5

The Evolution of American Families

Stephanie Coontz

What is a family? An Internet search of dictionaries yielded the following definitions: "parents and children, whether living together or not"; "any group of persons closely related by blood"; "a group of persons who form a household under one head"; and "the basic unit of society consisting of two or more adults joined by marriage and cooperating in the care and rearing of their children." But of course these definitions refer to very different residential and relational arrangements, and through most of history, few people would have accepted the idea that more than one of these definitions could count as a family.[1]

From the early Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, the European nobility generally used the term *family* not to refer to married parents and their children but rather to the larger kinship group from which they derived their claims to privilege and property. By contrast, most middle-class Europeans and North Americans defined family on the basis of common residence under the authority of a household head rather than on blood relatedness, a definition that included boarders or servants as family members. Samuel Pepys began his famous seventeenth-century English diary with the words: "I lived in Axe Yard, having my wife, and servant Jane, and no more in family than us three." In 1820, the publisher Everard Peck and his wife, childless newlyweds, established a new household in Rochester, New York, and wrote home: "We collected our family together which consists of seven persons and we think ourselves pleasantly situated."

Not until the mid-nineteenth century did the word *family* commonly come to refer just to a married couple with their co-resident children, excluding household residents or more distant kin. This more limited definition spread widely

during the 1800s, and by the end of that century, the restriction of the word to the immediate, co-residential family was so prevalent that the adjective *extended* had to be added when people referred to kin beyond the household.

In some societies, even the simple biological definition of family can get complicated. When a woman of the Toda people of southern India gets married, she marries all her husband's brothers, even those not yet born. Each child she bears is assigned an individual father, but the assignment is based on social rather than biological criteria. Among some African and Native American groups, a woman could traditionally become a "female husband" by taking a wife. The children the wife brought to the marriage or bore by various lovers were considered part of the family of the female husband, who was entitled to their labor and loyalty and from whom they derived their status and roles.

In kinship societies that trace descent exclusively through the maternal or paternal line, rather than through both parents, children are considered part of the family of only one spouse, and spouses themselves often do not count as family. In ancient China, it was said that "you have only one family, but you can always get another wife." In the late seventeenth century, some European writers also used the word *family* to refer exclusively to a man's offspring rather than his spouse, as in the phrase "his family and wife."

In some societies, a child's biological relation to a parent is only recognized when the parents are in a socially sanctioned marriage. The Lakher of Southeast Asia view a child as linked to his or her mother solely through the mother's relationship to the father. If the parents divorce, the mother is no longer considered to have any relationship to her children. She could, theoretically, even marry her son, since the group's incest taboos would not be considered applicable.

Through much of European history, a child born outside an approved marriage was a *filius nulius*—literally a child of no one, with a claim on no one. Not until 1968 did the United States Supreme Court rule that children born out of wedlock had the right to collect debts owed to their parents, sue for the wrongful death of a parent, and inherit family holdings.

By contrast, the indigenous societies of northeastern North America seldom distinguished between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" children. When a Jesuit missionary told a Montagnais-Naskapi Indian living in what is now Canada that he should keep tighter control over his wife in order to ensure that the children she bore were "his," the man replied: "You French people love only your own children; but we love all the children of our tribe."

In one society, the Mosuo or Na of China, family arrangements do not include marriage at all. In this society, brothers and sisters form the central family unit. Brothers and sisters do not have sex together—indeed, the incest taboo is so strong that it even prohibits siblings from having intense emotional discussions. But the

children that the women bear by lovers who usually only visit them at night are raised by the sibling group, not the biological parents.

The eminent anthropologist J. P. Murdock once defined the family as a social unit that shares common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. But among the Yoruba of Africa, the family is not a unit of production or consumption, as husbands and wives do not even share a common budget. Men of the Gururumba people of New Guinea sleep in separate houses and work separate plots of land from their wives. In the southern colonies of early America, the families of indentured servants were broken up, with husbands, wives, and even very young children living in different households for many years at a time.

Prohibitions against incest among family members are nearly universal. But the definition of what family relations are close enough to constitute incest varies considerably. In traditional Islamic societies, marriage between the children of two sisters is considered a form of incest. So is marriage between two people who shared the same milk as infants, even if it was from a wet nurse not related to either of them. Marriage between the children of two brothers, however, is a favored pattern. Among the aristocracy in ancient Egypt, brother-sister marriages, especially between half-brothers and sisters, were common. The medieval church in Europe, by contrast, prohibited marriage between cousins up to seven degrees removed.

The historical and cross-cultural diversity of family life extends also to the emotional meanings attached to families and the psychological dynamics within them. For example, what is now considered healthy parent-child bonding in our society (see Coleman in Chapter 24 of this volume) may be viewed as selfishness, narcissism, or pathological isolation by cultures that stress child exchange and fostering as ways of cementing social ties. In Polynesia, eastern Oceania, the Caribbean, and the West Indies (and also in sixteenth-century Europe and colonial America) offering your child to friends, neighbors, or other kin for adoption or prolonged co-residence was not considered abandonment but was rather a mark of parental responsibility, ensuring that the child developed access to support systems and social knowledge beyond what the immediate family could provide.

Modern Americans often focus on the need for strong mother-daughter and father-son identification. But in matrilineal societies, where descent is traced through the female line, a man usually has much closer ties with his nephews than with his sons. Among the Trobriand Islanders, where a child's biological father is considered merely a "relation by marriage," the strongest legal and emotional bonds are between children and their maternal uncle. Among the patrilineal Cheyenne, by contrast, at least after the rise of the fur trade with Europeans made women's traditional work of tanning hides more onerous, mother-daughter

relations were expected to be tense or even hostile, and girls tended to establish their closest relationships with paternal aunts.

These examples show that there is no universal definition of family that fits the reality of all cultural groups and historical periods. Yet almost all societies use the term to endow certain sexual relations and biological connections (or fictive biological connections) with special privileges and obligations. Within the same society, groups with different positions in the rank or class structure may have to organize their reproduction, caregiving, and interpersonal obligations in distinctive ways, and therefore several different family arrangements may coexist in the same culture. But the family that is codified as "normal" in law and ideology tends to represent the interests and ideals of the dominant members of society. Often, however, that ideal family coexists with, or even depends upon, a very different set of family arrangements among members of less powerful social groups.

Family Systems of Early America

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century America, three very different systems of social and personal reproduction were practiced respectively by Native American kinship societies, the conquering Europeans, and the Africans brought as captives by the Europeans. At the time of European exploration of the New World, North American native societies used family ties to organize nearly all the political, military, and economic transactions that in Europe were becoming regulated by the state. Kinship rules and marital alliances regulated an individual's place in the overall social network, establishing who owed what to whom in terms of producing and sharing resources and conducting interpersonal relationships.[2]

When society is organized through a state system, sharp distinctions are made between family duties and civil duties, domestic functions and political ones. But prior to sustained contact with Europeans, North American indigenous peoples had few institutions organized on any basis other than kinship. Some groups, such as the Cherokee, had a special governing body for times of war (and the influence of such groups grew once Native Americans engaged in regular conflicts with settlers), but most of the time village elders, representing different kin groups, made decisions. The indigenous peoples of North America, unlike some groups in South America, had no institutionalized courts, police, army, or agencies to tax or coerce labor. Kin obligations organized not just the production and distribution of goods but also the negotiation of conflicts and the administration of justice. Murder, for example, was an offense not against the state but against the kin group, and it was therefore the responsibility and right of kin to punish the perpetrator.

The nuclear family did not own productive property, such as land or animals, and could not, therefore, sell such resources or lose them to debt. Subsistence tools and their products were made and owned by individuals rather than families. Hunting and gathering grounds and other resources were either available to all or were controlled by the larger kin group, and even there, property rights were not absolute. Indians had no concept that land could be permanently sold and access to it monopolized, although they gladly accepted gifts in exchange for the right to use land. This led to many misunderstandings and much hostility between settlers and natives, who were astonished when Europeans they had allowed to settle somewhere then fenced off traditional hunting grounds.

The nuclear family's lack of private property meant that Indian families had less economic autonomy than European households vis-à-vis other families. On the other hand, the lack of a state gave Indian families more political autonomy, because people were not bound to follow a leader for any longer than they cared to do so.

The European families that came to North America were products of a developing market economy and international mercantile system. The way they organized production, exchange, land ownership, and social control put Europeans on a collision course with Indian patterns of existence. Europeans also operated within the framework of a centralized state apparatus whose claims to political authority and whose notion of territorial boundaries and national interests had no counterpart among Native Americans.[3] Colonial families had far more extensive property and inheritance rights than Indian families, but they were also subject to stringent controls by state and church institutions. Wealthy colonial families had much more limited obligations to share surpluses than Native Americans, so right from the beginning there were substantial differences in wealth and resources among colonial families and among the indigenous peoples.[4]

Yet we cannot understand colonial families if we project back onto them modern notions of individualism and nuclear family self-sufficiency. Colonial society was based on a system of agrarian household production, sustained by a patriarchal political and ideological structure that greatly constrained the individual freedom of action of individual households. The property-owning nuclear family was the basis of the social hierarchy, but poor people tended to be brought into propertied households as apprentices, servants, or temporary lodgers. Colonial authorities tried to ensure that everyone was a member of a family. The man or woman outside a family hierarchy was a threat to the social order. A household head exerted authority over all household members, and little distinction was made between a biological child and an unrelated household member of about the same age.

The colonists' insistence that people be members of families and accept the authority of the household head might suggest that the family was the most

important institution of colonial society. Yet we need to distinguish between the importance of families as an institution in colonial life and the importance of the individual family. The biological family was less sacrosanct, and less sentimentalized, than it would become in the nineteenth century. Colonial society demanded membership in a *properly ordered* family and subordinated actual blood or marital family ties to that end.

The lower classes often lived, either together or separately, in the households of their employers. A child might be removed from his or her biological family and placed in another family if his or her parents were deemed unworthy by authorities. Many families voluntarily sent their children to live in another household at a relatively young age to work as a servant or apprentice or simply to develop wider social connections. At home, the nuclear family did not retreat into an oasis of privacy. Parents and children ate—and often slept in the same room—with other household members, whether they were related or not.

Marriage, too, was much less sentimentalized than it became in the nineteenth century. Men often married because they needed someone to help them on the farm or in their business, or because a woman came with a handsome dowry. Women married for similar economic and social reasons. It was hoped that love would develop (in moderation) after marriage, but prior to the late eighteenth century, love was not supposed to be the primary motive for marriage, and children were expected to be guided by their parents' wishes in their matches.

Contact with the European colonists was devastating to the Native American family system. Having no domestic animals such as pigs, chickens, or cattle, the Indians had no acquired immunities to the diseases associated with such animals. Massive epidemics sometimes killed more than half a group's members, decimating kin networks and tearing apart the social fabric of life. Many Indian groups were either exterminated or driven onto marginal land that did not support traditional methods of social organization and subsistence. Even where native societies successfully defended themselves, armed conflict with the settlers elevated the role of young males at the expense of elders and women. Traders, colonial political officials, and Christian missionaries deliberately undermined the authority of extended kinship and community groups.

But Indian collective traditions were surprisingly resilient, and European Americans spent the entire nineteenth century trying to extinguish them. They passed laws requiring Indians to hold property as individuals or nuclear families rather than as larger kinship groups. They tried to impose European gender roles on the organization of work and social life. And Indian children were often forced into boarding schools where teachers tried to wipe out all the cultural traditions the children had learned from their elders.

The Africans who were captured and taken to the New World to serve the white settlers also came from kinship-based societies, although some of those societies had more complex political institutions and larger status differences than were found among the indigenous people of North America. The family arrangements of African slaves and their descendants varied depending on whether they lived in great cotton or tobacco plantations utilizing gang labor, small backwoods farms where one or two slaves lived and worked under a master's close supervision, colonial villages where there were just a few personal slaves or servants, or the free black settlements that gradually emerged in some areas. But in all these settings, Africans had to deal with their involuntary relocation to America, the loss of their languages, the brutality of slavery, and the gradual hardening of racial attitudes over the first two centuries of colonization.[5]

Gender imbalance on large plantations and small farms meant that many slaves remained single, and married couples often could not reside together. Slave families were constantly broken up by routine sales; as punishment for misbehavior; and when owners died, paid off debts, or reallocated their labor force between often far-flung properties. So slave families were not usually nuclear, nor were slave households organized around long-term monogamous married couples. Within the constraints of the slave trade and the plantation system, slaves adapted African cultural traditions to their new realities, using child-centered rather than marriage-centered family systems, adoptive and fictive kin ties, ritual co-parenting or godparenting, and complex naming patterns designed to maintain or recreate extended kin.

Slave families were shaped by the strategies they had to develop to accommodate as well as to resist their masters' world. But slave-owning families were also changed by the experience of slavery. Anxieties about racial/sexual hierarchies created high levels of sexual hypocrisy among Southern planters. Fears that blacks and poor whites might make common cause fostered pervasive patterns of violence against other whites as well as against slaves. And attempts to legitimize the "honor" of slave society in the face of growing Northern antislavery sentiment led to elaborate displays of patriarchy and deference, both in family life and in the community at large.

The Rise of the Domestic Family Ideal

During the second half of the eighteenth century, especially in the northern colonies, economic, political, and religious forces began to undermine the patriarchal and hierarchical social order that had prevailed in the seventeenth century.

The power of elders to dictate to the young, and of elites to control the daily life of the lower classes, weakened. But economic dependence and social inequality increased as many farmers fell into debt and lost their farms while some merchants and manufacturers became very wealthy.

From about the 1820s, the spread of a market economy led to the gradual separation of home and work, market production and household production.[6] This created new tensions between family activities and "economic" activities. Households could no longer get by as they had traditionally, mostly consuming things they made, grew, or bartered in the community. Diaries of the day increasingly complain about the need to earn cash. But in the era before cheap mass production, families could not yet rely on ready-made purchased goods even when they could raise a cash income. Even in middle-class homes, an immense amount of labor was required to make purchased goods usable. Families no longer had to spin their own cotton and grind their own grain, but someone still had to sew factory-produced cloth into clothes and painstakingly sift store-bought flour to rid it of impurities.

Many families responded by reorganizing their division of labor by age and gender. Men (and children, too, in working-class families) began to specialize in paid work outside the home. Unmarried women also started to work outside the home to bring in cash by doing women's traditional work in factories or as household help, or filling the multiplying jobs in teaching. (Among the impoverished lower classes in the growing cities, some women also turned to prostitution.)

But wives, who had once played a vital role in producing for the household and marketing their surpluses, and who had often delegated housework and child care to servants or older children, now began to devote the bulk of their attention to housework, sewing, and child rearing. Once referred to as yoke-mates and meet-helps, wives increasingly were seen as being responsible for the family comfort rather than co-producers of the family's subsistence.

As a market economy supplanted self-sufficient farms and household businesses, middle-class sons were less likely to inherit the family farm or assume their father's occupation. So parents had to prepare their male children for new kinds of employment in the wage economy, and their daughters for a new form of domestic life. The middle classes began to keep their children at home longer and concentrate their resources on fewer children, often subsidizing their children's schooling or work training rather than utilizing their labor to augment family finances. While in the past, children had started work in the family farm or business at an early age, or had been sent out to work in other people's homes, they were now seen as little innocents who needed to be protected within the family circle. A new middle-class ideal of parenting placed mothers at the

emotional center of family life and gave them the task of inculcating in their children ideals of sexual restraint, temperance, family solidarity, conservative business habits, diligence, prolonged education, and delayed marriage. This became the new "norm" for family life as popularized in the advice books and novels that proliferated in the early nineteenth century.

Yet middle-class white mothers were able to focus on child rearing and "lady-like" domestic tasks only because they could rely on a pool of individuals who had no option but to engage in paid labor outside their own homes. The extension of childhood for the middle class required the foreshortening of childhood and the denial of private family life for the slaves who provided cotton to the new textile mills, the working-class women and children who worked long hours in factories or tenement workshops to produce store-bought cloth, and the immigrant or African American mothers and daughters who left their own homes to clean and do the laundry for their middle-class mistresses.[7] (We see a similar pattern today; many egalitarian dual-earner families depend on the low-paid housework and child-care services of women who do what used to be the middle-class wife's domestic tasks but whose wages offer them no opportunity to achieve the economic and personal independence that the middle-class woman gains from her paid labor.)

For all the sexual prudery of nineteenth-century middle-class families, their urgent need for fertility restriction so that resources could be concentrated on fewer children led to interesting contradictions. By the time of the Civil War, the typical client of an abortionist in mid-nineteenth-century America was not a desperate unwed woman, but a respectable middle-class wife. By the end of the nineteenth century, there was a backlash in the form of laws criminalizing abortion and prohibiting the dissemination of contraceptive information or devices, but also a growing movement to defy those laws and extend women's access to birth control.[8]

As Americans adapted family life to the demands of an industrializing society during the nineteenth century, American families took on many of the characteristics associated with "the modern family." They became smaller, with fewer children. They focused more tightly around the nuclear core, putting greater distance between blood relatives and servants or boarders. Parents became more emotionally involved in child rearing and for a longer period. Marriage came to be seen as primarily about love, although the law continued to support men's legal and economic authority in the home. The distinction between home and work, both physically and conceptually, sharpened.

Average trends, however, obscure tremendous differences among and within the rapidly changing ethnic groups and classes of the industrializing United States. New professions opened up for middle-class and skilled workers, and during the Gilded Age, some entrepreneurs made vast fortunes, but job insecurity became more pronounced for laborers. More than 10 million immigrants arrived from Europe between 1830 and 1882, and each wave successively filled the lowest rungs of the industrial job ladder. Their distinctive cultural and class traditions interacted with the ways they developed to cope with the particular occupations they entered, and the housing conditions and social prejudices they met, to create new variations in family life and gender relations.

After the Civil War, African Americans who moved North found it hard to get a foothold on those rungs at all, and they were relegated to unskilled laboring jobs and segregated sections of the city, compelling new family adaptations. In the South, African American families eked out a tenuous living as sharecroppers, domestics, or agricultural wage workers. After the end of Radical Reconstruction, they also had to cope with an upsurge of mob violence and the passage of Jim Crow laws designed to restore white supremacy.

The result was that at the same time as the new ideal of the domestic middle-class family became enshrined in the dominant culture, diversity in family life actually increased. Middle-class children were now exempted from the farmwork or household tasks that all children traditionally had done. But working-class youth streamed out of the home into mines and mills, where they faced a much longer and more dangerous workday than in the past. Class differences in family arrangements, home furnishings, consumption patterns, and household organization *widened* in the second half of the nineteenth century.

There was also much more variation in the life course of individuals than would be seen through most of the twentieth century. There were greater differences among young people in the nineteenth century in the age at which they left school and home, married and set up households than among their counterparts in the first seventy years of the twentieth century. There was also more mixing of age groups than we see today, with less segregation of youth into specialized grades at school.

Although there has been a long-term trend toward restriction of household membership to the nuclear family, this was slowed down between 1870 and 1890 as some groups saw an increase in temporary co-residence with other kin, while others took in boarders or lodgers. On average, birthrates fell by nearly 40 percent between 1855 and 1915, but the fertility of some unskilled and semiskilled workers actually *rose* during this period.

The changes that helped produce more "modern" family forms, then, started at different times in different classes, meant different things to families occupying different positions in the industrial order, and did not proceed in a straight line. Family "modernization" was not the result of some general, steady evolution of "the" family, as early family sociologists suggested, but was the outcome of

diverging and *contradictory* responses that occurred in different areas and classes at various times.

Michael Katz, Michael Doucet, and Mark Stern list five major changes in family organization that accompanied industrialization: (1) the separation of home and work, (2) the reduction of household membership to its nuclear core, (3) the fall in marital fertility, (4) the more extended residence of children in their parents' home, and (5) the lengthened time that husbands and wives lived together after their children left home. "The first two began among the working class and among the wage-earning segment of the business class (clerks and kindred workers). The third started among the business class, particularly among its least affluent, most specialized, and most mobile sectors. The fourth began at about the same time in both the working and business class, though the children of the former usually went to work and the latter to school."[9]

The fifth change—the longer period that husband and wives live together after the children are gone—did not occur until the twentieth century, and represented a reversal of nineteenth-century trends. So did a sixth major change that created more convergence among families over the course of the twentieth century: the reintegration of women into productive work, especially the entry of mothers into paid work outside the home.

The Regulation of Marriage

Another change in family life that did not proceed in a linear way involved the state's regulation of marriage. From the time of the American Revolution until after the Civil War, American authorities did not inquire too closely as to whether a couple had taken out a valid license. If a couple acted as if they were married, they were treated as such. Until the 1860s, state Supreme Courts routinely ruled that cohabitation, especially if accompanied by a couple's acceptance in their local community, was sufficient evidence of a valid marriage. In consequence, informal marriage and self-divorce were quite common in this era, and interracial marriage was more frequent in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century compared to the 1880s to the 1930s, when the government began to exert stricter control over who could marry and who could not.[10]

The United States began to invalidate common-law and informal marriages in the late nineteenth century as part of a broader attempt to exert more government control over private behavior. By the 1920s, thirty-eight states had laws prohibiting whites from marrying blacks, mulattoes, Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Mongolians, Malays, or Filipinos. Twelve states forbade marriage to a "drunk" or a "mental defective."[11]

After the 1920s, however, this restrictive trend began to be reversed, and the right to marry was gradually extended to almost all heterosexuals over a certain age. In the civil rights era of the 1960s, this was to culminate in Supreme Court rulings that invalidated laws against interracial marriage and overturned the right of prison officials or employers to prohibit inmates or workers from marrying.

The Family Consumer Economy

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, a national system of mass production and mass communication replaced the decentralized production of goods and culture that had prevailed until the 1890s. Some huge new trends—the standardization of economic production, the development of schooling into the teenage years, the abolition of child labor, the spread of a national radio and film industry (and later television), and the growth of a consumer economy—created new similarities and new differences in people's experience of family life.

By the 1920s, for the first time, a slight majority of children came to live in families where the father was the breadwinner, the mother did not have paid employment outside the home, and the children were in school rather than at work. Numerous immigrant families, however, continued to pull their children out of school to go to work. African American families kept their children in school longer than almost all immigrant groups, but their wives were much more likely than either native-born or immigrant women to work outside the home.

The early twentieth century saw a breakdown of the nineteenth-century system of sexual segregation. Single women entered new occupations and exercised new social freedoms. Women finally won the right to vote. An autonomous and increasingly sexualized youth culture emerged, as youth from many different class backgrounds interacted in high schools and middle-class youth adopted the new institution of "dating" pioneered by working-class youth and a newly visible African American urban culture. Dating replaced the nineteenth-century middle-class courting system of "calling," where the girl and her family invited a young man to call and the couple socialized on the porch or in the living room under the watchful eyes of parents. By contrast, dating took place away from home, and since the male typically paid for a date, the initiative shifted to him. Young people—especially girls—gained more independence from parental oversight, but girls also incurred more responsibility for preventing their dates from going "too far."[12]

There was a profound change at this time in the dominant ideological portrayal of family life. In the nineteenth century, ties to siblings, parents, and close same-sex friends had been as emotionally intense as the ties between spouses.

Women often called their husbands "Mr. so-and-so," but wrote passionately in their diaries about their pet names and physically affectionate interactions with female friends. Men and women alike had waxed as sentimental about their love for siblings and parents as they did for their intended marital partner.

Now, however, the center of emotional life shifted to the husband-wife bond and to the immediate nuclear family. Young adults were encouraged to cut "the silver cord" that bound them to their mother. The same-sex "crushes" that had been viewed indulgently in the late nineteenth century came to be seen as threats to the primacy of heterosexual love ties.

The growing emphasis on companionship and mutual sexual satisfaction in marriage brought new intimacy to married life. But it also encouraged premarital sexual experimentation. For the first time, a majority of the boys who had sex before marriage did so with girls they had dated rather than with prostitutes. And it is not surprising that the higher standards for marriage also created an unwillingness to settle for what used to be considered adequate relationships. "Great expectations," as historian Elaine Tyler May points out, could also generate great disappointments.[13] The divorce rate more than tripled in the 1920s.

All these changes created a sense of panic about "the future of the family" that was every bit as intense as the family values debates of the 1980s and 1990s. Commentators in the 1920s hearkened back to the "good old days," bemoaning the sexual revolution, the fragility of nuclear family ties, women's "selfish" use of contraception, decline of respect for elders, the loss of extended kin ties, and the threat of the "Emancipated Woman." "Is Marriage on the Skids?" asked one magazine article of the day. Another asked despairingly, "What Is the Family Still Good For?"

The challenges of the Great Depression and World War II in the 1930s and 1940s put these concerns on the back burner. But disturbing family changes continued. During the Depression, divorce rates fell, but so did marriage rates. Desertion and domestic violence rose sharply. Economic stress often led to punitive parenting that left children with scars still visible to researchers decades later. Birthrates plummeted. Many wives had to go to work to make ends meet, but disapproval of working wives increased, with many observers complaining that they were stealing jobs from unemployed men.

World War II stimulated a marriage boom, as couples rushed to wed before the men shipped off to war. Wives who worked in the war industries while the men were away garnered social approval—as long as they were willing to quit their jobs when the men came home. But by the end of the war, most women workers in the war industry were telling pollsters they did not want to quit their jobs. Rates of unwed motherhood soared during the war, and by 1947 one in every three marriages was ending in divorce.

So as the war ended, the fears about family life that had troubled observers during the Roaring Twenties reemerged. But several factors soon combined to assuage those fears. Couples who had postponed having children because of the war now rushed to have them. The enormous deferred consumption of the war years, as well as the sense that people's family lives had been put on hold, led to a huge demand for new houses and other consumer goods. This was reinforced by a concerted campaign by businesses, advertisers, therapists, the new profession of marriage counselors, and the mass media to convince people that they could find happiness through nuclear-family consumerism.

There was a renewed emphasis on female domesticity in the postwar years. Women were told that they could help the veterans readjust to civilian life by giving up the independent decision making they had engaged in while the men were gone. They were urged to forgo the challenges of the work world and seek fulfillment in domestic chores. Politicians rewrote the tax code to favor male breadwinner families over dual-earner families, explicitly to discourage wives from working. Psychiatrists—who had largely replaced ministers as the source of advice for families—claimed that any woman who desired anything other than marriage, motherhood, and domesticity was deeply neurotic.[14]

The home-centered life was supported by an unprecedented postwar economic boom. Family wage jobs became more plentiful for blue-collar workers, especially when the Eisenhower administration embarked on a massive highway-building project. And the government handed out unprecedented subsidies for family formation, home ownership, and higher education. Forty percent of the young men starting families at the end of World War II were eligible for veterans' benefits, which were much more generous than they are today. The government encouraged banks to accept lower down payments and offer longer payment terms to young men, and veterans could sometimes put down just one dollar to sign a mortgage on a new home. The National Defense Education Act subsidized individuals who majored in fields such as engineering that were considered vital to national security.

Such government subsidies, combined with high rates of unionization, rapid economic expansion, and an explosion of housing construction and financing options, gave young families a tremendous economic jump start, created predictable paths out of poverty, and led to unprecedented increases in real wages. White male workers had a degree of job security that is increasingly elusive in the modern economy. Between 1947 and 1973, real wages rose, on average, by 81 percent, and the gap between the rich and poor declined significantly. The income of the bottom 80 percent of the population grew faster than the income of the richest 1 percent, with the most rapid gains of all made by the poorest 20 percent of the population.

The result was a boom in family life, so that by the early 1950s it appeared that the threat of women's emancipation and family instability had been turned back. For the first time in sixty years, the age of marriage and parenthood fell, the proportion of marriages ending in divorce dropped, and the birthrate soared. The percentage of women remaining single reached a hundred-year low. The proportion of children who were raised by a breadwinner father and a homemaker mother and who stayed in school until graduation from high school reached an all-time high. Although more women attended college than before the war, they graduated at much lower rates than men, and more and more opted to get an MRS degree rather than a BA degree. And the powerful new medium of television broadcast nightly pictures of suburban families where homemaker moms had dinner on the table every night and raised healthy children who never talked back or got into any trouble that couldn't be solved by a fatherly lecture.

We now know, of course, that the experience of many families with problems such as battering, alcoholism, and incest was swept under the rug in the 1950s. So was the rampant discrimination against African Americans and Hispanics, women, elders, gay men, lesbians, political dissidents, religious minorities, and the handicapped. Despite rising real wages, 30 percent of American children lived in poverty during the fifties—a higher figure than today. African American married-couple families had a poverty rate of nearly 50 percent. Institutionalized racism was the law in the South, and in the North there was daily violence in the cities against African Americans who attempted to move into white neighborhoods or use public parks and swim areas.

Meanwhile, underneath the surface stability of the era, the temporary triumph of nuclear-family domesticity was already being eroded. The expansion of the service and retail sections of the economy required new workers, and employers were especially eager to hire women, who were seen as less likely to join unions and were thought to be easier to move in and out of the labor market than men. But because the average age of marriage had fallen to about twenty years old, there were not enough single women to fill the demand for workers, so employers began to make changes in hiring practices to recruit married women.

Despite the dominance of full-time homemakers on TV sitcoms, the employment of women soared in the 1950s, quickly topping its wartime peak. And the fastest-growing segment of this female labor force was married women with school-age children. Indeed, economists later found that the labor force participation of wives played a central role in the spread of upward mobility and the reduction of poverty during the 1950s, and it paved the way for new work aspirations among the daughters of these women.

At the dawn of the 1960s, a national poll of American housewives found that although most declared that they were happier in their marriages than their own parents were, 90 percent of them also said that they did not want their daughters to follow in their footsteps. Instead, they hoped their daughters would postpone marriage longer and get more education and work experience.[15]

As early as 1957, the divorce rate had started to climb once more. And during the 1960s, the age of marriage also began to rise, especially as more women postponed marriage for education. As the "baby boom generation" grew up, there was a huge increase in the percentage of singles in the population, accelerating the acceptance of premarital sex that had begun to spread as early as the 1920s. The women's liberation movement helped expose the complex varieties of family experience that lay beneath the Ozzie and Harriet images of the time.[16] By the end of the 1960s, family diversity had begun to accelerate and had become more visible.

For the most part, middle-class wives and mothers entered the labor force in the 1950s and 1960s in response to new opportunities, but as the prolonged postwar expansion of real wages and social benefits came to an end in the 1970s, ever more wives and mothers of all social classes and racial-ethnic groups soon found that paid work had become a matter of economic necessity. By 1973, real wages were falling, especially for young families. Housing inflation made it less possible for a single breadwinner to afford a home. By the late 1970s, cuts in government services had gutted the antipoverty programs that in 1970 had brought child poverty to an all-time low (a low not equaled since). Still, despite these threats to families, the success of the women's movement in combating hiring and pay discrimination gave many women more economic independence than they had previously enjoyed.

The combination of expanding social freedoms for women and youth and contracting economic opportunities for blue-collar men made the 1970s and 1980s a time of turmoil. Real wages fell for workers without a college degree, and economic inequality increased, making it harder to form and maintain families. Old marital norms came into conflict with new family work patterns, leading to tensions between husbands and wives over housework. From a different angle, new social freedoms encouraged more people to feel free to leave a marriage they deemed unsatisfactory. Divorce rates reached an all-time high in 1979–1980, and it was women who initiated most divorces. As courts began to protect the rights of children born out of wedlock, fewer women felt compelled to enter a shotgun marriage if they became pregnant.[17]

Women's workforce participation continued to mount. In 1950, only a quarter of all wives were in the paid labor force, and just 16 percent of all children had mothers who worked outside the home. By 1991, nearly two-thirds of all married women with children were in the labor force. Fifty-nine percent of children, including a majority of preschoolers, had mothers who worked outside the home.