

**Changing Families around the World:  
The American Family in a Global Context**

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More than a half of a century ago, William J. Goode predicted that the family systems of the world would eventually converge toward a Western model of the nuclear family system. He posited that this form was best “fit” to adapt to a capitalistic economic system because education and labor mobility would undermine extended forms of kinship organization. While, in fact, family systems have been under pressure around the globe to adapt to changing economic conditions, it is less than clear that the Western model, as it existed 50 years ago, will prevail in most countries or, for that matter, even in the West and the Anglo-speaking nations. Indeed, we have seen at least as much change during the past half century in Western nations as we have in other parts of the world.

Predicting how economic change will change a country’s family system requires a consideration of a nation’s culture, institutional structures, and unique history. The family, as we knew it, in the middle of the last century, has undergone huge changes in all countries with advanced economies, but change has occurred differently depending on the country, the region of the world, and the political, economic, and social response to common pressures that arise as a result of free market systems.

1. Marriage everywhere has become a less dominate practice than it was 50 years ago. Marriage age is rising both because couples are entering marriage later and more are opting for cohabitational unions not sanction by state or church. Whether marriage has been “de-institutionalized” as some argue (Cherlin 2004) or whether it is merely being “re-institutionalized” in a new set of arrangements remains an open question. Marriage rates have been declining throughout most of the West, a

growing number of nations in Eastern Europe as well as many countries in Asia and some other parts of the world.

2. Divorce remains a common practice and divorce rates are growing in most countries with advanced economies. Most nations have relaxed their restrictions against divorce, but these legal changes cannot account for the growth of divorce entirely. Because informal unions are unrecorded, the validity of divorce as a measure of union stability is becoming questionable. The evidence suggests that couples are less likely to enter relationships (whether marriage or cohabitation) that are life long.

3. Fertility is declining throughout most of the world, mostly sharply in Southern Europe and South East Asia. The decline in fertility has been achieved by parents emphasizing the quality not the quantity of children. Couples who have children are entering parenthood at later ages. More couples are having from one to three children and more are not having children at all. Childlessness among women is growing in most parts of the world. The steep fertility decline in most of the West and Asia is ushering in a crisis in the aging of societies that calls for institutional adaptation in health and welfare systems. Most of all, it will be a challenge for most aging nations to maintain strong economic growth in order to invest both in the young and the elderly.

4. The gender-based division of labor that prevailed throughout most of the world in the last century is now giving way to a more symmetrical form of the family where both men and women work both outside and inside the home. This transformation has been unevenly distributed. In Northern Europe and among most of the Anglo-

speaking countries, the change has been the largest while gender equality has come more slowly to much of Southern Europe and in all of the advanced economies of Asia. In general, gender equality has been associated both with higher levels of fertility and greater union stability. In Asia and some Southern European nations where resistance to changing gender attitudes and greater gender equality in the family has been slow, fertility levels have dropped to well below replacement. It appears that many women are giving up marriage and childbearing to remain in the labor force. Few institutional supports such as day care, parental leave, and workplace policies that accommodate working couples exist. Without a growth of these institutional supports, low fertility is likely to continue.

5. The transition to adulthood is occurring later in all nations with highly developed economies. Extended education, rigidities in the workplace making it inhospitable for younger workers, and changes in reproductive practices because of more reliable contraception are all contributing to this delay. Young people are driven to stay in school to increase their eventual employability and fewer pathways to well paying jobs exist for young adults who lack education and training. In this new period of “early adulthood,” couples can form sexual partnerships or even cohabitational unions without fear of pregnancy because of widespread availability of effective methods of birth control and the availability of legalized abortion.

The slower pace of entering adult status creates a considerable burden on families who are being called upon to support their offspring into their third decade of life. The extension of the parental contract may lead parents to have fewer

children because they are finding it difficult to assist their young adult children while accumulating savings for their eventual retirement.

The changes in family systems throughout the world are interacting with another broad trend: the growth of inequality. In virtually all countries, the gini coefficient, the most widely used measure of inequality, has been rising. As family systems change, “the haves” and “the have nots” are responding to future uncertainty in different fashions, depending on the availability of public and private support.

In the United States, which represents an extreme case of inequality, two different family systems are spreading. Among the affluent, marriage rates have remained high albeit historically later than they have ever occurred. Childbearing occurs mainly inside of marriage and generally takes place in the late 20s and early thirties. Divorce rates have declined among the population with a college education or higher. Young adult children receive substantial levels of support enabling them to finish college and often gain graduate degrees thereby assuring an attractive position in the labor market.

Less well-educated families in the United States lack the wherewithal to advance their children’s schooling. They are generally able to provide less preparation for schooling and cannot as easily deal with school systems that call for high levels of parental involvement. As children move into secondary education, parents are less likely to be able to help their children graduate and enter college. And when they do enter college, parents are much less likely to be able to provide the economic support required to graduate from college.

Accordingly, offspring of lower-income and less educated families often exit school earlier, but unlike the past where youth were able to enter the labor force with relatively well-paying, unionized jobs. Accordingly, marriage is seen as unattainable by a substantial proportion of young adults. Instead, they enter cohabitational unions when pregnancies occur, forming fragile families that often do not survive. A growing fraction move from one union to the next, sometimes having additional children in hopes of stabilizing their unions or simply because they practice contraception less well. Having additional children across two or more partnerships creates more complex families. Complex families means that parents, fathers in particular, have to allocate their paternal investments (time and money) across several households and children frequently must rely on the uncertain attentions of parents who live apart from their biological children.

Whether the patterns exhibited in the U.S. will become widespread in other nations is not known. Many European countries with strong welfare systems mitigate the consequences of growing up in a poor and less educated family for children, but it is not clear whether greater public investment makes up for lower private investment among less well off families. Many of the Anglo-speaking nations that have higher rates of union instability are more prone to developing the type of two-tier family system that exists in the U.S. There is reason to suspect that parts of Eastern Europe that have high rates of union instability may also move toward a two-tier family system.

## **Policies to Accommodate the Changing Family**

There is no stopping family change as demographic, social, and economic factors require families to adapt to new circumstances. However, particular national policies, as I have suggested above, may shape the response to change that occurs in economies that are to a growing degree dependent on higher education to enter jobs that require a greater level of skill and mastery of new technologies. Needless to say that policies that promote educational advancement among the less well off will fare the best and systems that do not impose high costs for college and beyond are likely to promote a greater level of mobility. Many Asian countries have been remarkably successful in attaining high levels of education for its population.

Creating a greater level of gender equality in the workplace and the home is also likely to help stimulate both population growth and economic development. Doing so requires building a system of supports for families that enable women to work and men to take a greater part in childrearing than they currently do. The extension of daycare and early education, especially for less advantaged children, is a critical step that both assists women to remain in the labor force and helps children to compensate for differences in parental practices in early childhood.

Finally, youth who get off track because they are not successful in school require special assistance and alternative routes into the labor force. The development of vocational programs to re-integrate youth detached from both school and the labor force are essential tools for assisting both adolescents and young adults whose prospects would otherwise seem dim.

## **Conclusion**

This paper shows some of the recent trends in family systems in nations with advanced economies. Through the globe these systems are experiencing common disruptions: lower marriage rates and growing levels of cohabitation, greater control of fertility and hence smaller families, higher levels of singlehood and childlessness, higher levels of divorce especially among the less advanced.

I have argued that at least in the Anglo-speaking countries, most conspicuously in the U.S., the changes are bringing about a two-tiered family system. At the top, marriages remain the rule though they occur later; childbearing largely still occurs within marriage (or a stable cohabitational union). Thus, children of the well off are not only advantaged by their parents' education and income but also by the family system in which they are raised. Just the opposite is true of the less well off who experience lower levels of marriage, more childbearing across households, and hence greater levels of family complexity. There is good reason to suspect that this instability and family complexity creates barriers to educational advancement and social mobility.

Different nations are more or less committed to equality or are more tolerant of inequality in their public policies. They devote a greater level of resources to helping the less advantaged, especially through promoting early education for all and providing financial assistance to complete tertiary education. Northern Europe through its well-developed welfare system sets a higher standard of assistance to lower-income families. By contrast, the U.S. is relatively stingy in assisting less



advantaged families through its tax system. In fact, U.S. families are worse off after taxes and transfers than almost all other nations with advanced economies.

Similarly, policies promoting gender equality vary greatly across countries. Again Northern Europe typically leads the way though all of the Anglo-speaking nations have fairly enlightened approaches to mitigate gender inequality. Southern Europe, especially Greece, Portugal, and Italy, have lagged behind other nations with advanced economies. Many Asian nations, too, have resisted policies that overcome longstanding gender biases in the labor market or in the development of institutions to help both men and women balance responsibilities at work and home.

#### **Author's Note**

This essay draws from two previous papers where references to the text can be found. See family complexity paper, paper in the Future of Children, 2010 issue. There is a companion set of power point slides providing further documentation of the family trends.

Cherlin, Andrew J. 2004. The deinstitutionalization of the American family. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66:848-861.

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Furstenberg, Frank F. 2010. On a new schedule: Transitions to adulthood and family change. *The Future of Children*, 20(1): 3-18.