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# Cultural Diversity in Family Life

By Godfrey J. Ellis

*Godfrey J. Ellis is Assistant Professor of family relations and child development and faculty associate in the Family Study Center, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater.*

Ethnocentrism, the attitude that one's own group is superior (1), seems to be a human tendency. Even though we struggle against it, things that are different seem wrong; our way seems the best (2). We tend to close our eyes to what we don't understand. Yet, we only fully comprehend our *own* culture as we become aware of possible cultural alternatives.

The purpose of this article is to present examples of the diversity of family life around the world and in the United States with particular emphasis on their adaptation to environmental conditions. This is not an esoteric romp into ivory-tower academia without implications for home economists in the field. Just the opposite. Home economists need to appreciate and value cultural diversity as they seek to extend their programs and services to a wider audience in a "melting pot" society. They must understand the origins and correlates of family life in the United States in order to be aware of the ramifications of their professional interventions.

## Family Adaptation

For example, the popular literature often refers to "nontraditional" family forms as if they were an invention of the 1980's. "Nontraditional" usually refers to such family types as the "single-parent" family, the "reconstituted" family, or the "voluntarily childless" family. Of course, such family types

have really been with us for as long as there have been families. Several authors even theorize that the prehistoric family was a single-parent family consisting of the mother-child dyad and random visits from roving males (3). In any case, modern American family forms hardly exhaust all possible expressions of family structure.

The anthropologist, Kathleen Gough, pieced together a picture of an extinct society—called the Nayar—that lived along the Malabar coast of India (4). Women in this remarkable society had a variety of "visiting husbands" just as Nayar men usually had a variety of "wives." Marriage was contracted when the man left his weapons at the door of her hut. It was terminated before breakfast the next morning. A woman, therefore, did not live with any of her husbands but with her brothers who disciplined her children and provided totally for their maintenance. Similarly, a Nayar husband lived with his sister and took care of her children rather than his own. Biological paternity was established when the probable father gave a gift of cloth and vegetables to the midwife. Other than that, the biological father had no social or economic obligations whatsoever to his children or to their mother. This strange family form was apparently an adaptation to the lifestyle of Nayar men who were a warrior caste. Their warlike way of life made stable and permanent marriage impractical.

Another unusual family form is known as the "stem extended family." It occurs in harsh environments, such as agricultural Ireland. Living conditions there are so difficult that the small farms can barely produce enough to sustain even one family. Dividing the

family land up among numerous heirs would mean none of them could survive. According to Gary R. Lee:

The stem family arises when *one* child, and only one, remains as a member of his or her parents' family after marriage, and all other children of both sexes leave the home to establish their own independent families. . . . Children other than the one inheriting the farm received some other form of compensation or inheritance (5).

The stem family, therefore, is another interesting example of adaptation since extended families generally occur only where large numbers of family members are an advantage and members produce more than they individually consume.

## Preeminence of Extended Families

Although Ireland is not particularly suited for extended families, many societies are. Some form of extended family is typical in over one half of all known societies. The obvious question here is: Why are extended families so common? The popularity of extended families is understandable when we realize that most societies are characterized by having "undifferentiated functions." The vital roles of economic provision, status conferring, protection, legal recourse, political power, religion, education, et cetera are all provided by and within the family kin group. There are no other social structures to fill these roles. If the family fails, failure can literally mean death to the family members deprived of the family structure. Consequently being a member of a strong and large family is highly desirable.

Even among societies which typi-

cally do *not* have extended families, the nuclear families still do not live alone. They generally establish their residence among either the wife's or the husband's kin group. In fact, the United States pattern of a young couple marrying and living by themselves happens in less than four percent of all preindustrial societies.

### Love and Arranged Marriages

The preeminence of the extended family helps explain other aspects of cultural diversity, too. Arranged marriage versus free mate choice, for example, does not vary simply according to the whims of a family. The type of mate selection depends on the typical family structure in the society (6,7). American couples are allowed the luxury of making their *own* mate choice since the really severe consequences of a poor decision affect only the married couple (and their children). They have made their marital bed, so to speak, and they are the ones who must lie in it.

In undifferentiated societies, however, the selection of a spouse means the recruitment of a new member for the existing extended family. Since the family fills all the vital roles in the society, the new member's ability to work hard, provide important political alliances, or produce children could have life or death consequences. The mate selection decision becomes very much a *family* decision. It cannot be trusted to the immaturity and emotions of youth.

For this reason, the encouragement of romantic love and the practice of arranged marriage are often mutually exclusive. The anthropologist, Ralph Linton, draws the rather startling conclusion that:

All societies recognize that there are occasional violent, emotional attachments between persons of opposite sex, but our present American culture is practically the only one which has attempted to capitalize these and make them the basis of marriage. Most groups regard them as unfortunate and point out the victims of such attachments as horrible examples (8).

While Linton has probably overstated the case, it is true that romantic love is viewed in most undifferentiated so-

cieties as "a laughable or tragic aberration" (9).

Mate selection is usually a legal contract drawn up between the parents of the couple. The young often have very little to say about it. The fairly common extreme is the contract between two sets of parents for the future marriages of their young or even unborn children. In fact, child betrothal is a practice used specifically to control romantic love (9).

Arranged marriages are usually accompanied by two "contract clauses." The first is known as the "bride-price" which is a substantial payment in money, goods, or labor, designed to compensate the bride's family for investment in raising a daughter during her unproductive years only to lose her when she becomes productive. An example of the bride-price that is readily available to most readers is the Biblical account of Jacob in Genesis 29. Jacob labored seven years for the hand of Rachel only to have her father trick Jacob and substitute his older daughter in the dark of the wedding night. "It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn," explained Laban the next morning. Poor Jacob had to work an additional seven years to have Rachel as a second wife. At least he was able to marry her immediately and provide the seven years of additional labor later—perhaps the first recorded case of consumer credit!

The second common agreement in arranged marriage is a "guarantee clause" known as the leverite or sororate. According to this marriage custom, if the new spouse happened to die, he or she would be replaced with a sibling. Thus, the family's large investment was guaranteed.

One account of the leverite is the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. When Tamar's husband died, her father-in-law ordered his son, Onan, to fulfill the leverite responsibility. Although he married Tamar and slept with her, Onan refused to father children for his deceased brother and "spilled his seed on the ground." According to the Bible account, Onan was slain for this refusal to completely honor the leverite obligation. Tamar's father-in-law had a third son named Shelah. But he was reluctant to order him to perform the

leverite "lest peradventure he die also, as his brethren did." When Tamar realized that there was about to be a "breach of contract" she disguised herself as a prostitute and allowed herself to be propositioned by her father-in-law, Judah. Later, when it became obvious that Tamar was pregnant, Judah ordered her burnt to death for "playing the harlot." But when she proved who the father of the child was, Judah admitted, "She hath been more righteous than I; because I gave her not to Shelah my son." An interesting twist to this story is that one of the sons of this leverite union had a direct descendant named Boaz. This was the same Boaz who also fulfilled a leverite responsibility for the widowed Ruth.

### Polygamous Extension

The well-known marital practice of polygamy is also a form of extended family, except that the extension occurs by marriage rather than across generations. This type of extension tends to occur under the same conditions that favor the development of generationally extended families. The only exception to this is an unusual form of polygamy known as "polyandry."

Polyandry is defined as the marriage of one wife to two or more husbands (usually brothers). It generally occurs in extremely harsh environments where an agricultural living is eked out by dint of hard physical labor. It is difficult for women to produce as much as they consume in this kind of environment and virtually impossible for children. Thus women and children represent an economic liability under these conditions. With traditional polygamy the population flourishes. Polyandry represents the opposite extreme. By having one wife satisfy the sexual needs of several husbands, the number of women and children is radically minimized. This family form is usually accompanied by female infanticide to reduce further the number of nonproductive consumers in the society. It goes without saying that polyandry is extremely rare, having occurred as a minority family form in less than one percent of known world societies.

Even today, polygamous families are

far from extinct in preindustrial societies. Charles Welch III and Paul Glick recently published some interesting statistics about polygamy in contemporary Africa. The latest data available for Togo show that 36 percent of all married men head polygamously extended families. Since polygamy was always reserved for the older and wealthier men in any society, this rate is probably high enough to rival rates of polygamy at any time in history. Welch and Glick point out that in Zaire, "despite a 1955 law to the contrary, the incidence of polygamous males has remained relatively constant—29.3 percent in 1957 and 29.8 percent in 1977" (10).

### Implications of Social Change

Contrast for a moment, the extreme importance of the extended family in undifferentiated societies with the situation in contemporary United States. The current form of the American family is integrally tied to the level of differentiation.

For years, writers have been pointing out that the number of vital roles that the family fills is rapidly declining (11). Day care centers, police, government, the educational system, et cetera, are all filling roles that used to belong solely to the family. The last 10 to 20 years has seen a multiplication of social programs and agencies in the United States. As a result, the role that the family plays in providing economic support is less critical today because there are now backup social structures to care for the physical needs of individuals.

The only family roles of increased importance are social in nature. The role of emotional support appears more important than ever before, and F. Ivan Nye has pointed to the emergence of three new family roles: "therapeutic, recreational, and (male) sexual" (12). These increases in social roles are currently expressed in greater emphasis on a couple's "mutual fulfillment," on marital and parental "companionship," and on divorce for reason of incompatibility. The family is evolving into a primarily social unit.

The decrease in the number of functional roles that the family fills provides a partial explanation for the increase in family forms that *minimize*

family structure. Our differentiated society allows the "luxury" of single-parent families, childless families, and teenage marriage and parenthood. According to one recent estimate, single-parent families now comprise one fourth of all households (13).

But what about family forms that *maximize* family structure? When was the last time we read about increases in family forms such as a renewed interest in polygamy or family corporations?

Polygamy was practiced here in the United States as recently as the turn of the century. Most people are aware that the early Mormon leader, Brigham Young, was a polygamist. Interestingly, the wife of a current leader in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon) is the daughter of a "sororal polygamist"—meaning that her father was married to two sisters. Remembering that polygamy is a type of extended family and given what we have seen about the conditions favorable for the existence of extended families, unless there are extremely radical social, economic, and organizational changes in this society, we may assume that polygamy will not reemerge as a viable form of family life.

Understand that this discussion of changes in family roles is neither a statement of approval nor disapproval. It is intended to point out that families do not live in vacuums. How responsible is it to deliver social services and programs without an awareness of how they impact on the family? How rational is it to study the family without an awareness of how responsive it is to changes in the social structure?

### Implications of Economic Change

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this examination of cultural diversity of families is that the current family form in the United States is strongly affected by changes in economic conditions. As the economy tightens, it becomes increasingly important for *all* family members to produce as much as they consume. In the United States, more than in most other societies, children are extremely unproductive. They stay in school longer

and when their expensive dependency finally ends they tend to marry and move away. No wonder we see a continuing trend toward fewer children and older age of parenthood.

Because it is important that family members produce more than they consume, we see greater and greater numbers of wives and mothers in the work force. Contrary to some popular literature, the majority of them are working because of economic necessity rather than for personal fulfillment or "self-actualization." An unemployed wife is becoming an expensive luxury, indeed.

William Goode outlined some of the reasons that extended families gave way to nuclear families (14). According to Goode, as the United States industrialized, the population became more geographically mobile. Workers had to move to the place of employment rather than to remain on the family land. Family ties became less important as the occupational paths of parents and children started to differ and the "family name" became unimportant in the ability to secure employment. Industrialization brought specialization—(also known as "differentiation of roles"). In short, Goode showed that the extended family was simply not well-suited to the economics of an industrial society.

### Emerging Family Forms

Just as the family adapted to the demands of an industrial economy by reducing in size and complexity, the family now will undoubtedly adapt to the current economic pressures. We can already see some of these changes in the increase of family forms which minimize structure (discussed earlier).

Another speculation involves the recent increase in dual *career* as opposed to single earner or dual *earner* families. Since professional careers demand more geographic mobility than noncareer jobs, it becomes an extremely serious problem for a husband and a wife, who are both employed in professional level occupations, to find suitable employment in the same locale.

One possible solution that is already starting to appear is known as the "commuter marriage." In this marriage style, the husband and wife live

in separate cities—maybe as far apart as Miami and Little Rock or New York and Minneapolis—and visit each other by way of air travel on weekends. If there are children, they either take turns staying with each parent or have the greater stability of residing with only one of the parents. While most couples living in commuter marriages can see advantages to the lifestyle, they generally endorse it unenthusiastically. Harriet Gross, who recently published some interesting interview-based research on commuter marriage, concludes that the commuter couples “are coping with their lifestyle more than enjoying it” (15). She quotes one commuter wife as saying:

I know these things should not be a ‘big deal,’ but it’s hard. Yet I know it’s like how you feel when you’re sick. You don’t want to take the stuff they give you—it tastes bad—but you know it’s good for you.

Commuter marriages may hold very little appeal for most people, but they are an adaptation to the pressures of contemporary society. Comments Ms. Gross:

Two-residence living may be an inevitable outcome of women’s currently more realizable professional aspirations. But it may not be an effortless response until our ideas about sex, marital, and occupational roles catch up with the changes propelling women into careers (15).

Of course, there are other ways that families may adapt to the mobility demands of dual careers. Alvin Toffler, author of *Future Shock* and *The Third Wave*, suggests that it is the permanence of marriage that is the problematic element (16). He believes that marriages of the future will be short-term contracts. Virginia Satir, a well-known family therapist agrees. She advocates a “Statutory Five Year Renewable Contract” marriage after which the contract would “lapse” (17). If a couple wished to continue the marriage, they would have to take active steps to “renew” the contract every five years as opposed to our present system which requires active (and usually painful) steps to terminate it.

If this pattern of multiple marriage does gain wide acceptance, it will tend further to minimize family structure since the greater number of in-law re-

lationships will make extended family contracts more difficult to maintain.

Sequential marriage, of course, is really a variation of polygamy. The only difference between so-called “serial polygamy” and traditional forms of polygamy is that the multiple spouses occur one at a time rather than all together. One is reminded of the impermanence of Nayar marriages. Have we come full-circle?

### Conclusions

The cultural diversity in family form, behavior, and experience may seem incredible. Understanding the range of this variation can move us beyond blind acceptance of the cultural mores which surround us. More than this, such understanding can give direction to our professional exertions. The reader will need to generate his or her own specific strategies for application of the ideas presented in this article. Space limitations prohibit detailed suggestions for all of the many approaches and fields that fall under the domain of “home economics.” Perhaps one example will illustrate the possibilities, however.

It is common practice to blame the rapid changes in the family on families themselves. The belief seems to be that better communication or parenting skills will somehow bring instant family stability. Marriage enrichment seminars, parenting courses, “home start” programs, and marriage and family therapy often have this philosophy as the basic motivation for those leading or those participating. One direct implication of this brief look at cultural diversity in families is that pressures at the societal level play a dramatic role in the expression of family life. As practitioners, teachers, and researchers we need to realize that families are not islands unto themselves but are sometimes forced to react to these pressures. As Leontine Young has put it:

The necessities imposed by distance, the unceasing pulls of career and ambition, the sheer diversity and transience of modern life have brought a measure of artificiality to the effort to maintain a family in a way that was once simply normal. The bonds are there, but people must struggle not to free themselves of

them but to keep them alive (18).

In summary, if home economics is truly the study of the family in its natural and human-built environments, an understanding of the diversity of these environments and their relationship to emerging family forms and processes is essential. This understanding is even more critical for home economists who teach international students, deliver services to ethnic populations, consult businesses or governments in developing countries, or otherwise come into contact with cultural variation in the course of practicing the profession of home economics.

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