Colin Quinn

Professor Levecq

LS 201

22 March 2019

Family Construction Zones

Family structure is a topic that is not talked about often, although it has immense impacts on the people of our generation and the many generations to follow. A large part of this cultural shift is single-parent families and their impact on not only their own family but also on culture, specifically gender roles as a majority are single-mother homes. Outlook on the situation at hand is crucial when going against the cultural norms of gender role, and without the enabling of a supportive society, this feat would likely not be possible. Allowing for anyone to support themselves opens up new opportunities for more gender norms to be left behind as new paths are taken by the pioneers of the culture. The shift in gender norms over the last few generations has gone from a mother-father based family toward a less strictly defined “family” which puts more focus on the people at an individual level.

For many generations in the United States, a household was always thought of as a mother and father providing for a handful of children however, in the culture of today it seems to break away from this tradition toward a more individual based household. According to Jenny Porter “married couples make up 68 percent of all families with children under age 18, compared to 93 percent in 1950” (Porter). All the while twenty-three percent of children under the age of eighteen are cared for by a single mother, leaving the remaining nine percent to be looked after by single fathers or some other combination of parents (Porter). This dramatic change of twenty-five percent of families shifting from two to one parent homes is a large component of a shift in gender roles over time. Taking into account the social ideals involving gender in 1950, it was a rather male-oriented society, although women took over factory jobs during World War II just prior, it was still the norm for the father of a family to provide financially. In this post World War II era women fought for the right to equal pay, which aids in the shift from a male reliant household to relying on overall income between the heads of a household. As women fight for this right it becomes much more common to see the mother of a family provide financially, and ideally support a family on their own. This is a key stepping stone in the process of leaving the idea of the stay-at-home-mother in the past and acts as a catalyst for single mother homes specifically as it is now possible to provide for themselves and others.

As single-parent households become more common, the awareness of common struggles women in these sorts of homes rises, thus creating a more supportive social environment and increasing morale for these types of families. A group that is supported well will tend to exceed expectations as they will have a backup plan to count on should something not go as planned. As well as a better support system, awareness of these single-mother homes will allow more people to sympathize with the situation. With a more positive mindset on the possibilities of single-mother parenting, it allows for a much better chance at success. From the perspective of single-parent mothers, this outlook is described as though “there are all kinds of families that will appreciate having a ‘mother present’ instead of a ‘father absent’ perspective” (Wordlaw-Stinson, 193). Which shows that it is truly more about the mindset of the person rather than the gender of the head of household. To say in other words, anything can be done by anyone should they put their mind to it. A single mother can start her own business, complete classes towards a degree, and do anything imaginable. This concept was not possible before society’s shift in gender roles as a mother was often confined to the home. It seems to be rather common for single mothers to reach for their own personal goals while also raising a family, as from personal experiences about a ten to fifteen percent of community college students are single mothers or even fathers. This shows that not only are these single mothers succeeding in supporting their family, but that they are also striving towards creating a better future for themselves. The more progressive mindset for these single mothers alongside the support of the general public pushes the capabilities of these women even further than many people imagine. All the while this would not likely be possible without leaving behind the previous gender role of the typical housewife completing in-home tasks, but now focusing on enabling women to provide for their own families and continuing to achieve their dreams.

A shift in gender roles leads to a more individualistic society, which reverts the focus away from the family and more toward the self for fulfillment. This transition impacts the general goals set by those from a generation, while the ones who do not want large families do not have to: “Households have grown smaller over time, reflecting the decrease in family size and the rise of living alone. The average number of people living in each household has declined from 3.3 people in 1960 to 2.5 today” (Porter). This decline of average household size reflects numerous different aspects of the change in gender roles. An explanation of this household size shift is that there is no longer the role of a mother as a sole caretaker, but the role of the mother now also provides for the family just as a father would. Another explanation would be considering the rise of single-mother homes that simply do not need a father to be around to provide financially as the mother is capable of supplying care and financial stability. Similarly, to that “28 percent of households have just one person living in them, an increase from 13 percent in 1960” (Porter). This increase of single person households also shows that it is no longer a requirement of life to abide by the gender roles of mother and father, and hints towards something that the upcoming generation will very likely hold a high value of, individualism. It is very common to hear people say that everyone should pursue their dreams and not worry about the path that is most travelled, and for some people, that means not marrying or having children at all. This mindset is generally a result of no longer having a gender role or caretaker or provider forced upon the upcoming generations, but instead puts a larger focus on personal happiness and satisfaction over holding family life at higher values. This statement is further supported by a study “in 2016, almost one third of all adults (32 percent) have never been married, up from about one quarter (23 percent) in 1950” (Porter). This shows that gender roles in the aspect of family life have likely been overridden by newer values such as the previously mentioned personal satisfaction and individualism over providing for others.

Both mothers and fathers are capable of providing proper care for a child, there are simply too many variations and family structures to truly gauge an impact that a sole mother or father can have on a child. A common argument against single mother homes is that some things simply cannot be taught by a parent of a certain sex. The supposed role of a father in this case is to teach a child about toughness, honesty and integrity, and the stereotypical sports lessons alongside how to fix a car; meanwhile the mother is supposed teach a child how to be caring, gentle, and proper etiquette. Of course, these are the stereotypical roles of the mother and father, but according to research is not actually the case for what children learn from their parent(s): “The impact of family disruption on mother-child and father-child relations depends on custody arrangements, parental remarriage, the timing of family structure transitions, and the interaction of these factors with sex of child and sex of parent. Merely comparing intact with nonintact, or divorced and nondivorced families, would provide a quite misleading and incomplete picture of family structure effects” (Aquilino, 312). He is saying that there are too many factors that lead in to measuring the real impacts that a mother-son/daughter relationship has compared to a father-son/daughter relationship. This information hints that a majority of the effects on the child are more reliant on the timing and overall lifestyle transition while parents are splitting rather than the impacts relying on the gender of the parent that receives main custody. Using this information, although with a grain of salt since there is limited correlational evidence, it refutes the argument that the lessons a child learns rely on the gender of the parent. This ultimately means that both genders, in this case a mother and father, are able to provide what is essentially equal exposure to important life values.

Something that is often overlooked for single parents is the dating scene, as the number of people looking for an already started family is rather low in comparison, especially for single mothers. A sort of common respect exists in the world of single parent dating as explained Karyn Plumm: “The results of our study indicate that single parents perceive single adults with no children in a more positive manner than other single parents. However, single parents do have more positive perceptions of other single parents than participants with no children” (Plumm, 10). This is rather interesting in that single parents, no matter the gender, prefer those potential partners without children as opposed to those with children. It could be possible that this preference is due to a subconscious attempt at recreating the stereotypical gender role-based family. If this would be the case, then even though there is a clear shift in the overall ideals of single-parenthood and the changes in gender roles so closely related, our subconscious wants the classical family structure. It is also notable that single adults perceive those who are divorced without any children rather negatively due to their supposed inability to form a successful family, which was found in this study to yield similar results for both men and women (Plumm, 10). This hints that the key factors when considering dating are not necessarily breaking away from the stereotypical gender roles of provider and caretaker for male and female respectively. These roles still impact some decisions based on this evidence, although a majority of evidence shows the opposite.

It seems as though some gender roles are picked up on by children below the age of five, making it seem as though changes are difficult to create in just a single generation. In an ideal world, it would be possible to create a child’s mind with only the things we would want it to know, but even before birth it is known that babies are learning new things every second. Something that is uncontrollable that they seem to pick up on is expectations from parents: “In sum, the research examined risk-taking by young children being raised by single parents. The results showed that the role of parenting on children’s risk-taking varied by the type of parent with mothers’ authoritarian parenting predicting risk-taking in sons and daughters, but fathers’ permissive parenting predicting risk-taking in sons” (Wood). This study shows that the difference in parenting styles connects deeper depending on the sex of the parent and child in the case of risk-taking. This evidence hints that although the general public seems to have gotten rid of many stereotypical gender roles within family life, there are still some effects of these single-parent homes that will still take time to fix. The children are able to pick up on slight differences in parenting styles that are generally related to gender and base their actions off of those differences.

While gender roles are getting much better in the sense that it is becoming more normalized for men and women to not fit the role of provider and caretaker respectively, there is still room for improvement. A change in mindset likely has the largest impact on the shift from outdated gender roles to a culture where gender plays a much lesser part in one’s life and decisions. As the amount of single-parent homes continues to grow over the years, it will be much easier to measure the impact of being raised by a single gender parent rather than having a mother and father present. Based on the evidence provided, it seems as though every generation that passes tends to be more progressive, or at least accepting, in their ideas towards gender roles and stereotypes. These shifts in gender roles are likely to lead to a more individualistic culture that prioritizes personal goals over family-based values. As these gender roles seemingly fade through generations, it will become easier to veer off of the beaten path of a family reliant lifestyle, leaving those who do not necessarily want a family of their own to not be seen as outcasts.

Works Cited

Aquilino, William S. "Impact of Childhood Family Disruption on Young Adults' Relationships with Parents."*Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1994, pp. 295*.*

Porter, Jenny. "The Majority of Children Live With Two Parents, Census Bureau Reports." Census Bureau QuickFacts. 10 Apr. 2018. United States Census Bureau. 08 Mar. 2019 <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html>.

Plumm, Karyn M., et al. "Single Parent Seeking Single Parent? the Effects of Parental and Previous Relationship Status on Perceptions of Online Dating Profiles." Journal of Relationships Research, vol. 7, 2016, pp. 12.

Wood, Erin E., Shelia M. Kennison, and Geena C. Jackson. "The role of parenting style of single parents in young children's risk-taking." SpringerLink. 14 Feb. 2019. Springer. 09 Mar. 2019 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs12144-019-00178-0#Sec6>.

Wordlaw-Stinson, LaShawn. "Book Review: Unbroken Homes: Single Parent Mothers Tell their Stories. Wendy A. Paterson, New York: 2001, 409. Pp. $27.95 (Paperback), $69.95 (Hard Cover)."*Sex Roles*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2003, pp. 193*.*