

Ties That Bind

The emerging 21st century American family

By Tom W. Smith



Over the last three decades the American family has been undergoing a profound and far-reaching transformation in both structure and values. As a result, it is a much-altered institution.

While still central to American society, marriage plays a less dominant role than it once did. The proportion of adults who have never been married rose from 15% to 23% between 1972 and 1998. Including the divorced, separated, and widowed, three-quarters of adults were married in the early 1970s, but only 56% were by the late-1990s.¹ Why the decline?

Tom W. Smith is director of the General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

First, people are delaying marriage. Between 1960 and 1997 the median age at first marriage rose from 22.8 to 26.8 years for men and from 20.3 to 25.0 years for women.

Second, divorces have increased. The divorce rate more than doubled from 9.2 divorces per 1000 married women in 1960 to 22.6 per 1000 in 1980. The divorce rate slowly declined to 19.8 in 1995, but today it remains more than twice as high as it was in 1960. Even with the recent moderation, the proportion of ever-married adults who have been divorced has doubled, from 17% in 1972 to 34% in 1998.

Third, people are slower to remarry than previously. While most people divorced or widowed before the age of 50 remarry, the length of time between marriages has grown.

Tied in with the delay in age both at first marriage and in remarriage is an increase in the number of unmarried people living together. Cohabitators represented only 1.1% of couples in 1960 and 7.0% in 1997. The rate is still fairly low overall because most cohabitations are short term, typically leading to either a marriage or a break-up within about a year. But living together has become the norm for both men and women, both as their first form of union and after divorces. Where only 7% of women born between 1933 and 1942 first lived with someone in a cohabitation rather than in a marriage, 64% born between 1963 and 1974 did. The trend for men is similar. Among those who have remarried, 50% report having lived with their new spouse before their remarriage.

Besides no longer occupying as prominent a position in people's adult lives as it once did, marriage has undergone changes in terms of its impact on the quality of life. On the one hand, married people are much happier with life in general than unmarried people are. While 40% of the currently married are very happy, the unmarried are much less so. Among the widowed, only 23% say they are very happy; for divorced people the figure is 19%, for the separated 16%, and for the never married 23%. Married people are even happier in their marriages (64% very happy) than they are with life generally (40%).

On the other hand, there has been a small, but real, decline in how happy people are with their marriages, from about 68% very happy in the early 1970s to a low of 60% very happy in the 1994. (Since then a slight rebound in marital happiness has occurred—up to 64% in 1998.)

Even so, people still accord a great deal of importance to the institution of marriage. This is shown by a reluctance to make divorce easier. Only a quarter to a third of the public has favored liberalizing divorce laws over the last three decades, while on average 52% have advocated tougher laws. Twenty-one percent want to keep the laws unchanged. This opposition to easier divorce probably contributed to the levelling-off of the divorce rate in the early 1980s noted above, although it has not led to a general tightening of divorce laws or a notable drop in the divorce rate.

This is not to say people favor trapping couples in failed marriages. In 1994, 47% agreed that "divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can't seem to work out their marriage problems;" 33% disagreed, and 20% neither agreed nor disagreed. Eighty-two percent agreed that married, childless couples who "don't get along" should divorce, and 67% thought that even parents who "don't get along" should not stay together.

Along with the decline of marriage has come a decline in childbearing. In 1957, at the height of the Baby Boom, the fertility rate peaked at 3.65 children per woman. It

then declined rapidly to a rate of 1.75 children in 1975. This was below the "replacement level" of about 2.11 children needed for a population to hold its own through natural increase. The rate then slowly gained ground to 2.0 to 2.1 children in the early 1990s. Likewise, while only 45% of households had no children under 18 living at home in 1972, this climbed to 62% in 1998. Thus, the typical American household currently has no minor children living in it.

At the same time, preference for larger families has dropped. In 1972, 56% thought the ideal number of children was three or more. By 1998 only 39% thought three or more was ideal. However, there was little or no increase in preference for small families. Over the last three decades just 3 to 5% have favored families with one child or none.

During the last generation, childbearing increasingly became disconnected from marriage. In 1960 only 5.3% of births were to unmarried mothers, while by 1996 over 32% of births took place outside of marriage. Recently this long-term rise in non-marital births has levelled off.

The rise in divorce and the decline in fertility and marital births have had a major impact on the types of household in which children are raised. The proportion of adults who are married and have children living at home declined from 45% in 1972 to 26% in 1998, and the percentage of unmarried adults with no children rose from 16% in 1972 to 32% in 1998. By 1998 households with children, the predominant living arrangement till the 1970s, had fallen to third place behind both households with no children and no married couple and those with married couples with no children.

Changes are even more striking from the perspective of who heads the households with children in them (see Figure 1). In 1972 less than 5% of children under age 18 were living in a household with only one adult present. By 1998 this had increased to 18%. Similarly, the proportion of children in the care of two adults who are not currently married, but who had been previously married, rose from less than 4% in 1972 to 9% in 1998.

Conversely, while in 1972, 73% of children were being reared by two parents in an uninterrupted marriage, this fell to 49% in 1996 and was at 52% in 1998. Thus, the norm of the stable, two-parent family was close to becoming the exception rather than the rule for American children.

The ambivalence toward children shown by the decline in the desire for larger families is also indicated by a 1993 question on what people value and consider important. Twenty-four percent said that having children was one of the most important things in life, 38% that it was very important, 19% somewhat important, 11% not too

important, and 8% not at all important. While clearly most people saw having children as personally important, overall it was fourth on the list behind having faith in God, being self-sufficient and not having to depend on others, and being financially secure.

In terms of what children should be taught and how they should be raised, people have become less traditional over time with a shift from emphasizing obedience and parent-center families to valuing autonomy for children. From 1986 to 1998 a majority or plurality of Americans selected thinking for oneself as the most important trait for a child. The proportion mentioning obedience was less than half what it had been previously and was declining further (from about 23% in 1986 to about 18 to 19% in the 1990s). Likewise, approval for the corporal punishment of children declined during the last decade.

But another traditional value, hard work, gained ground, up from 11% in 1986 to 18% in the 1990s. This indicates that the shift from traditional to modern is not as simple as depicted in previous research. While strictness and discipline have given way to a more liberal approach to raising and guiding children, hard work and perhaps other traditional values are growing in importance.

Even as they continue, in their shrinking numbers, to represent the traditional, the families built around intact marriages have also undergone notable transformations. The biggest of these is the alteration in gender roles in general and in the division of responsibilities between

husbands and wives in particular. A traditional perspective placed women in the private sphere of life, centered on running a home and raising a family, while men engaged in the public sphere of earning a living and participating in civic and political events. This has rapidly been replaced by a modern perspective in which there is much less gender-role specialization and women have increasingly been entering the labor force, a change that has wrought great alterations in family life.

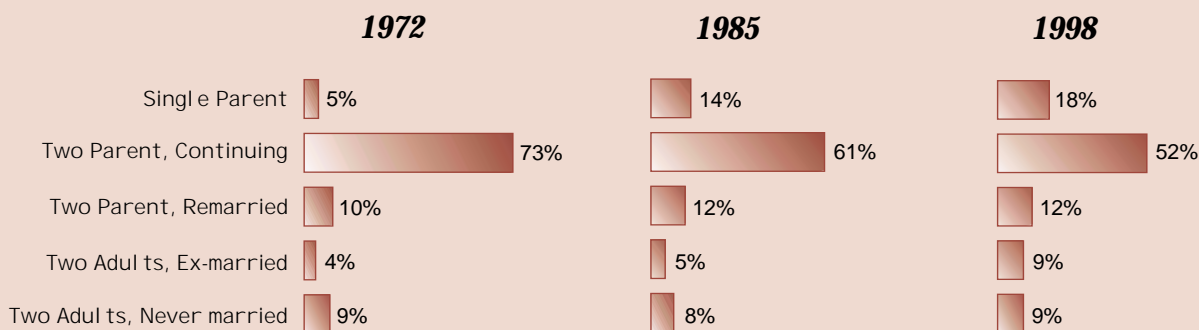
In 1960, 42% of women in the prime working ages (25 to 64) were employed. This grew to 49% in 1970, 60% in 1980, 69% in 1990, and 72% in 1995. Most of this growth came from mothers of children under 18 entering the labor force. Among married couples with children under 18, the proportion of traditional homes with an employed husband and a wife keeping house declined from 60% in 1972 to 27% in 1998 (see Figure 2). Conversely, the modern pattern of both spouses being employed grew from 33% to 67%. Showing little change were households in which only the wife was employed and in which neither spouse worked.

These changes have produced mixed feelings in the public. In 1972 only 67% approved of a wife working even if her husband could support her; in the 1990s, 82 to 84% agreed. Similarly, while 43% in 1977 disagreed that a wife should help her husband's career rather than have one of her own, 81% disagreed by 1998; and while only 34% in 1977 opposed the idea that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family," 62 to 66% disagreed in the

Figure 1

Traditional Two-Parent Families on the Decline

Percent of children in various family types



Note: *Single Parent* is only one adult in household; *Two Parent, Continuing* is married couple, never divorced; *Two Parent, Remarried* is married couple, at least one remarried (unknown if remarriage came before or after children born); *Two Adults, Ex-married* is two or more adults previously, but not currently, married; *Two Adults, Never Married* is two or more adults, never married (this category also includes some complex family structures).

Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey.

1990s. In fact, people increasingly think that both the husband and wife should earn money (67% in 1996)—a good thing, since by 1994, not only were wives contributing more to family income through increased labor force participation; in 23% of dual-earner families, they had higher incomes than their husbands did.

Finally, people have become more convinced that having a working mother does not negatively affect children. In 1977 only 49% felt that a working mother can have just as “warm and secure a relationship with her children” as a mother who does not work; in 1998, 68% agreed. But at the same time most people are still not convinced that mothers of young children should have full-time jobs. In 1994, 85% felt that a wife should work before having children, and 80% favored employment after her youngest child left home. But only 38% endorsed a full-time job after the youngest had started school, and just 12% did so when there was a child under school age. Still, under each condition, approval of mothers working was on the rise.

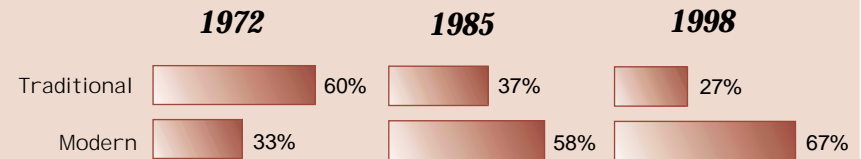
Major changes in family structure and values feed off of each other. Structural changes lead to the reassessment of traditional values and the growth of values more in tune with current conditions. Likewise, changes in values facilitate the development of new forms of social organization and the growth of those forms most consistent with the emerging values. The structural and value changes reinforce one another so that social transformations are sped along and replace older forms and viewpoints. Several prime examples of this mutual process of social change apply to the contemporary American family.

First, the decline in the birth rate and family size parallels a decrease in the ideal family size. Second, the rise in female labor force participation follows along with increased acceptance of women being involved in the public sphere in general and of combining employment with raising children in particular. In turn, the growth in dual-earner families (and the decline in single-earner couples) was accompanied by first acceptance of and then even a preference for families with both parents employed. Third, the climb in divorce and the liberalization of divorce laws went along with public support for the idea that divorce was preferable to continuing failed marriages. Finally, greater tolerance of cohabitation coincided with gains in non-marital births. In brief, changes in structure and values have

Figure 2

Mom and Dad Both Go To Work

Labor force participation of married couples with children under 18



Note: *Traditional* is husband works/wife at home; *Modern* is both work outside home.

Source: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey.

gone hand-in-hand over the last generation to transform the American family in both forms and norms.

And, overall, the shift from traditional to modern family structures and values is likely to continue. This is especially true of the shift to dual-earner couples and egalitarian gender roles, although the impetus towards single-parent families is less certain. The divorce rate has stabilized, albeit at a high level, and non-marital births have stopped rising and may be falling. These factors will tend to curb the continued growth of single-parent families, although they are unlikely to lead to their decline.

Few areas of society have changed as much as the family has over the last generation. Collectively the alterations mark the replacement of traditional family types and family values with the emerging, modern family types and a new set of family values.

As Meng-tzu has noted, “The root of the state is the family,” and the ongoing transplantation of the family has uprooted society in general. Some changes have been good, others bad, and still others both good and bad. But given the breadth and depth of changes in family life, the changes both for the better and the worse have been disruptive. Society has had to readjust to continually evolving structures and new attitudes. It is through this process of structural and value change and adaptation to these changes that the modern, 21st century family is emerging. ●

Endnote

¹Most of the data in this report come from the 1972-1998 General Social Surveys (GSSs) of the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. The GSSs are in-person, full-probability samples of adults living in households in the United States.