

How Has American Family Changed During the Last Five Decades

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to make a comparative analysis of traditional American family of the 1960s and a modern one. This paper aims at highlighting the main changes that took place during the last five decades as well as the community point of view on the issue and alteration of the society's attitude toward the changes. The paper is based on statistics, academic articles and books using both qualitative and comparative analysis.

Keywords: Childbearing outside marriage, cohabitation, divorce, family, marriage

Introduction

Family has always been an important phenomenon and institution in almost every country. Throughout history, family has been a central institution in human society involved in almost all activities of human life, like production, consumption, reproduction, parenting, social relationship, religion, leisure, etc. Family structured the lives, activities and relationship of women, men and children and consisted of wife, husband and children. Marriage, as an essential and integral part of family, defined womanhood, manhood and adult status. The status of wife or husband was seen as a central element of human identity and becoming a wife or husband was one of the most important transitions in people's lives. Moreover, marriage had a religious significance for many, and Catholic Church made marriage a sacrament (Thorton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007).

However, attitude towards family and marriage has dramatically changed during the last decades. Recently scientists, scholars and media representatives agree on the fact that marriage has become deinstitutionalized (Diana B. Elliott, 2012). If in the past marriage was a commonplace, even required stage of life for establishing oneself in the society, the only accepted way of having intimate relationship and was associated with the creation of a new household unit, the initiation of sexual relationship and the birth of children (Trask & Koivunen, 2007), today it is less obligatory and essential (Diana B. Elliott J. M., 2010). Furthermore, according to the study conducted in 2010, about 39 percent of Americans say that marriage is becoming obsolete while this figure was only 28 percent in 1978 (Diana B. Elliott K. K., 2012). A lot of people nowadays question the decision to marry openly but those who nevertheless choose marriage do so at a later age than in the recent past. Between 1965-2005, estimated median age at first mar-

riage increased from 20 to 25 for women and from 23 to 27 for men (Bureau, 2006).

Traditional American Family of the 1960s

A typical American family of the 1960s consisted of a working father, stay-at-home wife and children. The man was considered to be the main breadwinner in the family and thus the main decision-maker, while woman was considered to be the obedient wife, raising children and serving her husband and her family (Qian, *Divergent Paths of American families*, 2013). This kind of "ideal family" was considered to be the only accepted form of relationship type between a man and a woman by the society of that time and other forms of relationship, even if they were considered as families by some, were disfavored by the society and predominant social values (Parke R. D., 2013).

The family of the 1960s seems to be almost perfect from the first glance. Number of divorces was quite low. According to Paul R. Amato, family sociologist and demographer, divorce rate in the 1960s was about 2.2. (number of divorces per 1,000 married women) (Amato, 2010). Consequently, majority of children lived in a family with both parents. According to Pew Research Center, 73% of children lived in a typical "ideal" American family, in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage. (Livingston, 2014). Accordingly, very few children were born outside wedlock. As Diana B. Elliott and Jemie M. Lewis claim in their article "Embracing the Institution of Marriage: The Characteristics of Remarried Americans", only 5% of children were born outside marriage (Diana B. Elliott J. M., 2010). Cohabiting partners also represented only small percentage of

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American society. Regrettably, Census Bureau did not have statistics regarding cohabiting couples in 1960-1980s. No explanations are given for that, but it can be assumed that few people cohabited during that period and they did not want to reveal their unmarried relationship. More than that, it is also possible that people were not even asked about unmarried relationship as it was a “blocked, closed, awkward topic”. Nevertheless, while researching the cohabitation data I came across an interesting statistics suggested by Diana B Elliot and Jemie M Lewis, according to which about 11 percent of couples cohabited before marriage in 1965-1974. However, the data about cohabiting couples, whose relationship did not end in marriage, is still difficult to find and needs further research, yet that figure is supposed to be less.

To sum up, traditional American family of 1960s seems to be almost perfect, with low figure of divorces, cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage. Besides that, most children were raised in a family of two married heterosexual parents with distinct role distribution within the family-caring mother looking after family and breadwinner father.

Main Changes in American Family

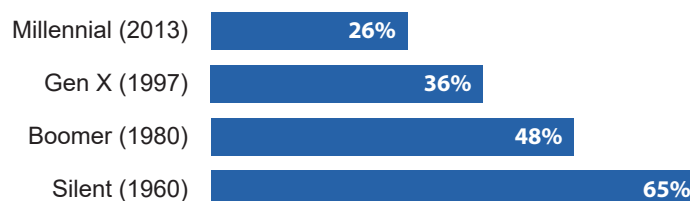
Traditional American family of the 1960s has dramatically changed providing absolutely different picture. Demographic, economic and social change of the last

decades has affected and transformed the structure and composition of American family (Pew Research Center; Time, 2010). Family unit of mum, dad and kids with distinct role distribution of breadwinner father and home stay mother has altered giving the way to new types of family forms. If in 1960s heterosexual married couple with kids was considered as family by the society and other forms of relationship was disfavored and not accepted, in modern society other “family” types have emerged like cohabiting families, single parent families, same sex families, etc.

One of the important changes of the last decades is decline in marriage and its importance. According to Pew Research Center, if in the 1960s about 72% of adults were married, by 2008 that share had fallen to 52% (Pew Research Center; Time, 2010). Pew Research Center provides researchers with another very interesting data on marriage rate by generation between young people aged from 18 to 32, according to which the marriage rate of 65% in 1960s dramatically dropped to 26% by 2013 (Collins, 2015) (see chart 1). Moreover, the marriage rate has not only fallen, marriage institution itself started losing its great importance and as Andrew Cherlin, sociologist and demographer, asserts in his article “The Deinstitutionalization of Marriage”, marriage has undergone a process of deinstitutionalization giving way to a new trend of relationship pattern, cohabitation, which in the contrary is becoming more and more institutionalized (Cherlin, 2004).

U.S. marriage rate, by generation

Percent married at age 18 to 32



Source: Pew Research Center

Chart 1

Cohabitation, the phenomena when a man and women live together in a sexual relationship without being married (Sondic, Nadans, Rothwell, & J, 2010), represents another great shift in relationship pattern. According to studies conducted in the USA, about 11 percent of couples cohabited before marriage in 1965-1974, in contrast to 56 percent between 1990-1994 (Diana B. Elliott J. M., 2010). However, as mentioned before, the number of cohabiting partners, whose relationship did

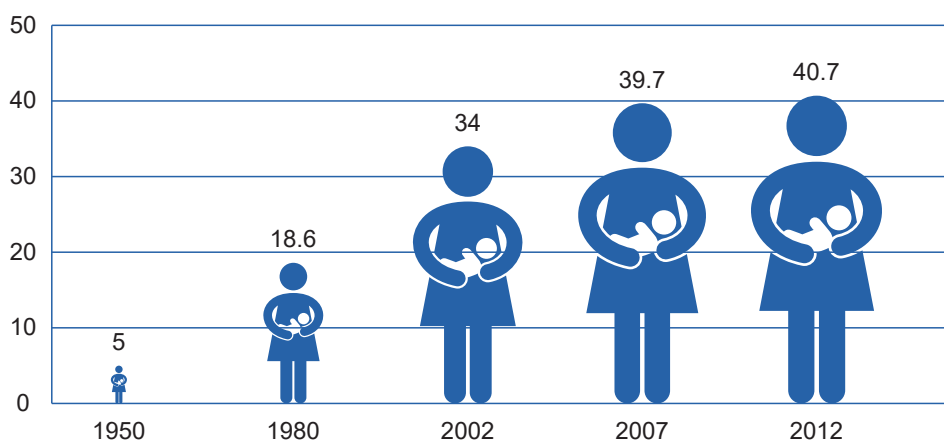
not end in marriage, is not given. U.S Census Bureau provides scholars with data of unmarried couples only after 1990s and according to which the number of unmarried cohabiting couples has dramatically increased from 2.5 million in 1994 to 7.9 million in 2014 (Bureau, Unmarried Couples of the Opposite Sex1, by Presence of Children2: 1960 to present, 2015).

Divorce and separation represents further great alteration in American family. According to studies, the

divorce rate rose from 2.2 in 1960 to 5.2 in 1980 - 136% increase. This rate was dropped in 2006 to 3.6 -31% decline (Amato, 2010) and rose again up to 9.2 (in men and 9.7 in women) in 2009 (Elliott & Simmons, 2011). As a result men and women cohabit, marry, separate or divorce, once or even multiple times, a phenomenon described as “American marriage – go round” (Qian, Divergent Paths of American families, 2013).

One of the eye catching changes during the last decades is connected with a rapid increase of childbearing outside marriage. As can be seen in the chart, if in 1960s, only 5% of children were born outside marriage, this number has dramatically increased up to about 40% in 2012 according to the study conducted by the scholars of University of Michigan (Rosegrant, 2014).

Percent of all births that are to unmarried women



Source: Pamela Smock, University of Michigan Institute for Social Research

Picture 1

What has also changed greatly during the last decades is the strict division of gender roles within the family and society as well, and division of labor between fathers and mothers. Moreover, society view of breadwinner father and housekeeper mother has been replaced by the view that roles are fluid and mothers and fathers are more interchangeable than in earlier generations (Parke R. D., 2013).

According to the report published by PewResearch-Center in 2013, the number of employed fathers, representing the only working members of the family, and, accordingly, the breadwinner, has decreased more than twice since the 1960s from 69% to 31.1 % in 2011. As in case of mothers, as the only working members of the family and breadwinners, percentage has increased more than 4 times since the 1960s from 1.6% to 6.7% in 2011 (Wendy Wag, 2013). Dramatically has increased the number of dual income families with both parents working in the same years from 24.6% to 58.6% (Wendy Wag, 2013).

The Most radical change, however, is connected with the decision of the U.S Supreme court on June 26, 2015 to allow same sex couples to marry, (Vogue & Diamond, 2015). However, we do not deal with this issue in this paper.

What is Society Attitude towards the Traditional Family and its Changes?

According to legal historian Stephan Sugarman, by the 1950s, as well as the 1960s, “American law and policy, largely centered on a single vision of the “ideal” family, composed of a married man, who worked in the paid labor force, and his wife, who spent most of her time in their home-caring for their biological children. Americans were strongly encouraged to conform to that norm. Other groupings of adults and children—even if they were considered families by some people—were generally disfavored by the predominant social values (and by the public programs) of the time” (Sugarman, 2008).

However, society attitude has changed during the last decades. According to the study conducted by Pew Research Center (based on 2,691 adult participants), American public is sharply divided in its judgment about the sweeping changes in the structure of American family. About the third of respondents (31%) are accepters of the changes. Similar share of public (32%) represents rejecters of the changes while 37% represents skeptics (Morin, 2011).

Rapid change of society attitude towards same sex couples is eye catching. According to Pew Research

Center, the support of same sex marriage has dramatically increased from 39% to 55% after 2001 (Changing Attitude on Gay Marriage, 2015).

Conclusion

To sum up, during the last 5-6 decades, American family structure and composition, as well as distinct division of gender roles in the family and society attitude towards the family, has dramatically changed. The number of divorces, cohabitation and childbearing has dramatically increased, while the number of marriages in the contrary has decreased. However, the most vivid change can be considered to be the legalization of same sex marriage.

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