-class patterns of communication, for example, tend to reinforce social solidarities and identities by translating individualized emotions into the language of custom, interest, and duty. Individuals' tender feelings may be disguised by "tough terms," because of the fear that intense individual ties may be experienced as a threat by the larger group. In other periods or classes, the opposite distortion may occur, as group interests and power claims are expressed in a language of individualized, voluntary affection (Medick & Sabine, 1984).

On the other hand, emotions derive from intellectual and ideological judgments about social and personal relationships (Solomon, 1978). As such, contrasting emotional expressions may exemplify more than linguistic differences. They may represent an actual metamorphosis in social relationships and world views. Elaine Tyler May

(1980, 1988) suggested that rising divorce rates in the early 1900s reflected heightened expectations of marriage; yet she has also shown how women in the 1950s labeled their marriages as very happy even while they detailed discontents that would lead a modern observer to rate their marriages far less positively. Lillian Rubin's research reveals that definitions of what constitutes a good marriage and a lovable husband have changed dramatically among working-class women since the 1970s (Hammerton, 1992; Rubin, 1976/1992).

Historians, of course, are not the only researchers who stress the importance of context, witness the nuanced analysis of ethnographies such as *Brave New Families* (Stacey, 1998) or *Down on Their Luck* (Anderson & Snow, 1985). Many statisticians are also conscious of the limits as well as the benefits of their methods (Maltz, 1994). Still as Marks (in press) points out, this remains an ongoing problem even for researchers committed to recognizing variation. Constructing a sample that has comparable categories (e.g., two-parent households) may involve studying only an unrepresentative cross section of one group or ignoring data that would help us understand the distal causes of the correlations we find. For example, Marks (in press) reviewed one study showing that "involved fathers" make a tremendous difference for children's well-being in all racial and socioeconomic groups. This is an important and potentially useful finding, but it is easy to then ignore the racial and class dynamics that affect the distribution of involved fathers, as well as to overlook smaller patterns that allow some children with *uninvolved fathers* to succeed.

Similar cautions are raised by the growing evidence from many different disciplines that the impact of poverty or unemployment on people's family behaviors (as well as the impact of family behaviors on poverty or unemployment) depends on so many interacting contextual factors that it is difficult to make useful generalizations about correlations, much less overarching causes. Unemployment has a different meaning in cities today than it did during the Great Depression. Even during the 1930s, people reacted to job loss differently just after the Wall Street crash than when the sit-down strikes were going on in urban factories. Historian Roger Lane (1997) suggested that in some poor neighborhoods during the 19th century, better pay or more regular work may have led to more homicides, by increasing people's alcohol consumption. In other periods, unemployment and relative deprivation have increased vi-

olent crime (Dawley, 1991; Katz, 1993; Lane; Sugrue, 1996).

Similarly, urban historians join many sociologists in arguing that poverty in today's central cities plays a qualitatively different role than it did in the past. Once it was a way of disciplining new workers to the rhythms and demands of industrial labor. Today, it serves to exclude residents from access to work. People's reactions to poverty seem to depend not just on the character of the neighborhood, but that of nearby neighborhoods, as well as the interaction among neighborhoods and the concentration of affluence and poverty. Families' behavior, values, and range of choices also vary depending on the amount of their confidence in public institutions, the social messages that people receive or generate about the reasons for poverty and wealth, and prior trends in poverty, which affect perceptions about whether life is improving or deteriorating (Anderson, 1990; Katz, 1993; Lane, 1997; Massey, 1996).

All these considerations complicate our notion of what constitutes an "at-risk" behavior or status for families or individuals. Being prudent in an impoverished or homeless environment may mean passing up chances for long-term betterment, whereas behaviors that are judicious in a middle-class, professional environment can be very risky for lower-class individuals. Aspirations that would reflect unrealistic fantasizing about fame or quick riches in a middle-class youth might represent a realistic assessment by a lower-class individual of what offers as good a long shot as any for escaping his or her environment. What is risky sexual behavior for a girl with good education and employment prospects may be a rational way of negotiating race, class, and gender power relations for a young woman with fewer options, even if it often reinforces her lack of power in the long run. From another angle, what is called deferred gratification in middle-class youth (going on to college; avoiding marriage or childbirth) may, in fact, be a socially rewarded way of following the easiest, most gratifying path (Rubin, 1976/1992; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Stack, 1974; Willis, 1977; Wyn & White, 1997).

Attention to context enriches qualitative research, as well as quantitative research, challenging broad generalizations about "adaptive" or "dysfunctional" behaviors and abstract characterizations of culture or "style." Historian Robin D. G. Kelley (1997), for example, has written a withering critique of recent ethnographic descriptions of African American culture. He argues that many

authors not only ignore the "diverse and contradictory range of practices, attitudes, and relationships that are dynamic, historically situated, and ethnically hybrid," but also completely miss the role of irony and humor in the behaviors and "rituals" they record (p. 9).

Understanding the specificity of social location and the importance of context does not necessarily produce the relativism that has been associated with some versions of "postmodernist" theorizing. Rather, it directs our attention to the tension between the institutional or historical constraints under which people operate and the tool kit of personal, cultural, and social resources they use to make choices about how to adapt to or resist those constraints, along with the complex interactions that produce unanticipated outcomes to such choices. It also should remind us of the need to balance our interests as researchers with our obligations as citizens.

Both as researchers and as citizens, we need a continuing dialogue among historians, ethnographers, and social scientists about ways to cut across the overgeneralizations and simplistic interpretation of correlations that currently deform so much of the public discussion of families. Interdisciplinary collaboration, especially between family studies and history, is not only intellectually rewarding, but practically useful as well. It helps the families we study and the audiences we write for to better interpret their lives and assess their choices for the future.

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