12.4: Recent Changes in Family Structure

The Decline of the Traditional Family

One parent households, cohabitation, same sex families, and voluntary childless couples are increasingly common.

Learning Objectives

Summarize the prevalence of single parents, cohabitation, same-sex couples, and unmarried individuals

Key Points

- One recent trend illustrating the changing nature of families is the rise in prevalence of single-parent families.
- Cohabitation is an intimate relationship that includes a common living place and which exists without the benefit of legal, cultural, or religious sanction.
- While homosexuality has existed for thousands of years among human beings, formal marriages between homosexual partners is a relatively recent phenomenon.
- Voluntary childlessness in women is defined as women of childbearing age who are fertile and do not intend to have children.

Key Terms

- **cohabitation**: An emotionally and physically intimate relationship that includes a common living place and which exists without legal or religious sanction.
- **Voluntary Childlessness**: Women of childbearing age who are fertile and do not intend to have children, women who have chosen sterilization, or women past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children.
Family structures of some kind are found in every society. Pairing off into formal or informal marital relationships originated in hunter-gatherer groups to forge networks of cooperation beyond the immediate family. Intermarriage between groups, tribes, or clans was often political or strategic and resulted in reciprocal obligations between the two groups represented by the marital partners. Even so, marital dissolution was not a serious problem as the obligations resting on marital longevity were not particularly high.

One Parent Households

One recent trend illustrating the changing nature of families is the rise in prevalence of single-parent families. While somewhat more common prior to the twentieth century due to the more frequent deaths of spouses, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the nuclear family became the societal norm in most Western nations. But what was the prevailing norm for much of the twentieth century is no longer the actual norm, nor is it perceived as such.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the change in the economic structure of the United States—the inability to support a nuclear family on a single wage—had significant ramifications on family life. Women and men began delaying the age of first marriage in order to invest in their earning power before marriage by spending more time in school. The increased levels of education among women, with women now earn more than 50% of bachelor’s degrees, positioned women to survive economically without the support of a husband. By 1997, 40% of births to unmarried American women were intentional and, despite a still prominent gender gap in pay, women were able to survive as single mothers.

Cohabitation

Cohabitation is an intimate relationship that includes a common living place and which exists without the benefit of legal, cultural, or religious sanction. It can be seen as an alternative form of marriage, in that, in practice, it is similar to marriage, but it does not receive the same formal recognition by religions, governments, or cultures. The cohabiting population, although inclusive of all ages, is mainly made up of those between the ages of 25 and 34. In 2005, the U.S. Census Bureau reported 4.85 million cohabiting couples, up more than 1,000% from 1960, when there were 439,000 such couples. More than half of couples in the United States lived together, at least briefly, before walking down the aisle.

Same- Sex Unions

While homosexuality has existed for thousands of years among human beings, formal marriages between homosexual partners is a relatively recent phenomenon. As of 2009, only two states in the United States recognized marriages between same-sex partners, Massachusetts and Iowa, where same-sex marriage was formally allowed as of May 17, 2004 and April 2009, respectively. Three additional states allow same-sex civil unions, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Vermont. Between May 2004 and December 2006, 7,341 same-sex couples married in Massachusetts. Assuming the percentage of homosexuals in Massachusetts is similar to that of the rest of the nation, the above number indicates that 16.7% of homosexuals in Massachusetts married during that time. Massachusetts is also the state with the lowest divorce rate.

Same sex couples, while becoming increasingly more common, still only account for about 1 percent of American households, according to 2010 Census data. About 0.5 percent of American households were same-sex couples in
2000, so this number has doubled, and it is expected to continue increasing by the next Census data.

**Childfree Couples**

Voluntary childlessness in women is defined as women of childbearing age who are fertile and do not intend to have children, women who have chosen sterilization, or women past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children. Individuals can also be “temporarily childless” or do not currently have children but want children in the future. The availability of reliable contraception along with support provided in old age by systems other than traditional familial ones has made childlessness an option for some people in developed countries. In most societies and for most of human history, choosing to be childfree was both difficult and undesirable. To accomplish the goal of remaining childfree, some individuals undergo medical sterilization or relinquish their children for adoption.


Household types in the United States in 2006: This figure shows that roughly 5% of households in the United States are made up of cohabiting couples of various types: heterosexual, gay, or, lesbian.

**Change in Marriage Rate**

Over the past three decades, marriage rates in the United States have increased for all racial and ethnic groups.

**Learning Objectives**

Recognize changes in marriage patterns

**Key Points**

- Marriage is a social union or legal contract between people, called spouses, that creates kinship.
- Marriage laws have changed over the course of United States history, including the removal of bans on interracial marriage.
- Of all racial categories considered by the U.S. Census, African-Americans have married the least.
- Of all racial categories considered by the U.S. Census, Hispanics have married the most.
- The average family income for married households is higher than the average family income of unmarried households. However, marriage rates have increased for poverty-stricken populations as well.
Key Terms

- **wedding**: Marriage ceremony; a ritual officially celebrating the beginning of a marriage.
- **Marriage Laws**: The legal requirements that determine the validity of a marriage.

Marriage is a social union or legal contract between people, called spouses, that creates kinship. The definition of marriage varies according to different cultures, but is usually an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual, are acknowledged. Such a union is often formalized through a wedding ceremony.

Marriage Rates in the United States

Marriage laws have changed over the course of United States history, including the removal of bans on interracial marriage. In the twenty-first century, laws have been passed enabling same-sex marriages in several states. According to the United States Census Bureau, 2,077,000 marriages occurred in the United States in 2009. The median age for the first marriage of an American has increased in recent years; the median age in the early 1970s was 21 for women and 23 for men, and rose to 26 for women and 28 for men by 2009. As of 2006, 55.7% of Americans age 18 and over have married at a rate of 51.5%. Females over the age of 15 have married at a rate of 47.7%. The separation rate is 1.8% for males and 0.1% for females.

Marriage Trends

African Americans have married the least of all of the major ethnic groups in the U.S., with a 29.9% marriage rate, but have the highest separation rate which is 4.5%. This results in a high percentage of single mother households among African Americans compared with other ethnic groups (White, African American, Native Americans, Asian, Hispanic). This can lead a child to become closer to his/her mother, the only caregiver. Yet one parent households are also more susceptible to economic difficulties. Native Americans have the second lowest marriage rate at 37.9%. Hispanics have a 45.1% marriage rate, with a 3.5% separation rate.

In the United States, the two ethnic groups with the highest marriage rates included Asians with 58.5%, and Whites with 52.9%. Asians have the lowest rate of divorce among the main groups with 1.8%. Whites, African Americans, and Native Americans have the highest rates of being widowed, ranging from 5%-6.5%. They also have the highest rates of divorce among the three, ranging from 11%-13%, with Native Americans having the highest divorce rate.
According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, the average family income is higher than previous years, at $62,770. Nevertheless, the percentage of family households below the poverty line in 2011 was 15.1%, higher than in 2000 when it was 11.3%.

Unmarried Mothers

With the rise of single-parent households, unmarried mothers have become more common in the United States.

Learning Objectives

Discuss the factors involved in the increasing number of single-parent households

Key Points

- One recent trend illustrating the changing nature of families is the rise in prevalence of single-parent household.
- The expectation of single mothers as primary caregiver is a part of traditional parenting trends between mothers and fathers.
- In the United States, 27% of single mothers live below the poverty line, as they lack the financial resources to support their children when the birth father is unresponsive.

Key Terms

- **nuclear family**: a family unit consisting of at most a father, mother and dependent children.
- **Primary Caregiver**: The person who takes primary responsibility for someone who cannot care fully for themselves.

One recent trend illustrating the changing nature of families is the rise in prevalence of the single-parent household.
While somewhat more common prior to the 20th century due to the more frequent deaths of spouses, the nuclear family became the societal norm in most Western nations. But what was the prevailing norm for much of the 20th century is no longer the actual norm, nor is it perceived as such.

Since the 1960s, there has been a marked increase in the number of children living with a single parent. The 1960 United States Census reported that 9% of children were dependent on a single parent; this number that has increased to 28% by the 2000 US Census. The spike was caused by an increase in unmarried pregnancies, which 36% of all births by unmarried women, and to the increasing prevalence of divorces among couple.

The prevalence of single mothers as primary caregiver is a part of traditional parenting trends between mothers and fathers. In the United States, 27% of single mothers live below the poverty line, as they lack the financial resources to support their children when the birth father is unresponsive. Although the public is sympathetic with low-wage single mothers, government benefits are fairly low. Many seek assistance by living with another adult, such as a relative, fictive kin, or significant other. Divorced mothers who re-marry have fewer financial struggles than unmarried single mothers, who cannot work for longer periods of time without shirking their child-caring responsibilities. Unmarried mothers are thus more likely to cohabit with another adult. In the United States, the rate of unintended pregnancy is higher among unmarried couples than among married ones. In 1990, 73% of births to unmarried women were unintended at the time of conception, compared to about 44% of births overall.

The “Sandwich Generation” and Elder Care

Elderly care is the fulfillment of the special needs and requirements that are unique to senior citizens.

Learning Objectives

Describe the challenges of elderly care in the U.S.

Key Points

- The Sandwich generation is a generation of people who care for their aging parents while supporting their own children.
• Elderly care encompasses such services as assisted living, adult day care, long-term care, nursing homes, hospice care, and in-home care, as well as less formalized caretaking, such as by an elder’s grown child.

• Given the choice, most elders would prefer to continue to live in their own homes rather than move to an elder home or caretaking facility.

• Respite care allows caregivers the opportunity to go on vacation or a business trip and know that their elder has good quality temporary care. Without this help, the elder might have to move permanently to an outside facility.

Key Terms

• **sandwich generation**: The generation of persons who are the children of baby boomers, whose lifestyle is governed by the fact that they must simultaneously care for the needs of their children and their own elderly parents.

• **Respite Care**: Temporary care that allows caregivers the opportunity to go on vacation or a business trip and know that their elder has good quality temporary care, for without this help the elder might have to move permanently to an outside facility.

Elderly care is the fulfillment of the special needs and requirements that are unique to senior citizens. This broad term encompasses such services as assisted living, adult day care, long-term care, nursing homes, hospice care, and in-home care. Because of the wide variety of elderly care found globally, as well as different cultural perspectives on elderly citizens, the subject cannot be limited to any one practice. For example, many countries in Asia use government-established elderly care quite infrequently, preferring the traditional methods of being cared for by younger generations of family members.

Elderly Care in the United States

The form of elderly care provided varies greatly among countries and is changing rapidly. According to the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, the older population—persons 65 years or older—numbered 39.6 million in 2009. They represented 12.9% of the U.S. population, or about one in every eight Americans. By 2030, there will be about 72.1 million older persons, more than twice their number in 2000. In the United States, most of the large multi-facility providers are publicly owned and managed as for-profit businesses. Given the choice, most elders would prefer to continue to live in their own homes. Unfortunately, the majority of elderly people gradually lose functioning ability and require either additional assistance in the home or a move to an eldercare facility. The adult children of these elders often face a difficult challenge in helping their parents make the right choices.

One relatively new service in the United States that can help keep the elderly in their homes longer is respite care. This type of care allows caregivers the opportunity to go on vacation or a business trip and know that their elder has good quality temporary care. Without this help, the elder might have to move permanently to an outside facility. Another unique type of care cropping in U.S. hospitals is called acute care of elder units, or ACE units, which provide “a homelike setting” within a medical center specifically for the elderly.

The Sandwich Generation

The Sandwich generation is a generation of people who care for their aging parents while supporting their own children. According to the Pew Research Center, just over 1 of every 8 Americans aged 40 to 60 is both raising a child and caring for a parent, in addition to between 7 to 10 million adults caring for their aging parents from a long distance.
Childless Couples

Voluntary childlessness in women is defined as women of childbearing age who are fertile and do not intend to have children.

Learning Objectives

Discuss the factors involved in voluntary childlessness

Key Points

- To accomplish the goal of remaining childfree, some individuals undergo medical sterilization or relinquish their children for adoption.
- The factors involved in voluntary childlessness include age, income, unmarried status, and higher education.
- Most societies place a high value on parenthood in adult life, so that people who remain childless intentionally are sometimes stereotyped as being “individualistic” people who avoid social responsibility and are less prepared to commit themselves to helping others.

Key Terms

- **Childfree**: Childfree (sometimes spelled child-free), also known as voluntary childlessness, is a form of childlessness. Voluntary childlessness in women is defined as women of childbearing age who are fertile and do not intend to have children, women who have chosen sterilization, or women past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children.
- **sterilization**: A procedure to permanently prevent an organism from reproducing.
children, women who have chosen sterilization, or women past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children. Individuals can also be “temporarily childless” but want children in the future. The availability of reliable contraception along with support provided in old age by systems other than traditional familial ones has made childlessness an option for some people in developed countries. In most societies and for most of human history, choosing to be childfree was both difficult and undesirable. To accomplish the goal of remaining childfree, some individuals undergo medical sterilization or relinquish their children for adoption.

Factors Involved in Voluntary Childlessness

First, while younger women are more likely to be childless, older women are more likely to state that they intend to remain childless in the future. Thus age plays a significant role in the decision. Further, according to 2004 U.S. Census Bureau data, the proportion of childless women 15 to 44 years old was 44.6%, up from 35% in 1976. The higher a woman’s income, the less likely she is to have children: Nearly half of women with annual incomes over $100,000 are childless. Third, being unmarried is one of the strongest predictors of childlessness.

Research also suggests that married individuals who were concerned about the stability of their marriages were more likely to remain childless. Most studies on this subject find that higher income predicted childlessness. However, some women report that the lack of financial resources was a reason why they decided to remain childless. Childless women in the developed world often express the view that women ultimately have to make a choice between motherhood and having a career. Lastly, the chance of being childless was far greater for never married women (35 to 44 yrs old), 82.5% vs. ever-married (12.9%). Chance of childlessness (age 35 to 44) by education level: graduate or professional degree (27.6%) vs non high school graduate (13.5%), high school graduate (14.3%), some college but no degree (24.7%), associate degree (11.4%), and bachelor’s degree (18.2%). The higher the level of education, the more likely a woman is to remain childless.

Social Attitudes to Remaining Childless

Most societies place a high value on parenthood in adult life, so that people who remain childless intentionally are sometimes stereotyped as being “individualistic” people who avoid social responsibility and are less prepared to commit themselves to helping others. With the advent of environmentalism and concerns for stewardship, those choosing to not have children are also sometimes recognized as helping reduce our impact, such as members of the voluntary human extinction movement. Some childless individuals are sometimes applauded on moral grounds, such as members of philosophical or religious groups, like the shakers.
Voluntary Human Extinction Movement: With the advent of environmentalism and concerns for stewardship, those choosing to not have children are also sometimes recognized as helping reduce our impact, such as members of the voluntary human extinction movement.

Some opponents of the childfree choice consider such a choice to be “selfish.” The rationale of this position is the assertion that raising children is a very important activity. Proponents of child freedom posit that choosing not to have children is no more or less selfish than choosing to have children. In fact, choosing to have children may be the more selfish choice, especially when poor parenting risks creating many long-term problems for both the children themselves and society at large.

Organizations and Political Activism

Childfree individuals do not necessarily share a unified political or economic philosophy, and most prominent childfree organizations tend to be social in nature. Childfree social groups first emerged in the 1970s, most notable among them The National Organization for Non-Parents and No Kidding! in North America. Numerous books have been written about childfree people and a range of social positions related to childfree interests have developed along with political and social activism in support of these interests. The term "childfree" was used in a July 3, 1972 Time article on the creation of the National Organization for Non-Parents. It was revived in the 1990s when Leslie Lafayette formed a later childfree group, the Childfree Network.

Change in Household Size

Household models include the single family and blended family home, shared housing, and group homes for people with special needs.

Learning Objectives

Describe different household models

Key Points

- A shared house is a household in which a group of usually unrelated people reside together.
A group home is a private residence designed to serve children or adults with chronic disabilities or special needs. This type of home usually has a maximum of six residents and a trained caregiver available 24 hours a day.

A boarding house is a house in which lodgers rent one or more rooms for one or more nights, and sometimes for extended periods of weeks, months and years.

People who live together in a shared house are called roommates.

A single room occupancy is a single room dwelling or a multiple-tenant building that houses one or two people in individual rooms.

Key Terms

- **Single Room Occupancy**: A multiple-tenant building that houses one or two people in individual rooms (or to the single room dwelling itself).
- **Roommate**: A person with whom one shares an apartment or house (UK: flatmate or housemate).
- **Group Home**: A private residence designed to serve children or adults with chronic disabilities. Typically there are no more than six residents and there is a trained caregiver there twenty-four hours a day.

Household models in Anglophone culture include the single family and varieties of blended families, shared housing, and group homes for people with support needs. Other models of living situations that may meet definitions of a household include boarding houses, a house in multiple occupations in Great Britain, and a single room occupancy in the United States.

Shared Houses

A shared house is a household in which a group of often-unrelated people reside together. The term generally applies to people living together in rental properties rather than in properties in which any resident is an owner-occupier. A shared house is formed when a group of people move into a rental property; typically, one or more of these people has applied to rent the property through a real estate agent, been accepted, and signed a lease. People who live together in a shared house are called *roommates*. In both developed and developing countries, shared housing is an increasingly popular household model. This is due to a variety of economic and social changes, such as the declining affordability of home ownership, as well as delayed marriage and decreasing marriage rates.

Group Homes

A group home is a private residence designed to serve children or adults with chronic disabilities. Group homes typically have a maximum of six residents and a trained, on-site caregiver available 24 hours a day. Residents of group homes usually have either a chronic mental disorder or a physical disability that prevents them from living independently. They need regular assistance in order to complete daily tasks, such as taking medication or bathing. Other residents may be developmentally disabled, recovering from alcohol or drug addiction, or abused, troubled, or neglected youths. Some residents have behavioral problems that are potentially dangerous to themselves or others and require constant supervision. Since the 1970s, group homes have assumed the role of earlier institutions such as asylums, poorhouses, and orphanages.
Boarding Houses

In a boarding house, lodgers rent one or more rooms for a period ranging from one night to weeks, months, or even years. Common areas of the house are maintained and services like laundry and cleaning may be provided. Boarding houses usually offer bed and board, or at least some meals as well as accommodation. Formerly, boarders would typically share washing, breakfast, and dining facilities; in recent years, individual rooms have tended to have their own washing and toilet facilities.

Single Room Occupancy

A single room occupancy is a single room dwelling or multiple-tenant building that houses one or two people in individual rooms. As the value of urban land has increased, many of these properties have been renovated and made available at higher prices. This has played a role in the displacement of lower-income people who once lived in these properties; it has also been cited as a reason for the visible rise in homelessness across America since the early 1980s.

Women in the Labor Force

Women in the workforce have faced barriers, though they have greater access to education and employment in the contemporary era.

Learning Objectives

Discuss three factors that restrict women’s access to certain occupations

Key Points

- Women have participated in the workforce for as long as men have, yet women have been challenged by inequality in the workforce.
Historically, women’s lack of access to higher education effectively excluded them from the practice of well-paid and high status occupations.

Access to higher education remains a significant barrier to women’s full participation in the workforce in developing countries.

The gender pay gap is the difference between male and female earnings expressed as a percentage of male earnings.

The feminization of the workplace is a label given to the trend towards greater employment of women and of men willing and able to operate with these more ‘feminine’ modes of interaction.

Key Terms

- **Wage Gap**: The difference between male and female earnings expressed as a percentage of male earnings.
- **occupation**: A regular activity performed in exchange for payment, including jobs and professions.
- **Feminization of the Workplace**: A label given to the trend towards greater employment of women and of men willing and able to operate with these more ‘feminine’ modes of interaction.

Women in the workforce earning wages or a salary are part of a modern phenomenon, one that developed at the same time as the growth of paid employment for men; yet women have been challenged by inequality in the workforce. Until modern times, legal and cultural practices, combined with the inertia of longstanding religious and educational conventions, restricted women’s entry and participation in the workforce. Economic dependency upon men has had the same impact, particularly as occupations have become professionalized over the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries.

Historically, women’s lack of access to higher education had effectively excluded them from the practice of well-paid and high status occupations. Entry of women into the higher professions like law and medicine was delayed in most countries due to women being denied entry to universities and qualification for degrees; for example, Cambridge University only fully validated degrees for women late in 1947, and even then only after much opposition and acrimonious debate.

**Barriers to Equal Participation**

As gender roles have followed the formation of agricultural and then industrial societies, newly developed professions and fields of occupation have been frequently inflected by gender. Some examples of the ways in which gender affects a field include: prohibitions or restrictions on members of a particular gender entering a field or studying a field; discrimination within a field, including wage, management, and prestige hierarchies; expectation that mothers, rather than fathers, should be the primary childcare providers.

**Access to Education and Training**

A number of occupations became “professionalized” through the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries, gaining regulatory bodies, and passing laws or regulations requiring particular higher educational requirements. As women’s access to higher education was often limited, this effectively restricted women’s participation in these professionalizing occupations. For instance, women were completely forbidden access to Cambridge University until 1868, and were encumbered with a variety of restrictions until 1987, when the university adopted an equal opportunity policy. Numerous other institutions in the United States and Western Europe began opening their doors to women over the same period of time, but access to
higher education remains a significant barrier to women’s full participation in the workforce in developing countries.

**Access to Capital**

Women’s access to occupations requiring capital outlays is also hindered by their unequal access to capital; this affects occupations such as entrepreneur and small business owner, farm ownership, and investor. Numerous microloan programs attempt to redress this imbalance, targeting women for loans or grants to establish start-up businesses or farms, having determined that aid targeted to women can disproportionately benefit a nation’s economy.

**Discrimination within Occupations**

The gender pay gap is the difference between male and female earnings expressed as a percentage of male earnings, according to the OECD. The European Commission defines it as the average difference between men and women’s hourly earnings. There is a debate to what extent this is the result of gender differences, implicit discrimination due to lifestyle choices (e.g., number of hours worked, need for maternity leave), or because of explicit discrimination. The 2008 edition of the Employment Outlook report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that, while female employment rates have expanded considerably and the gender employment and wage gaps have narrowed virtually everywhere, women still have 20% less chance to have a job than men, on average, and they are paid 17% less than their male counterparts.

**Feminization of the Workplace**

In response to the pressure from feminism and cultural trends highlighting characteristics in workers that have culturally been associated with women, feminization of the workplace is a label given to the trend towards greater employment of women, and of men willing and able to operate with these more ‘feminine’ modes of interaction.

OECD Gender Pay Gap: Gender Pay Gap in 19 OECD countries according to the 2008 OECD Employment Outlook report

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