

**Seminar im Grundstudium**  
**The Family as Cultural Institution in the U.S.**

WS 1998/99

**ESSAY**

**Question 1:**

Write an essay evaluating the major changes in family life from the colonial period to the present. In what ways do these changes demonstrate that the family is a social and cultural, rather than a 'natural' institution.

of

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From the brink of the colonial period in the late 1600's to the present date, major changes on both macro and micro levels have dramatically changed the structure and standard of the American family life to the point of giving it a new definition from what it was centuries ago. In a time where change prevails and is expected, the American family has kept up with the growth of a newborn nation, and trends in social and global issues. Wars (Civil War, World War I & II), economic instabilities (Stock Market Crash in the 20's), and shifting demographics, illustrate some prime examples of major fields of influence that have shaped and molded the infrastructure of American society and family life. If we examine the family in a historical context, we see that the survival of many enormous hardships, disruptions, and dislocations throughout history better portrays the norm for folk and kin, and are better denoted through change and not stability. Change demonstrates that families are a social and cultural institution, rather than a "natural" institution, and are the ideas supported and expressed by this essay.

The extended family was the most prevalent family form both in England and in the first settlements of New England. An elderly grandparent or an apprentice sometimes lived with or near the family for a while, (Goode 35) and counted to the family. The Puritans – Protestant colonists who adhered to strict moral and religious values – believed that the community had the right to intervene in families that did not perform their duties properly. Unlike later times, few individuals survived outside the family during the colonial period. Most of the settlements were small and each family was considered a 'little commonwealth' that performed a variety of functions. The family was a self-sufficient business that produced and exchanged commodities, the primary unit of production, (Rotundo 11); all family members worked together to meet the family's material needs. At the same time, the family was a school that taught children to read. It was a vocational institute that taught children specific skills and prepared them for jobs. The family also served as a miniature church that taught its members daily prayers, personal meditation, and formal family worship in the community.

Finally, the family served as a welfare institution because each family was expected not only to give its members medical and other care but also to provide a home and care for other relatives who were parentless, aging, infirm or homeless, (Knaur 4416).

In the world of the eighteenth century, marriage created a household, which was the basic unit of the society. “The community had a vital interest in the stability of every marriage, and so each wedding united a couple in mutual duty and bound it solemnly to the community through the presence of a legal authority,” (Rotundo 129).

The Puritan tried to prevent premarital intercourse, but still according to historic figures, premarital and extra marital sex were not uncommon. Twenty to 33 percent of colonial women were pregnant at the time of marriage, (Demos 1970). However, sexual activity was generally confined to engaged couples. On the other hand, among young women who immigrated as contracted servants, out-of-wedlock births were not uncommon. Because these often very young women were alone and vastly outnumbered by men in the colonies, they were vulnerable to sexual attacks by their employers and other men. In the Puritan community, the primary offenses of adultery were condemned because they threatened the family structure. Sometimes a straying spouse was denounced publicly, but only few records document men’s extramarital affairs because a husband’s infidelity was considered normal.

Husbands and wives worked together to make sure that the family survived. Colonial America, expected spouses to have strong personal as well as economic relationships. Inequalities, however, were very much a part of the early American family life. In personal relationships, women were subordinate to men, and the wife’s chief duty was obedience to her husband. New England clergymen often referred to male authority as a ‘government’ that the female must accept as ‘law’, (Benokraitis 57). A woman’s social status as well as her power and prestige in the community came from the patriarchal head of the household, the husband. The ‘well ordered’ family at this time was based on a number of mutual spousal responsibilities. Husbands and wives were expected to love each other and to show ‘great

affection'. They should be faithful to each other, and they were encouraged to be patient and to help each other. In contrast to the Old World, in Plymouth, women had the right to transfer land. The courts also granted sometimes liquor and other business licenses to women. And sometimes they offered protection from a violent husband.

Although men were held responsible for the family's economic survival, husbands and wives were not segregated into rigid work roles. Men, women, and children all produced, cultivated and processed goods for the family's consumption. And although prosperity and industry were praised in both sexes during colonial times, men were expected to initiate economic activity, and women were expected to support men and to be frugal. In some cases though, unmarried women, especially widows and those who had been deserted by their husbands, turned their homemaking activities into self-supporting businesses. However, women's and especially wives' economic roles were generally severely limited. In general, the man was the head of the household and they were especially judged by their contribution to the larger community. Terms like individuality or self-reliance had little place in Colonial New England. "A person's identity was bound up in the performance of social roles, not in expression of self," (Rotundo 13).

Children in colonial times were dominated by the concepts of repression, religion and respect. The Puritans believed that children were born with original sin and were inherently stubborn, willful, selfish and corrupt. So the entire community - parents, school, church, and neighbors - worked together to keep children in their place. Colonial children were expected to be extraordinarily well disciplined, obedient and docile. Authority was imposed on the children by their parents as the common educational standard. Because girls were expected to be homemakers their education was meager. The New England Puritans educated boys, but girls were generally banned from education.

The lives of many U.S. families changed considerably from about 1820 to 1930 due to the Industrial Revolution, which brought about extensive mechanization and shifted home

manufacturing to large scale-factory production. As farming became large scale and commercial and as factories developed, families lost many of their production functions. Commercial and professional offices were moved out of the homes and into specialized districts. Thus, men were working longer hours and spending more of these hours farther from home. Industrialization had striped the family of its productive function, leaving it, and especially wives and mothers, to specialize in socializing children and providing ‘socioemotional’ support to family members. Through producing people who acted not according to tradition but by autonomous choice and self-control, the Victorian family contributed to the development of industrial capitalism. Victorian families pursuit the goals of social respectability and economic success, and therefore planned daily life for their attainment. As Poster puts it: “The [Oedipal] family was a shrine of instrumental rationality,” (Poster 206).

“The nuclear family began approximately two centuries ago, when the people began to separate work from daily life, to base the choice of a spouse on romantic love, and to make it the personal decision of the prospective partners, to insist on monogamous sexual relations as the ideal between husband and wife, to commit the partners to lifelong association, to value the social respectability of the marriage above the individual needs of the partners, to separate the personality traits of men and women with men defined as rational and women as emotional, and, above all, to create the family residence as a world set apart from the rest of society, a private space for the sharing of intimate experience that, in principle, excluded even close relatives,” (Poster 192).

In the middle classes, husbands and wives developed separate spheres of activity. The husbands went out to work (the ‘breadwinner’), and the wife stayed home to care for their children (the ‘housewife’). At that time, romantic love disentangled itself from family considerations in choosing a spouse. Couples had more freedom in choosing partners on the basis of compatibility and personal attraction between unique selves. Romance was a

profoundly individual experience. The new attitude that emerged was that the individual, not the community, was the fundamental unit of society.

As households became more private, ties with the larger community became more tenuous, and spouses now turned to each other for affection and happiness. New attitudes about the 'true woman' became paramount in redefining the role of the wife as nurturer and caregiver rather than workmate.

By the early 1800s, most men's work was totally separated from the household, and family life became oriented around the man's struggle in the economy. The 'good' wife made the home a comfortable retreat from the pressures that man faced at the workplace. Between 1820 and 1860, women's magazines and religious literature defined attributes of true womanhood. Women were judged as 'good' if they displayed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, (Cult of Domesticity 108), virtues that were natural to the female sex. It was believed that women should concentrate their energies on running their households, not on seeking to enter the world of men, the public life and politics.

Fathers' control over children began to erode even before the onset of the Industrial Revolution. By the end of the seventeenth century, fathers had less land to divide among sons. This meant that fathers had less authority over their children's (especially sons') sexual behavior and the choice of a marriage partner. The fact that the percentage of women who were pregnant at the time of marriage shot up to more than 40 percent by the middle of the century shows that parents had become less effective in preventing premarital intercourse, (Benokraitis 68). The role the father now played was reduced, yet still important as head of the household, chief disciplinarian and advisor. Since he was frequently absent from home he was not the primary parent anymore. For the first time in American history, the mother was the primary parent. Mothers, for example, were expected to mold the character of their sons. A mother also was expected to build strong and lasting bonds with her son. This marked a dramatic change from earlier conceptions. Puritans thought, that a mother's love would ruin

children, especially their sons. Generally speaking, “parents in the Victorian family were no longer to act as strict authorities, but were to increase their roles as moral teachers,” (Rotundo 26). Perhaps the biggest change was that, largely in the middle class, children began to be perceived and treated as individuals. Marriage was not seen anymore as a community matter, but it focused more on the two individuals being wed.

The economic depression of the 1930s, World War II, the baby boom of the 1950s, and the increasing economic and political unrest of the years since the 1960s have all influenced the American family - sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. By the beginning of the twentieth century the companionate family was on the rise. At that time, married couples stressed increasingly the importance of sexual attraction and compatibility in their relationships. Particularly in the middle classes, the notion of companionship (Barrie Thorne 20), encompassed a couple’s children. Affection between parents and children was more intimate and more openly demonstrated, and young people enjoyed greater freedom from parental supervision.

During the Great Depression, families had a great variety of experiences, influenced largely by such factors as residence, social class, and sex. For example to help support their families, many young men and women raised on farms moved to the cities to find work. The Depression had the most devastating effect on working class and poor families. Boys, especially, were expected to work after school or to leave school entirely to help families with their meager income. When mothers found jobs, older children, especially girls, looked after their younger brothers and sisters and often had to drop out of the school to do so. Because the position of the husband and the father was based on his occupation and his role as provider, if he lost his job he often suffered a decline in status within the family. Men who could not provide for their families became depressed, preoccupied, abusive, drank more, or spent much of their time searching for jobs. As fathers became physically and emotionally distant, their authority in the family and their children’s respect often decreased.

When the United States entered World War II, there was a scarcity of workers, especially in the defense and manufacturing industries. For the first time, many women, especially African American mothers, found jobs that paid a decent salary. Death and divorce also disrupted many families. Some wives and mothers who had worked during the war enjoyed their new-found economic independence and decided to end unhappy marriages. After World War II, when women were no longer needed in the workplace and returning veterans needed jobs, attitudes towards family roles changed almost over night. The family roles of white middle-class women were expanded to include full-time nurturance of children and husbands. Husbands' roles were largely limited to work.

Feminist theory has had a significant impact on the understanding of family life. Feminist scholars have opened up new areas of inquiry which include gender relations and new ways of thinking about family experiences. For example, the term often used to refer to kinship, intimacy, and domestic sharing is monolithic: 'The family' implies a firm, unchanging entity, always similar in shape and content. It seems that families deal with root biological events like birth, sickness and death. Feminists have long challenged this image because it falsifies the actual variety of household forms. Contemporary feminists have challenged beliefs that arrangements are biological and so also natural in any way. Instead, feminists argue that families are socially and historically constructed. They have emphasized the social organization of sexuality, intimacy, reproduction, motherhood, fatherhood, childhood, sexual divisions of labor, and the division of gender itself. Furthermore, beliefs, laws, politics, and feelings give cultural significance to biology and alter the understanding of the meaning of a 'natural' family. Families and households are also affected by laws governing divorce, child custody, sexuality, marital rape, and domestic violence. There are close and ongoing connections between families and the state which imply the social and cultural character of the family.

The gender problem shown in this essay is far from being a fact of nature, as many feminists argue. “Gender is a complex social construction with multiple dimensions that bear on the dynamics of families and other institutions,” (Barrie Thorne 12). Gender is central to the social organization of households, work, schools, hospitals, the state, and other institutions. Gender divisions of labor and notions of ‘women’s work’ and ‘men’s work’ vary across cultures, although women typically have more responsibility than men do for the tasks of social reproduction, and ‘caring’ work. While much of the sociological literature of the 1950s and 1960s portrayed contemporary marriage as an arrangement of love between equals, in the 1970s, feminists put forth a more conflictual portrayal of relations between wives, husbands, parents and children. Instead of love and companionship of the 1950s, they emphasized patterns of inequality and conflict.

At least since the nineteenth century, social theorists have viewed the family as a private and distinctive sphere, set apart from the public world. “Feminists have challenged that view, arguing that division between ‘public’ and ‘private’ is deeply ideological,” (Barrie Thorne 22). Households were always affected from its surroundings as economic and social structures. Stacey discusses in her essay the effects of the shift to a service based, low-wage economy on the organization and dynamics of U.S. households. Since more and more women find that their husbands’ earnings are insufficient to balance the household, they had to work in low-paid jobs. The women entered a working place where they encountered unequal conditions and had no significant opportunities to climb up the social ladder. As historians have demonstrated, state policies had a great impact on the family, because they generated this gendered division of labor.

Since the 1950s many changes have occurred in the structure of the American family. Rising rates of divorce, separation, and cohabitation outside of marriage have created a growing percentage of single-parent and single-adult households. The increasing rate of employed women, especially employed mothers, has produced a rising tide of dual-earner

couples whose patterns of child rearing differ greatly from the 1950s norm. And yet “the nuclear family persists because permanent monogamy and domestic privacy remain strong values,” (Poster 190), but it is a waning institution.

The primary breadwinner who emphasizes economic support and constricted participation in child rearing persists, but it no longer predominates. The major group of men has become more involved in the nurturing activities of family life. Although these fathers rarely have equal responsibility for child rearing, they are significantly more involved with their children. Two patterns represent increasingly popular responses to the search for an alternative to the traditional primary breadwinner picture: men who are involved more in caretaking and men who quit parental commitments completely.

The classical ‘domestic oriented woman’ does not predominate postmodern family forms. As Gerson demonstrates in her essay, there are two trends visible today. First, the exposure to expanded opportunities (upward employment mobility) outside home and insecurities within the family (financial constraints) promotes a non-domestic orientation, (Gerson 39). Exposure to a more traditional package of opportunities (stable marriage) promotes a domestic orientation, (Gerson 39). Rising marital instability and stagnant male wages have damaged the support voices for domesticity, but persistent gender inequality at the workplace and in the home also make domesticity an inviting alternative to those who still face limited options in the paid labor force. In contrast to women in the nuclear family of the past, many women today work outside the home, and in this respect the designation nuclear family, as the sociologists have shown, applies only to 10 percent of the population in the United States today, (Poster 198). This change in women’s job status is one of the most profound social trends affecting the family nowadays and is an important condition for many other changes in the family today.

The structure of parental authority and love towards the children today is different from the common norm of the nineteenth-century. Taking Poster’s ‘Orange County Families’

sample into account, several changes can be demonstrated. The mothers in the study abandoned sanctions, like withdrawal of love, imposed when the child failed to comply. Today's child's little pleasures (childhood masturbation) are also treated differently – not with the withdrawal of love. Families today allow the child considerable exploration and enjoyment of the body. The imposition of authority by parents on children has lessened dramatically by giving children considerable freedom in making their own rules. So parents encourage the autonomous ego development.

In contrast to the nineteenth-century Victorian Family, the children are not longer isolated from adults and children outside the home. While the child's emotional ties to the immediate family were intensified in the 1800s, children today have more contact with other persons and establish also bonds with a variety of adults. In this context their parents remain the most important people in their lives, but for them the intensity of interfamilial relations is less than that for the children in the Victorian Family, (Poster 204).

Family members want more from life than the nineteenth-century goals of social respectability and economic success. Today's family seeks a wider range of accomplishments such as emotional and sexual fulfillment.

Today's family remains an isolated unit (in terms of sociability) and with a strong attitude towards the privacy of domestic interactions, but yet today's family is open to the influence of wider society, especially to the consumer culture through the mass media (TV, Computer...). It's much harder for them to resist outside incursions than it was for the Victorian Family.

Social change in the family arrangement nowadays, has increased the number of options adult women and men encounter, but the inconsistent nature of change has also created new personal problems, more complex forms of gender inequality, and a growing social and ideological gap between more traditional family forms and the alternative family forms, (Gerson 36). Since people have different exposures to changes in the family life, for example marriage, the economy, and the workplace, they have developed many different methods of

living. Some have developed new patterns of family life that emphasize either greater freedom from family commitments (childless women and men, not involved divorced fathers) or more equal sharing of breadwinning responsibilities (work-committed women and involved fathers). Others have re-created a more traditional model of gender roles, in spite of the social forces promoting change (women who are domestically oriented and men who are primary breadwinners). Today, one can see the growth of alternative patterns of family life and their competition between each other. Men and women today, enjoy their given freedom, in developing multiple family strategies, even if they are contrasting, to cope with the contrasting individual circumstances they confront. "If the uneven and inconsistent nature of change has produced social division and political conflict in the short run, then the long-run fate of the American family life depends on finding resolutions to the dilemmas and conflicts that make all family choices problematic," (Gerson 57). The first step should be to stop the search for the only one, correct family form in favor to find solutions for the full range of dilemmas and needs created by unequal change. This would reduce the barriers to integrating work and family for employed parents of either sex, and it would promote gender equality in rights, responsibilities and options regarding parenting and employment.

To answer the question whether the family is more a social institution one can answer this with a clear 'yes'. As this essay shows, forms of domination of the surrounding society profoundly affect the American family. Social ideology puts great pressure on the family to reproduce those forms of domination in children. Society has also a great influence on the emotional structure of a family, for example, the relations between age and sex groups, the relationship of the family to the wider society etc.

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