The Family Structure

In the mid-twentieth century, the ideal family was considered to be a married man and woman, committed to each other for life, and their children – the heterosexual nuclear family – where men were the income earners and women were homemakers (Adams 1997; Bradbury 2005). Underpinning this ideal was the assumption that couples married for love, that parents and children loved each other and accepted responsibility for each others' care, and that families were the main, if not the only, relationships in which people could find emotional security (Luhmann 1986). As Fox with Yiu notes (2009:186-7)

Men of all classes, as husbands and fathers, typically engaged in income-generating work, either by producing for the market (for example, by farming or fishing), by running businesses, or by working for wages. Most women, as wives and mothers, devoted themselves to running their homes and caring for their families. In 1951, only 9.6% of married women were in the paid labour force and women were just 22% of the total labour force (Leacy 1965:107-23). The higher and more secure the man's income relative to household costs, the easier it was for the family to conform to that idealized division of labour, although doing so left women vulnerable to economic and social dependence on their husbands and undermined their ability to participate in social and public life. Where family incomes were more precarious, women were under pressure to take up income-generating work and risk being labelled as changing families, new understandings | 3 j u n e 2 0 1 1 bad mothers (Little 1998, Wall 2009:95). This ideal also imposed responsibilities on men to secure an income adequate to support a family and undermined men's capacity to be involved in child care and other household labour.

Just as the heterosexual nuclear family form predominated, most people shared a similar family life course. Typically, young adults lived with their parents until marrying and setting up an independent household. For men, securing income-generating work was a necessary precondition to marriage. For women, marriage typically meant giving up paid work. Married couples were expected to have children; having a child outside of marriage was socially unacceptable in most communities. Couples typically remained married until death; divorce was hard to get and carried a heavy social stigma. In their old age, parents expected their children, especially daughters, to care for them. In the 1950s, this family pattern was widespread (Wilson 2009) and came to represent a cultural ideal or ideology that thoroughly permeated society, was embedded in laws and public policies, and taken for granted in popular culture. This ideal informed everything from housing design and urban planning to education policy.2 The nuclear family model came to be seen as the 'natural' family form and 'normal' adult life was expected to conform to dominant family life course patterns (Adams 1997). Today, for some, it represents a lost ideal that needs to be revitalised (Gairdner1992); for others, it is an imaginary ideal that never was (Coontz 1992).

Changes to the Family Structure

Some activists have explicitly contested the privileging of this family form. Gays, lesbians, intersex and transgendered people have fought for legal and social recognition of same-sex marriages, for the right to have and adopt children (Gavigan 1995), and for recognition that having same-sex parents, in and of itself, has no negative effects on children and offers some

benefits (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Waves of immigrants and refugees and Aboriginal peoples have lobbied for recognition of other family and household forms, usually based on wider groups of kin (Hathaway 1994a; 1994b; Arat-Koc 2006). The feminist movement has won formal equality rights for women and actual improvements in many aspects of women's lives (Prentice et al. 1998). New reproductive technologies and the successful struggle to decriminalise abortion have given women the possibility of having sex with men without the fear of unwanted pregnancies and have made it possible for women to choose if, when, and how many children they have. At the same time, women's increased labour market participation began to challenge sex/gender divisions of labour in both the home and the work place (Luxton and Corman 2001:58-60).

Changing demographic patterns have also altered family life in a number of important ways. Women are delaying child bearing and having fewer children than earlier generations. As a result, more children are growing up without siblings. Separation and divorce and subsequent new relationships produce "blended families" in which the adult partners may parent step-children who live with another parent part-time, while children have multiple parents and siblings who do not all have the same parents. At the same time, both women and men are living longer. These changes mean that most parents spend less of their lives as active parents than previous generations and couples may spend many years living alone together after their children leave home. As family size gets smaller, and more seniors live longer, more frail seniors do not have children to look after them.

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