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How to cite

KULICH, Clara, BOSAK, Janine. Gender Roles: Family Structures. In: Encyclopedia of Sexual Psychology and Behavior. Shackelford, T.K. (Ed.). Cham : Springer International Publishing, 2023. p. 1–6. doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-08956-5_162-1

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:168204>

Publication DOI: [10.1007/978-3-031-08956-5_162-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08956-5_162-1)

Cite this entry: Kulich, C., Bosak, J. (2023). Gender Roles: Family Structures. In: Shackelford, T.K. (eds) Encyclopedia of Sexual Psychology and Behavior. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08956-5_162-1

Family Structures

Title of Entry: Gender Roles: Family Structures

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Synonyms: N/A

Definition: Family structure refers to relationships at the juncture of biological relatedness, marriage and comparable legal relationships including adoption, and living arrangements.

Introduction

Family structure refers to relationships at the juncture of biological relatedness, marriage, comparable legal relationships including adoption, and living arrangements. Census data provides information on family structure (e.g., US Census Bureau, 2022). Definitions of family can differ between countries, and even from census to census within countries. This approach seeks to categorize, quantify, and measure existing family structures and make comparisons over time. We introduce key concepts and definitions critical for our understanding of families and family structures mainly within a Western and US context. Then, we will discuss family structure referring to biological evolutionary, historical, sociological, and psychological theory and research.

Concepts

The term ‘family’ has been often replaced with ‘household’. However, households can include more than one family, and not all households contain families. The following key definitions are commonly accepted across data sources and are relevant for the discussion of family structures (US Census Bureau, 2022; PEW, 2015): A *household* consists of all people living in a housing unit (e.g., house, apartment, single room), with the householder being the unit owner or renter. A *family household* is a household of two or more people (one of whom is the householder) residing together (without or without children present) related by birth, marriage, or adoption. A *nuclear family* refers to a family whereupon any number of children live with their married biological parents, with many definitions allowing only for full-blood siblings. *Cohabiting families* consist of the biological parent of any children living with at least one different-sex, non-related adult who may or may not be another biological parent. Other examples include *single-parent families*, *same-sex cohabiting/married families* where the parent of any number of children lives with at least one same-sex, non-biologically related adult. *Stepfamilies/ blended families* include households with a stepparent, stepsibling, or half-sibling. Some definitions refer to children residing in the household. Since 2007, studies have expanded their data collection in relation to parent-child relationships. The current population survey (CPS) of the Census Bureau assesses whether children reside with both father and mother, differentiating between biological, step-, and adoptive parents (Kreider, 2008).

The concept of what constitutes a family is subject to change over time. Over recent decades, families in the United States as well as in European countries have undergone a significant transformation leading to diversification of family forms (Doblhammer & Gumà, 2018). While the nuclear family was an unchallenged cultural ideal in Western industrialized countries, it has been slowly replaced with differing social arrangements affected by various social, cultural, and economic changes since the 1960s. Societal changes include fewer and

later marriages, rising divorce followed by remarriage or repartnering, cohabitation; declining fertility rates, and later childbearing (often extra-marital); same-sex relationships/ marriages; and women increasingly participating in the labor force (Cherlin, 2010; Oláh et al., 2018; Widmer & Ganjour, 2017). While marriage rates have declined (particularly among younger Americans), cohabitation has risen from being almost non-existent in the 1960s. From 1995 to 2018 marriage decreased from 58% to 53% whereas cohabitation in US adults increased from 3% to 7% (Horowitz et al., 2019). Cohabiting may be limited in time and thus more recently statistics may reflect whether people have cohabited at any point in their lives (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Regarding children, historically the most common arrangement in the United States consisted of children living with two parents. This trend dropped from 85% in 1968 to 70% in 2020, whereas children living with their mother has doubled from 11% to 21% (Hemez & Washington, 2021). Since the 1960s, societal and economic changes including birth control, the emancipation of women, increased wealth and educational attainments have led to changes in the understanding of the nature of family and fertility in European countries (Fine-Davis, 2017). Important events were registered partnerships for same-sex couples starting in Scandinavian countries in the 1990s legalization of same-sex marriages in several countries in the 2000s (Ganjour & Widmer, 2019), and in all US states in 2015. Although the absolute number of marriages in same-sex couples increased over time, getting married, or having children, is lower for same-sex couples compared to different-sex couples. Differences between race and ethnic groups indicate that White and Asian couples are more likely to marry than African American or Hispanic couples, possibly partially due to differences in socio-economic status (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Scholars observe such demographic trends to understand the nature and implications of such changes within family structures. Developments such as same-sex marriage are still so recent that more time is needed to have sufficient data to analyze trends (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Traditional

demographic indicators (e.g., marriages, divorces) are becoming less informative regarding units called families, causing family scholars to reconsider the concept of family, and how to assess it (Cherlin, 2010).

Studying Family Structure

The study and understanding of family vary across historical periods, and the perspective that is taken in theorizing family relationships, their impact on human behavior and developments in family structure. Strong advocates of *evolutionary explanations* will emphasize the important role of natural selection and reproductive behaviors, contending that reproductive strategies (regarding one's own reproductive success) and nepotistic strategies (favoring relatives to ensure the reproductive success of kin) may affect social behavior (Salmon & Shackelford, 2012). Certain traits are passed on through biological kinship, therefore it is argued that helping is more likely to occur in genetically similar families. In contrast, conflict and abuse are more likely to be observed in families with step-relations due to a lack of genetic relatedness (Buss, 2009). Recent work is preoccupied with decreases in family size, with arguments that, in modern society, parental investment in each child increases, with a great number of children hindering rather than facilitating access to status, prestige, and reproductive success (Mace, 2012).

Historical accounts usually understand the concept of family as a kinship system possibly including close and peripheral members, with different forms of co-residence within a household (Kertzer, 1991). Historically, this may have included biologically unrelated members, such as servants, long-term visitors, or lodgers. Until the 1970s a number of myths existed about what families typically were in the past, including assumptions that industrialization led from larger to smaller size nuclear families (Laslett, 2009). Research on family structure using census data, official documents (marriage settlements, will-makings, property agreements, dowry documents etc.), and qualitative sources (letters, diaries, or

novels) uncovered a diversity of structures in European cultures, rejecting the pre-post industrialization hypothesis. Families and households were analyzed as a function of them being labor units (e.g., family farms), the applied inheritance system, women's ages at marriage, how elders were included in nuclear families etc.; consequently, historians came to better understand what structures families consisted of (Kertzer, 1991). A caveat is that historical analyses of official documents might not reflect the "lived" reality and that qualitative sources might portray only specific classes of society - the literate and possessing (Laslett, 2009). Historical accounts were criticized for predicting societal change when this was only true for (married) high- or middle-class women (e.g., their participation in the workforce), while ignoring the fact that, for a majority of the population (e.g., peasants), women always had worked outside the household (Scott & Tilly, 1975). Economic reasons and well-being drove families in the nineteenth century to send children and young women to work in other households, lands, or factories, integrating instead into these households rather than their biological family.

In *sociology* up until the 1970s a *structural-functionalist approach* pertained, viewing families as (heterosexual) couples living together with their biological offspring with strict division of breadwinner and care-taker roles (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Families have been defined in *theories of (social) practice* by what its members *do* rather than what the family *is* (Morgan, 1996). One of these practices may relate to food, how it is prepared, by whom, and its consumption within the family circle (Brannen, 2017). The recent *configural approach of family diversity* looks into complex networks between individuals considered family members (cf Widmer, 2021). Families are seen as networks of interdependent individuals (Elias, 1978), including diverse power relations, conflict, disparate goals of family members, as well as cooperation, support, and resource sharing within families. Widmer (2021) suggested that "individual members co-construct a feeling of being part of a family 'we' or 'we-ness'"

(p.62). Researchers establish sociograms by asking individuals about their “significant” family members allowing them to describe the network of associated individuals. In this way, it was found that amongst older generations in Switzerland 21% extend the family concept to close friends, while others think of sibling or kinship configurations (Oris et al., 2016). More generally, changes in health, partnership, and economic status in the course of life can impact family relations with variations in conflict and support within family networks (Girardin et al., 2018).

Family Structure Today and Psychological Correlates

Increasingly diverse family structures made sociologists and psychologists question how family structure impacts family members’ psychological, physical health, and economic situation (e.g., Doblhammer & Gumà, 2018). For example, single-mother households tend to be poorer than two-parent households, same-sex households indicate better education and economic status than different-sex households, while female same-sex households tend to be poorer than male ones (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Such findings give a glimpse into the complex sociological dynamics that correlate with different types of family structure. Furthermore, children’s health, criminal activity, or success in later life are objects of study possibly impacted by different family structures (Smock & Schwartz, 2020).

Family-life is subject to transitions across one’s lifespan. When an individual becomes an adult, enters the workforce and starts living alone, they build personal networks independent of the (nuclear) family network (Aeby et al., 2019). This poses challenges to the negotiation between occupational and family identities (Gyberg et al., 2019). Work-life conflict particularly affects the views of family particularly in high-skilled women. In Western countries, China and Japan high-skilled women are shown to refrain from having children (Xian et al., 2021) peaking in the 1980s. However, since the 1990s this drop in birth-rates has slowed down because first-child bearing occurs at later points in life (Beaujouan,

2020). Concurrently, the higher acceptance of same-sex relationships and the institutionalizing of same-sex marriage in some countries changed definitions of family thus contributing to more diverse family structures (Ganjour & Widmer, 2019). Conversely, changes in structure such as the legalizing of same-sex marriage in the US led to a doubled decrease of antigay attitudes (Ofosu et al., 2019).

Sociologists and psychologists further focus on how family structure is related to individuals' gender-role attitudes. Certain values and social norms impact individuals' behaviors leading to varying definitions and structures of family. Simultaneously, being socialized in a specific family model also affects values about what family should look like and the division of roles. *Learning theory* and research indicate children develop their gender roles and attitudes through social learning in different contexts (family, peers, social media) particularly through modelling their behavior and attitudes after their same-sex parent (Lytton & Romney, 1991). Adults growing up with single mothers favored political power for women more strongly, whereas those who grew up in two-parent families held similar traditional gender-role attitudes (Kiecolt et al., 2019). Individuals raised by single mothers, compared to those raised in intact two-parent families, reported more masculine characteristics with a low level of feminine characteristics for themselves, whereas females in intact two-parent families, compared to females in mother-headed one-parent families, viewed themselves as androgenous – that is high in both masculine and feminine characteristics (Slavkin & Stright, 2000). Research further showed that biological parents' gender ideologies were highly predictive of children's gender ideologies. This relationship was also found for step-parents and stepchildren, but only when the relationship was of high quality (Carlson & Knoester, 2011). Overall, sociological research shows that, over time, gender role attitudes have become less traditional, and this to a larger degree in women than in men (Fine-Davis, 2017).

Conclusion

Family is traditionally understood as being linked to kinship and may include nuclear or extended families, or households. Different forms of smaller and larger configurations can be found across history accounts and cultures. The diversification of family structures in terms of the legal context (cf. marriage of same-sex couples) and consideration of people's own definitions of family (sociograms of family network) go beyond traditional views, questioning the definition and assessment of family structure. Finally, education, socio-economic status, health, and importance of gender role attitudes have been considered as antecedents of observed family structure, with their consequences showing the circular causal influences between what families look like and how individuals think and behave.

Cross-References

Buss, David

Family structures

Family structures and relationship configurations

Sex

Sex differences

Gender roles

Learning

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