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## Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry

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### Family Diversity (2005)

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#### Basic Concepts and Definitions

When we talk about "family" in organizations or in work-family research, we conceptualize and measure it in ways that imply our default definition of family. Most often, this definition is spouse and children. Explicit in this definition is the notion that members must be related by a legally recognized marriage, or by birth or adoption. Yet, many families do not fit this definition and are therefore left out of much of the discussion of work-family. In addition, families differ by many more variables than the marital status of the adults in the family and the numbers and ages of children. In this entry, I will review concepts and measures of family to point out issues of family diversity that arise in organizations and in work-family research. The word family as we use it in most western cultures derives from the Latin *familia*, which originally meant household, including kin and servants of the householder (Mish, 1993). Implicit in this original definition are some of the concepts that still cause confusion when talking about or measuring families. *Familia* consists of four important interrelated but separate concepts, kin (those related by blood or legal ties), non-kin (those not related by blood or legal ties, but perhaps by dependency or duty), household (those who live together, whether kin or non-kin) and the notion of the householder or "head of household."

In most work-family research in the 1970s through the 1990s, the notions of household and kin defined family. A review of the use of the word family in the work-family literature reveals that the common understanding of family in the U.S. is based on the model of a monogamous patriarchal family headed by a man permanently married to his wife and living with her and their children; generally the man is the householder in this implicit definition of the nuclear family, and the notion of non-kin has been dropped (Rothausen, 1999). It is important to note that the idealization of this family type led to it being given the label "traditional" rather than the more descriptive label "patriarchal nuclear." There are debates as to just how traditional this type of family is in the U.S., just how prevalent it ever was, and for whom. I will refer to this type of family as the "assumed normal" family in this article.

#### Importance of the Topic to Work-Family Studies

Measures of the assumed normal family were developed and used that have caused the exclusion of some families and the exclusion of important information about families. For example, Cohen (2002) found that part of the reason for the recent findings that the marriage premium men benefit from is

decreasing is that cohabitating couples were included in the unmarried rather than the married category. Including cohabitating heterosexual couples, a different form of family, in the analysis led him to the conclusion that the premium is not decreasing as much as previous studies claimed.

Although a small group of researchers in family studies have explored family diversity for decades, more recently increasing attention has been paid to family diversity in the work-family area and in organizations. Discussion has focused both on whether the assumed normal family ever reflected people's experiences of family, and on how recent social shifts may have changed this definition.

Family diversity, however, can mean many different things. Some of the different dimensions of this topic include demographic diversity (e.g., socio-economic), cultural-racial diversity, diversity of family structures (e.g., single-parent, gay, grandparent-head-of-household), diversity of beliefs and norms, diversity across the life course, and diversity of particular populations (e.g., families with members who have special needs). Some of these aspects of diversity will be addressed here, but a thorough treatment of all of them is beyond the scope of this entry.

### **State of the Body of Knowledge**

*Levels of diversity.* When talking about family diversity, three levels of analysis become important. Diversity within families is differences between family members. For example, one family may consist of all African Americans from Detroit, whereas another family may consist of one African American from Detroit and two Danes of Asian ancestry. These families may have different levels of internal diversity. Important dimensions of diversity within families include, but are not limited to, race, ethnic origin, skin color, sex, gender, physical disability, mental disability, sexual preference, religion, and cultural origin. In this sense, a gay couple has less diversity than a heterosexual couple, all else being equal.

Diversity *between* families is what we generally mean when talking about family diversity, and it is the focus of this article. Diversity between families refers to diversity between family structures and circumstances. For example, one family may consist of two lesbians who are not married living with the elderly parent of one of them, whereas another family may consist of a heterosexual married couple living with three children, one from his previous marriage, one from hers, and one that is both theirs biologically. In addition to structure, circumstances may be a source of diversity. Families with the same structure, for example all heterosexual families with two children and married parents, may differ in patterned ways due to differences in their level of poverty or wealth or by race or culture.

Finally, there are differences in the assumed normal form of family across cultures and subcultures in the world. For example, in China the assumed normal family is a stem family that includes three or more generations. Within the United States, the focus of this article, many subcultures have been understudied. For example, Native American families come from a variety of distinct tribes and cultures,

yet may share some common elements in the ways of blending work and caregiving in the family and the tribe, but there is a dearth of research on this (LaFromboise, Heyle, & Ozer, 1990).

Class and race can also play roles in differing norms for family structures. It has been noted that lower income Black family structure changes precede the same changes for the dominant U.S. culture. However, some assumed norms are not normal; just as there is an “assumed normal” family that may not be at all the norm, so too there are stereotypes of families based on race or class that are inaccurate. McAdoo (1997) points out that Black families are often stereotyped by negatives despite the diversity of Black families, and that within the field of scholars studying Black families, there is disagreement about whether there is significant difference between Black American families and other American families.

Some of the diversity between families in any country may be due to these different cultural and subcultural patterns and norms. For example, McAdoo (1997) points out that many scholars of Black families argue that African American families have certain common elements that are different from other families due to factors such as poverty, the effects of slavery, or common African cultural descent. Another example is that within the U.S., children in immigrant families may have different experiences in their families than do non-immigrant children.

It should be noted here that family is also one element or facet of diversity in discussions of diversity in organizations, along with other elements such as race, sex, and religion. This becomes important in that one’s experience of family is affected by race, class or socioeconomic status, sex, sexual orientation, gender, age, and other diversity characteristics.

*Diversity between families in the U.S.* In a review of research between the 1960s and the 1990s, Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) conclude that there is increasing societal tolerance toward a diversity of personal and family behaviors and types, and that at the same time marriage remains important in our culture with a large proportion of the population of youth planning on marriage and family for their futures. Thus, the definition of family as those living together and tied by marriage, birth, or adoption will likely remain with us.

However, there is increasing recognition and study of other types of families as well, and these definitions bring back notions from *familia*. In this recent work, the notion of family is often expanded to include individuals, either living together or not, who are tied by not only marriage, birth, and adoption, but also by dependence, obligation or duty, love, caring, or cooperation (Rothausen, 1999). In some literatures, this is called the affiliative family or the wider family. These definitions are less restrictive and legalistic, and more inclusive and functional in their approach.

Another complicating factor in studying families is their fluidity. We may often think of families as well defined and relatively static, but as Donald Hernandez (1992, 1993) points out, families are continuously ending and being replaced by new families; eight percent of two-parent and 23% of mother-child(ren)

families that existed during a typical year in the mid-1980s no longer existed two years later. The latter households were replaced by new two-parent families in the case of remarriage, or by joining an existing household such as the mothers' parents.

The following section reviews some of the important expansions from the assumed normal family in the U.S., organized by the four dimensions of *familia*, householder, household, kin, and non-kin members.

*Householder.* The "householder" notion remains in the assumed normal family. However, more work-family researchers recognize families in which there is no primary householder. This includes studies of "single," "single parent," "dual career," and "two-parent" families. Single people living on their own are a growing demographic. In addition, there are more single-parent households. In 1997, 28% of all families were single-parent families, more than doubling the proportion in 1970. 82% of these households were headed by women. In 1994, 35% of all first births occurred outside of a marital relationship, up from 17% in 1969 (Leslie & Morton, 2001).

Poverty plays a role in the breakup of two-parent families. Contrary to popular rhetoric, Donald Hernandez (1992, 1993) found that most mother-child families in poverty were originally part of two-parent families that were already in poverty. Poor two-parent families were more than twice as likely to break up as those with income above the poverty line in the 1980s.

As gender roles have changed in the last forty years, the notion of heterosexual couples in which the male is the "householder" has blurred. Researchers have studied couples who are trying for androgyny or equality of roles. Often these couples are called "dual career" couples, or if children are present, "two-parent families." This model of family may be a new ideal that is in actual fact uncommon. Although women have taken on many workplace roles, they continue to do the majority of household work and dependent care as well (Williams, 2000).

*Household.* Both household and family have been used in work-family research; often included are differences between family households and non-family households. The proportion of all households that were non-family households grew from 19% to 30% between 1970 and 1998. Part of this growth is due to more households of one person, but some is also due to other family structures such as cohabitating adults, either heterosexual or homosexual (Leslie & Morton, 2001), and households in transition, as mentioned in the previous section.

*Kin.* Kin have common ancestry, or primarily blood and legal ties. These ties come in a variety of forms beyond the assumed normal family ties. For example, stepfamilies are increasingly common, in which members of the household have legal ties because the household consists of a married couple, as does

the assumed normal family, however the children in these households may be the child of one marriage partner but not the other. Serial monogamy and remarriage may be becoming the norm in U.S. society, where approximately half of all marriages eventually dissolve. Another example of kin diversity is adoption. Forty years ago adoptions were often invisible because most couples adopted children with a common ethnic ancestry. However, more cross-race adoptions are now occurring, leading to the rise of an adoption movement.

Kin can also include the elderly. Although the elderly have always been cared for in part by their children or other younger people, they have often not been included in measures of family or dependents. Bengtson (2001) argues that the extended family is growing in importance in American society and that family relationships across several generations are becoming increasingly diverse in structure. Increasing attention is now being paid to a generation of people who had their children later in life and are concurrently caring for both their own children and their own elderly parents. These elderly may be part of the household or not.

Another form of kin families that often is overlooked in discussions and measures of family in work-family are multi-generation households in which grandparents or great-grandparents are involved. Skipped generation families are families in which grandparents raise children and parents are absent from the household. This is one area in which different subcultures may have different norms. Burr and Mutchler (1999) note that the extent of filial responsibility and extended-family household configurations may differ by race, ethnicity, or both.

*Non-kin.* It is this fourth part of the original *familia* that has generated the most heated discussion. The original notion of non-kin servants has been replaced by a rich variety of relationships between individuals who consider each other *de facto* family, but are not related legally, and who may live together without hierarchy. One major category of mixed kin and non-kin families is cohabiting heterosexual couples with and without children. A majority of marriageable age adults will spend some time in a cohabiting relationship, and about 40% of children will spend some time in a cohabiting household. Yet, these families may be ignored in research on families, including work-family research (see Cohen, 2002).

Cohabiting homosexual couples, with and without children, are another category of mixed kin and non-kin families. The collection of census data has made it difficult to measure trends in the proportion of gay couples living together. However, recent data indicates that these couples are part of the increase in non-family households measured in the census data. One study of gay and lesbian couples that cohabitate found that 22% of partnered lesbian households and 5% of gay male partnered households include children (reviewed in Leslie & Morton, 2001).

Other non-kin that can function as family are child-care workers. Some child-care workers (e.g., nannies, governesses) may live with the family in the household. Even when they do not, the child-care worker

performs much of the child-care work previously done by families and may seem like family to the child. Hernandez (1995) argues that in the past 55 years, the proportion of children under six living in families with two wage earners or a single working parent has escalated, resulting in less parental time available for child care.

Open relationships, polyamory, and communes are other examples of non-kin families. Open relationships and polyamory are relationships in which multiple sexual partners exist. Open relationships are different from “swinging” relationships. In swinging, such partnership is generally only sexual and temporary and thus generally not related to families. In open marriages, however, the primary marriage partners rely on each other for emotional intimacy, family building, and economic support for the most part, but may have other sexual partners and close friends. In polyamory, emotional and sexual intimacy, family building, and economic support may extend past a primary married couple to include other couples and singles. They may live together or apart. Other terms for this type of family include group marriage and triadic marriage. Bisexuality is often invisible in couple households because in both homosexual and heterosexual relationships, one or both partners may be bisexual. However, in triadic relationships and polyamory, more often at least one partner is bisexual.

Sociologist Richard Jenks, who studied these phenomenon in the 1980s, noted that swingers are not different in any significant way from non-swingers except in their swinging, and concluded that they are not “marginal” but mainstream couples. Statistics on these types of lifestyles and their overlap with families and households are difficult to come by. Popular press reports have estimated that there are approximately 3 million swingers in the U.S.; there are 250 support groups devoted to polyamorists, and there are between 3,000 and 4,000 communes (Rubin, 2001).

Communes are living relationships in which the household is the primary definer of members, wherein there is a purposeful effort to expand the household beyond the family. Most often, multiple families are involved in any given commune, and different needs are met by the family and the commune.

Other considerations. In the 1960s and 1970s, great social changes occurred and a group of researchers was studying “alternative lifestyles.” Certain aspects of this work continued into the present (egalitarian marriage, homosexual relationships), but many aspects of it dried up and were not studied as thoroughly (group marriage, communes). The term from that era of research, “lifestyles,” may have morphed into the term family diversity. Regardless, both categories of social phenomena are expressions of the search for human connection, intimacy, and cooperation to care for societies’ workers and dependents.

Family diversity should also be studied in the context of the changing understanding of the purposes of family. The social purposes of families are many and varied, but may over time have evolved from a primarily economic survival group to one in which the primary focus is on the personal satisfaction and fulfillment of its adult members. This change may have continued important effects on how we define and experience family.

Finally, the individual level of analysis is very important to explore. Simon (1995) found that men and women in the same families experience these families very differently. Allen (2001), a scholar and writer, notes in her article that family to her consisted of herself, her long-term lesbian partner, her son, and her partner's son by her gay brother's partner. She defined her family as "headed by two lesbian mothers raising two young sons with several fathers in the picture (p. 805)." However, her son, in that same family, defined his family as himself and her.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Although there is research on diverse families in the family studies literature, much of it is just making its way into work-family research and into organizations. However, work-family writers and researchers are beginning to integrate expanded notions of family. For example, Mock (2001) studied retirement intentions of same-sex couples. Leslie Hammer and her colleagues (e.g., Ingersoll-Dayton, Neal, & Hammer, 2001) have done extensive work on people in certain types of families that they call "sandwich generation" families, which are defined as individuals who care for both children and aging parents.

The broadening notions of family in our culture have many implications for policy and practice. Take just the issue of cohabitating homosexual couples and marriage. As of fall 2003, this area of the law was in flux. No states had legalized gay marriage, however Vermont allowed civil unions, which differed legally from marriage, and laws in California and Hawaii extended some economic benefits to same-sex couples. A number of other states also offered some form of benefits, and, in many states, legislation for gay marriage had been proposed. Again as of fall 2003, three countries had legal same-sex marriages - the Netherlands, Belgium, and Canada.

In the U.S., many companies offer domestic partner benefits to cohabiting couples, even though it may not be mandated by law. The Human Rights Campaign reports, for example, that 202 of the Fortune 500 offer domestic partner health benefits; some companies offer these to same-sex couples only, and some to any cohabiting couple (Human Rights Campaign, 2003).

Another issue related to these is the inclusion of step-children who are not adopted by the non-biological parent and in the health benefits of the non-biological parent. Types of dependents other than biological children may require different kind of accommodation in the workplace. According to a survey of work and family benefits 15% of 1,026 major U. S. employers provide adoption benefits to their employees including paying adoption agency fees, legal costs, medical expenses, temporary foster care while a child is waiting for permanent placement, and transportation costs for international adoptions (New York State Citizens, 2003).

Policies for children and partners get even more complex once families move beyond couple-based families or single-person families. New policies that consider household instead of family may emerge, or

policies that consider only the individual and their dependents. However, many companies will continue to rely on legal definitions of family to guide them.

Many effects that have been studied using family definitions which only include spouse and children would also be interesting using broader definitions of family. For example, are the effects of a dual career homosexual partnership different from the effects for heterosexual couples? Other questions might only impact these expanding families. For example, what are the impacts of being in or out of the closet for a gay worker or a worker in a polyamorous family?

### **Conclusion**

The concept of “family” seems simple to many people, but it is abounding in subtleties of meaning that involve concepts that are related but not the same, including the meaning of marriage, the meaning of family life, gender roles, relationships, households, sexuality, children, and dependents. That is a lot of aspects of human life for one concept to encompass. Some authors have pointed this out and suggested that this makes another dimension of family diversity important, that of the boundary around the family, and how integrated it therefore is with the larger community. Some needs that are currently met by families may in the future be met by communities.

Discussions of family diversity are replete with unexamined social, cultural, and religious beliefs that contribute to our continued research on which family form is superior to others, rather than study families as they exist. In that sense, family diversity is very different from discussing, for example, biological diversity in plants. It is similar to discussions of racial diversity from earlier eras in that, initially, cultural and religious values against, for instance “race mixing,” effected what was researched and written. As understanding and experience increased, research and writing topics moved away from which race was superior or how different races should interact to an acceptance of racial diversity and studies of how that diversity impacts individuals, organizations, and society. Some have argued that there is no one form of family that is superior in general, just as there is no race that is superior. Others argue that it is an empirical question, the measure of which is personal fulfillment and societal efficiency. Families are one of the primary units of organization in our society, and the study of families and how people experience them should be a top priority for investigation; what “family” means should not be assumed or narrowly defined.

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