

May 6, 2004

Economic Issues and Problems V: Diversity, Summing Up

Read: Stack: 107-152

- I. It is clear the title of this course is a myth
 - A. There is no “Contemporary American Family”: no family type that characterizes most families
 - B. There isn’t even a single ideal of “family” held by all Americans
 - C. Although all families make efforts to meet their needs for:
 1. Reproduction
 2. Marital sexuality
 3. Nurturance
 4. Economic cooperation
 5. Affection
 6. Protection
 7. Meaning
 - D. They do it in different ways
 - E. Lecture today concerned with the role of unequal access to power and resources in producing diversity
- II. Overview of changes that produce diversity in families
 - A. Common types of changes in the past
 1. Internal factors
 - a. Families changed mainly due to the domestic cycles (Skolnick’s “life course”): deaths, births
 2. External factors
 - a. Wars, economic depressions, etc.
 - b. Opportunities that encouraged mobility, migration
 - 1) For example, the 1862 Homestead Act gave public land (160 acres) to settlers
 - B. Today: greater variety of types of families

1. Traditionally families were formed through
 - a. Blood
 - b. Marriage
 - c. Adoption

2. New ways to form families have appeared on the scene
 - a. Groups of unrelated people who call themselves “family”
 - b. Or lesbian and gay couples who see themselves as almost the same as a married couple, but cannot marry
 - c. Finally, cohabitation with or without children
 - 1) Which, after 7 years would legally turn into “common-law marriage”
 - 2) But “living together” is now an institution in itself, not necessarily leading to eventual marriage
 - 3) In Denmark, when couples begin to live together they sometimes put classified announcements in the paper informing people that they do *not* intend to marry
 - a) We’re not there yet
 - b) Remember the newspaper clipping about high rates of N. European couples living together?

- C. Note, however, that the original meaning of the term “family” when it emerged in late 14th century England
 1. Referred to a household under a head, including servants or slaves
 2. This notion of family defined by co-residence, not kinship, continued till the early 19th century

- III. What kinds of diversity have we discussed so far in the course?
 - A. Structural diversity

1. “Traditional” kinds of structural diversity that result from departures from the ideal
 - a. Stepfamilies
 - b. Single-parent families
 - c. These are not new forms
 - d. However, those resulting from divorce (not death) are much more prevalent
 - e. Remember Nancy Cott’s discussion of divorce in colonial America 17th and 18th centuries?
 2. Older adults and their families
 - a. Not new, there’s just far more of them now
 - b. Topic of our last class
- B. New kinds of structural diversity?
1. Gays and lesbians raising children
 - a. Various legal changes have occurred
 - 1) Previously only heterosexual, married adults had protected legal ties to each other and their children
 - b. Such family types could not develop until the notion of gay and lesbian *identity* developed in the early 20th century
 - c. Earlier, people did have desires and did engage in erotic behavior with a person of the same sex
 - 1) But the notion of gay/lesbian identity didn’t exist
 - 2) So, certainly couldn’t have something like a gay *family*
 - d. Other factors prevented such families from appearing, too, of course
 - 1) Earlier, the family economy pretty much required that the couple be composed of a man and a woman

- 2) Homosexuality is illegal
 - 3) Many people see homosexuality as immoral
2. Shifts in how marriage articulates with family
- a. Defined here as organizing the intergenerational relationships, obligations, and rights legally and socially sanctioned
 - b. Marriage has come to organize a smaller and smaller portion of the lives of people in all sections of the population
 - 1) In this country the age at first marriage has reached a world historic high for women, and tied its previous high of 1890 for men
 - c. Marriage is simply less central to family formation and the organization of interpersonal ties than ever before
 - d. With so many unwed parents, it's important to think: should obligations to children be easier to break if one has not entered into, or has dissolved a formal legal contract with another adult?
 - 1) Parents are legally required to support their children no matter what their marital status or intention
 - 2) It is quite clear that one major role of marriage has to do with obligations and rights to the next generation
 - 3) But increasingly questions are asked regarding whether health benefits, pensions, and other such rights should be contingent on a legally sanctioned sexual connection with another person
 - e. And at the end of life: a person who reaches age 60 can expect to live another 27 years; unlikely to be cared for during all this time by a marriage partner
- C. Family diversity according to gender roles
- 1. Patriarchal model of a male-breadwinner, a dependent female-homemaker
 - a. Being male typically has more privilege than being female

- b. And until very recently, significantly different levels of protections, rights, responsibilities as defined by law assigned to men and women
- c. Although differences have been greatly reduced:
 - 1) Especially the *de jure* ones
 - 2) The *de facto* ones are still strong
 - 3) Discuss: meaning of these terms?
- 2. “Dual-earner,” “co-provider” ...the changes in the very words are clues

D. And of course ethnic diversity

IV. Social class

- A. Concept of Socioeconomic status (SES)¹
 - 1. “Class” implies discrete categories of people
 - 2. Stratified
 - 3. Concepts of “class” and “caste”
 - a. Both: you’re born into them
 - b. A “class-based” society provides possibility of mobility for individuals and families
 - 1) Both up and down (the reading by Rubin)
 - 4. But unlike earlier periods, particularly in Europe
 - a. We can’t sort people into one or another class; there aren’t discrete groups
 - 5. Multiple variables contribute to one’s class position
 - a. Discuss:
 - b. Education, income, family background, occupation, attitudes

¹ Some of this discussion from Stephen A. Anderson and Ronald M. Sabatelli, 2003, *Family Interaction: A Multigenerational Developmental Perspective*. 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon: 76-79.

6. SES a more useful analytical concept
 - a. Implies more fluidity, families fall along a continuum
 7. Can still talk about social class as an analytical concept, just not an empirical one (in the sense of discrete, bounded groups)
 - a. Discuss: “empirical”?
- V. In the real world social class invariably interacts with other variables
- A. Example #1: gender
 1. “The feminization of poverty”
 2. Families deciding that the mother should enter the labor force to keep family from descending into a lower social class
 - B. Example #2: age
 1. Americans living in poverty used to be mostly older individuals
 2. Now it’s children
 - a. Resulting in the “diversity” of 500,000 homeless children at any one time
 - C. Example #3: race/ethnicity
 1. It’s clear that parenting techniques or marital relationships that are appropriate to middle-class white families are less effective for families that must cope with economic deprivation and racial prejudice
 - a. We have seen a huge debate about this with respect to marriage
 - b. Arguments made that the welfare state encourages unwed mothers to stay that way
 - c. But there is no consistent evidence that welfare benefits reduce the likelihood of marriage
 - d. Rates of marriage have declined along with decline in rates of AFDC payments
 2. The only clear piece of evidence about the impact of welfare payments on decisions made by impoverished mothers

- a. Is that welfare payments appear to influence young unmarried women who become pregnant to set up their own households rather than remain at home with their parents
 - b. Nothing to do with marriage decisions
- 3. Discuss: points made by Edin in “A Few Good Men”?
- D. Example #4: age, race, social class and gender interacting
 - 1. Age at marriage: among white men marriage more common when they are employed, have more education, and have higher incomes
 - 2. Yet among white women, marriage is less common when they are employed, have more education, and have higher incomes
 - 3. And among African Americans the economic characteristics of the women do not predict rates of marriage at all
 - 4. The data on the white men suggest economic factors play a major role
 - 5. The data on the white women suggest gender values (of both men and women)
 - 6. Data on middle-class black women show a scarcity of potential marriage partners

VI. Conclusions

- A. A great deal of diversity in American families is due to differences in available resources
 - 1. Diversity that we observe is shaped by the choices that individuals make about family life
 - 2. These choices are shaped by two major factors:
 - a. Values, culture
 - 1) Most Americans share the same values of wanting to live in families, have children, and provide them with a secure future
 - b. External constraints that limit available choices

- 1) The resulting negative kinds of diversity not due to bad values but to the presence of external constraints

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