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Families of America

Variations on a Theme

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SOCIOLOGISTS have noted that the dynamic is the real and the static is the abnormal. No institution better illustrates this than the American family. As an institution it has maintained its stability. How it performs its basic functions and what functions it now encompasses is a study of change within a context of durability.

That the family is responsible for the conception, birth, and physical survival of the child is taken for granted. Socialization of the child and the development of his healthy personality remain among its major concerns. In addition, it has come to be recognized that the family is responsible not only for children and their development, but also for the stability of adult family members.¹ These functions are accomplished in diverse family structures which differ almost as much as the computer and "pencil figuring."

THE UNIVERSE OF FAMILIES

The family has undergone modification and extension even in conception of what it is. No longer is this institution considered only as an agglomeration of parents, their children, maternal and paternal grandparents in easy reach, and relatives in great variety and nearby residence. Today there are small unitary families of biological origin as well as those of social composition. Mothers, fathers, and their children often live in houses separate, indeed miles, from anyone related to them. These young and small families


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Families of older persons, many of whose children have married and moved, are living in homes as isolated and separated as those of their offspring. Often these elders, sometimes widowed, sometimes still together, are concentrated in less desirable houses and areas—both rural and urban—because of limited resources. For many, their dependence has had to be transferred from sons and daughters to social agencies and their services. The growing number of resident centers for elders in public and private housing complexes and nursing and convalescent homes attest to this separation of generations in families. Even “golden age” clubs and other such organizations speak of the isolation of elders from their offspring and relatives.

When two or more persons choose to establish a home together, operate as a family unit, share in its financing, and bring into it the warmth and companionship of friends and relatives of each participant, they form what may be called a social family. Many lone women and a very few men maintain a home and bring into it the affectional aspects of their lives which distinguish a place of residence from a home.

Social families of this day are a unique contribution of urban and technological culture, and are composed largely of employed women. Less often and for shorter duration similar arrangements are entered into by men, usually prior to their marriages. Some will insist that these households should not be considered as “families” in any sense. However, they do serve the function of a family in the establishment of a household and they do offer the stabilization of personality through consistent adult companionship.

As Ernest W. Burgess pointed out many years ago, the higher rates of mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, and of other forms of personal disorganization are most often found among those relatively few persons who live outside a family setting, biological or social, in an “area of furnished rooms” where they are unknown and unloved.

The United States is, in truth, a family centered culture. Families are changing in their structure and in their functions, to be sure, but the majority of persons do live in homes in some variation of family groups. As for the some 60 million children under 18 years of age in the nation, over 97 per cent live with their parents, one or both, or
with relatives who serve as surrogate parents. Each of these adults and their children, as well as the mature persons whose home life is of purely social origin, make up the universe of modern "homemakers" in a very real sense. Education for homemaking, therefore, is a near universal need. Moreover, such education, consciously designed and conscientiously offered, might even serve to cut down on the number of persons who suffer some form of social disorganization because they have never fully understood the positive contribution of family life to their own emotional-social security.

**Urban Culture and Family Adaptation**

Deterioration and disintegration in family life have too often been equated with changes in structure and function of the institution of the family. Indeed, much of what has been described in these "D's of doom" is nothing more than necessary adaptation within an institution for its survival in a culture now predominantly urban and technological rather than rural and agrarian.

Well over 70 per cent of the people of the nation reside in urban communities with a population of 2500 or over. However, this is not the most telling "urbanization" of contemporary family life. Cosmopolitan ways of living—standards, values, practices and even dress—have come to almost all families in this country whether their addresses are still rural routes or city streets. Moreover, urbanization in family life style and functioning has its source in the same forces that have made the United States the technological giant of the world—the application of science to production and to the life of man. Finding the solution of problems of change in "going back to the simple life" is not only impossible but ridiculous. Instead, the major imperative in every facet of education today is to get on with the business of teaching persons to live well in urban culture which their own imagination and creativity have wrought.

New lessons for living in modern society are as important on the intellectual-emotional level as they are in production and use of

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goods. Conveniences of technology are as available in country homes as they are in the city if and when they can be afforded in either situation. Both rural and urban segments of the population face the fact of mobility, of closeness of living with others, of the impact of stress, of rapid change, of the necessity of learning to live with diversity and difference, of the imperative for a common value structure which lends stability not only to the person but also to his nation.

No amount of wishful thinking or rationalization can eliminate the fact that this kind of learning for family living cannot be had in its entirety in the home at the feet of fathers and mothers. Nor can it be left to absorption of family practices. The very quantity of information available and the rapid accumulation of new knowledge applicable to personal and family living make it essential that every resource of education be used so that youth and adults may improve their families and their personal living. Also, they must be able to acquire the skills and vocabulary for learning to continue to learn what they need to know about themselves and their family members, young or older.  

**Subcultures and Their Families**

Families in the various subcultures in the United States are not alike either in the way they live in their homes and rear their children or in their values, goals, and ideals. However, as Howard W. Odum and Harry E. Moore have well documented in *American Regionalism,* this very diversity in regions and in peoples has been the strength of the nation. But strength from accommodation of differences does run out for one special subcultural group which has been described as the "rejects of an affluent society," the families in the culture of poverty.  

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*For an excellent discussion of some of the more important problems of urban living see, Leonard J. Duhl, *The Urban Condition,* New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1963, and especially the fine introductory statement of its author, pp. vii-xiii.


The Most Privileged

Perhaps it would be well to begin with the most, rather than the least, privileged families in the nation. These have been pointed out by Gans⁶ as those in the upper middle class of professional and managerial occupations whose ways of life offer not only the highest incomes in the nation, but opportunities for richer and more diverse experiences. Moreover, they have a greater range of choices of behavior and improved capacity to handle problems of a changing society. Upper middle class families do center their concern and interest on their members, but each one, child or adult, is looked upon as a personality in his own right. Relationships are geared to the development of family members as individuals of potential and of basic worth rather than as integral components of the family. The person is paramount rather than the family. As the Texas Cooperative Youth Study revealed in its examination of the responses of some 13,000 high school youth, these are the families whose teenagers have the most effective relationships with their world, their parents, their schools, and their peers, and also have healthy conceptions of themselves.⁷

Mothers in these households are fully occupied. They may either be employed in professions themselves—many are teachers, doctors, lawyers, social workers, and the like—or they may be a part of the large corps of "professional volunteers" who serve in a wide range of activities for community betterment. These are also the families in which fathers have assumed radically different roles from their grandfathers within their own homes and as parents. Here is the egalitarian family with a relationship of companionship, of mutual responsibility, of sharing in creating a home though the women carry a major assignment in the operation of the household. Here also are parents with goals and ambitions for their children and standards for their accomplishment which often serve not only as motivation for their youngsters but also as the sources of stress in childhood and youth.

⁷ Bernice Milburn Moore and Wayne H. Holtzman, Tomorrow’s Parents, Austin, Texas, The University of Texas Press, for December 1964 release. For a full discussion of the impact of education of parents on their adolescent sons and daughters, see Chapter XIII, "The Case for the Educated Parent."
Again, these parents—and now their children—were the “better students” and the leaders in high school. They—as are their own children—were college-bound and emphasized the academic in their studies. Some may have taken time out for homemaking education as an elective. Others, both boys and girls, may have had courses in family living which included discussions of the dynamics of human behavior, personal and family relations, and the obligations and responsibilities of parenthood. But it is safe to guess that their number was minimal.

However, it must not be forgotten that these are the parents whose lives are complicated and complex in their demands both at home and in the community. They, in truth, are those who need exceptional skills and capacities to carry their family and social roles with efficiency. They are the ones who cannot waste time through inefficiency in home management and ineffectiveness in family relationships. Much can be gained by young women for freeing of time through operational proficiency in their home because of planned instruction in classroom and laboratory in time and money management, in child rearing in all of its aspects and especially in its mental health implications, in the intricacies of personal and family relationships within the family and in the community.

Perhaps it is not too much to hope that in a future day, high school boys at this same socio-economic level will have the opportunity to become acquainted with what the behavioral sciences have to offer them in definition of their new family roles, including a more adequate conception of masculinity, of their own responsibilities and opportunities in parenthood, and in their major share in the emotional stability of their wives. Also, in high school both boys and girls can make time and should have time to attain an objective knowledge of values and of fundamental concepts of man-woman relationships which will stand them in good stead in building security into their marriages. Instead of being considered unnecessary, or even unimportant, for young persons of this subculture, formalized education for family living should be recognized as vital for their own wellbeing and for the healthy development of their children.

Middle Class America

For the great middle class in American society, the largest in number and the subculture whose values are predominant, family life is
doubly significant. While the upper class families find satisfaction in and place great importance upon their families, the middle class family is distinctly child-centered. The broader society, the community and its activities take secondary place to the nuclear family itself. It is the family that has paramount emphasis, not the family as a vehicle for personality development. As Gans pointed out, these persons gain most of their social and emotional satisfaction within the home and among family members, not from the broader outside world. Friends are those who share common interests in their own families and derive their own pleasures from such concentration.\(^8\)

These men and women include the myriad of parents who devote themselves to Little Leagues, Boy Scouts, YM and YWCA, to church youth activities and the like, who travel together in family groups, who camp out, who are church and Sunday school participants, who furnish the power in parent-teacher organizations, who read and seek information concerning improvement of their homes and families in magazines, in study groups, and in discussions over coffee. They are the residents of suburbia and of settled neighborhoods. Their children are in school and will stay in school in order that their sons may be educated for their careers and their daughters for their roles as mothers and homemakers.

These are also the families from which come the majority of women who are employed before their children are born and who go back to work in their middle years so that family income may be enhanced and their children can go to college. These women do not work as “career women” or as professionals but to provide what the income of their husband will not cover for their children. Men in this group are high school graduates and more. They are participating parents, though many still carry some residue as the authoritarian head of the family. Here is the group of families where pressure is exerted for children to “get ahead” and it is also from this group that new members of the professional class will emerge.

Education for family living among persons of this group carries a double-barreled implication. Since basic gratification for family members is derived from home life itself, then persons who will be marriage partners and parents in such a setting need a background of information and of experience which will make family life not only more satisfying but also stimulating. Women in this group

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find their fundamental creativity within their homes and in child rearing. Without basic knowledge and equipment for this thoroughly worthy career, frustration and disappointment in their roles may result. This is a real possibility when college education has been a part of their training.

Men in this subculture have long been considered "guests in their own homes" as Henry A. Bowman, sociologist, has described them. With earning as a part of the shared experience of their wives prior to the birth of children, and in the teen years of their offspring, these men are having to assume a more active share in the actual operation of their households as well as in the rearing of their children.

Here again, absorption from adults of the past is not enough for either sex. Problems of management of time and money, of child rearing, of basic mental and physical health, of leisure and recreation, of family relationships as well as of skills for home operation are of paramount importance both for family members themselves and as a source of creativity and productivity in life. Women do carry the major roles of home managers and operators, but their husbands too, need the essential knowledge to be partners in this family centered enterprise. The universality of high school education for the middle class group indicates these years as those best adapted for the development of basic understanding and acquisition of knowledge concerning the family as a paramount institution, factors contributing to marriage stability, the processes of child rearing, the mental health aspects of the components necessary for satisfying relationships, and stabilization of personalities of all ages in the family.

Since women in the middle class are basically homemakers, even if they may be wage earners at various stages in their lives, they are among those who may profit most from home economics education both for family consumption and as a source of possible employment.

Working Class Families

Working class families in the United States more nearly perpetuate the older agrarian patterns of relationships of the extended family. They live out their lives with relatives, and often they sacrifice their own security in time of family crisis, investing all they have to meet the needs of others, who, in turn, will reciprocate.
To members of this subculture the outside world is foreign and often considered hostile. Schools were not a satisfying experience for most of them and are likely to be lumped with other facets of the hostile outside. Children are not urged to stay in school. They go because they must. Education for this group lasts only long enough to develop necessary skills to earn a living for the family. It holds within it neither the connotation of advancement through success in work nor of basic satisfaction through production in employment. Certainly it does not carry the implication of personal enhancement.

Husbands and wives know nothing of team effort. They live separate lives. Masculinity is defined in terms of aggressiveness, of male companions, of little association with children, and of no sense of joint responsibility in parenthood or homemaking. Their women are often lonely. They exhibit problems in emotional control. As Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel have vividly described in *The Workingman’s Wife,* they vicariously share in the life crises of others through radio and television “soap operas” where acting out emotional stress is dramatized. If they read at all, they find companionship in the magazines which purport to recount “true experiences.” Few of them participate in any kind of community activity save perhaps church attendance in a neighborhood setting.

Children in this subculture are not considered individuals in their own right, with potentialities for development, but as necessary accompaniments of marriage. When they are infants, they are treated as “dolls to be dressed” rather than as children to be taught and developed. These youngsters, so closely associated with their mothers and observers of their aggressive fathers, often have problems of emotional control themselves. They tend to fight out their feelings rather than to symbolize them as do children of other subcultures.

Many of the girls from these families when they do get as far as high school, enroll in homemaking education. As one school superintendent from far West Texas viewed this fact, he considered it his “secret weapon” against dropouts among girls. He had developed in his homemaking division a superior teaching staff who understood the vastness of need among girls of this group. They

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set about the task of not only developing necessary skills for home living among their students, but also establishing a new set of attitudes and values related to family life. As Thomas Gladwin has written in “Strategies in Delinquency Prevention,” satisfying goals can be established by which to live in families. Transmitting of middle class values from teachers of homemaking is perhaps a major contribution they make to these future mothers and homemakers. Students from these backgrounds have to begin with action and move into concepts. They do not come from a verbal world. But they do understand the acquisition of skills. Skills can lead to the application of the theory and values back of them to patterns of living and of thinking.

Real tragedy exists in that education for boys is not a regular part of the high school program of homemaking education. Perhaps no group, save those in the culture of poverty, need a total revamping of their conceptions of themselves, their male roles, and their relationships to their wives and children more than do these youth. Yet, little or no opportunity is available for them. Little or no experimentation has been undertaken to develop a feasible approach to this necessary area of learning for them. Until both boys and girls of this socio-cultural group come to have a common meeting ground on what constitutes satisfying family life and effective relationships of men and women in homemaking, little or no progress can be made in changing basic family life for this subculture.

Since girls from this group are enrolled in homemaking in fairly large numbers and since earning for many of them is an imperative for economic survival of the family, occupations growing out of their high school courses in home economics offer opportunity for earning as well as for improvement in their role as homemaker-mother. From these young persons can come child care aides, nursing home assistants, housekeeper-companions for the elderly, nurses' aides, employees for food services and clothing concerns, and members of a vast variety of other service occupations. Again, this carries dual value. As these young girls learn to earn, they also learn to live, or vice versa. Both important ends are served at the same time.

The Culture of Poverty

Last, but certainly not least, for consideration is the subculture of poverty. Persons in this subculture are estimated to number

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12 Duhl, The Urban Condition, Chapter 20, pp. 267-274.
between 32 and 50 million with 11 million children among them. Eight million are over 65 years of age. Almost six and a half million are non-white, and eight million are women who head households. They are the under-educated, the unemployed, the unlovely and the unloved in a culture of prosperity and opportunity. They are the parents of the youth who are described by Olin and Cloward in their *Delinquency and Opportunity*. Youngsters from these families have no opportunity at all to move up and out of the bondage of deprivation save through other institutions than the family. The schools are facing, and do face, a major role in the prevention of another generation of economically submerged family heads. These youngsters have no other hope.

The President's Task Force on Job Opportunities for Women has planned to attack the general problem of lack of even basic education among these young girls and women through preparation for marriage, child rearing, and homemaking. As one of the leaders described this approach to a major problem of cultural deprivation, fundamental communication skills will come from "kitchen reading and clothing computation." Their aim in schools, or in new centers for education of those youth from the culture of poverty, will be to prepare young women, and hopefully young men, for a new style of life, a different pattern of home living, a renewed entrance into a culture of promise for the children and their children's children. Again, here are imperative needs for opportunities for learning to live and learning to earn.

**IN SUMMARY**

Many educators in secondary schools or colleges argue against education for homemaking and family living. Contentions and their refutations include: (1) Not enough is known to teach about marriage, child rearing, and family life. *More research is needed but valid information is abundant.* (2) Education should be confined to fundamentals. *What are fundamentals? What can be more fundamental than the family?* (3) The curriculum is full. *Facts and theories concerning man are taught from many points of view. Why the conspicuous absence of instruction for home and family life?* (4) Qualified teachers are not available. *This may have been true when home economists were technologists. Today they are applied*

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scientists educated in aspects of behavioral, life, and physical sciences relevant to the family and the home. (5) Family education is the responsibility of the parents. So it is; but schools share in the responsibility to teach what science and technology have to offer families. (6) Courses of this nature contribute to early marriage. A noted sociologist whose field of teaching is marriage and the family, Dr. Henry A. Bowman, categorically denies this, “Experience proves quite the opposite.”

Families of this nation differ widely and do have a vast variety of needs. But families in every subculture are forever. Through them infants become persons; culture is transmitted from generation to generation; and the ongoing of life is assured. What the quality of life will be depends in no small measure on how schools assume their responsibilities for making families more effective through education relevant to all and at the same time adapted to each subculture and its needs. Indeed, diversity is held together through common strengths.

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