The Evolution of the American Family in 2035

Haylie Hewitt

Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina Wilmington

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When discussing the American family today, it is often viewed as irregular, considering the previous consistency of the family structure. But with a closer look, especially through a sociological lens, the reality isn't a decline in family structure–it's a deep adaptation (Smock et al., 2005). The traditional nuclear family, with clear rules and reliance on a single male income, has become unsustainable for most people. By the year 2035, the American family will be defined by its adaptation to two main issues that today's families face as well: the economic instability of modern life and the fact that the gender revolution that started in the 1970s is still only half-finished. With this, the diverse, flexible, and occasionally complex family structures we see now–single-parent, blended families, cohabitation, LGBTQ+ families–aren't signs of failure that many deem it to be, but instead they are the foundation of strategies people in the mid-2030s will use to survive under immense systemic pressure.

The Deinstitutionalization of Marriage and Defining "Capstone"

The biggest change in family structure is arguably the evolution of marriage itself. Sociologist Andrew Cherlin calls this the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004). This deinstitutionalization essentially means that marriage has lost its out-dated, strict rulebook, and this regression of the institution as a whole will leave what's left of these 'rules' completely disregarded by 2035. Marriage used to be an institution governed by social and religious norms, telling you who to marry, when to marry, and what your role was (breadwinner or homemaker). Today, those norms have largely broken down. Marriage is now seen as an "individualized marriage", focused entirely on personal happiness, emotional fulfillment, and self-development.

While marriage is less necessary than it used to be (we don't need it for economic survival or social approval anymore), its symbolic value has skyrocketed. It's no longer the

marker beginning adulthood; it is now the capstone–the expensive, celebratory achievement that happens after a couple feels they have succeeded financially–and it will most likely be increasingly referred to as a capstone considering the increase of financial instability citizens experience today. Many cohabiting couples simply delay marriage, saying, "everything's there except the money," (Smock et al., 2005). They feel it's best to secure a solid education, income, and stability before they can afford the symbolic and (mainly) financial weight of a wedding, a house, and starting a family.

This new term of "capstone" is now a distinct marker of class stratification–layers of our society created by class-based groups, or, as Betsy Lucal describes it, a system of oppression and privilege (Lucal, 1994). Those with higher education and financial security are more likely to marry and stay married, benefiting from the stability and resources the institution provides. While on the other hand, those facing greater financial strain, debt, and less education are often forced to delay marriage, increasing their likelihood of instability within their cohabitation as they consistently battle these other factors. As Stephanie Coontz notes, economic insecurity puts immense stress on low-income parents, making it harder for them to achieve the "financial readiness" required for the capstone (Coontz, 2006). After considering these dynamics, it is clear that marriage has become a luxury item, reinforcing the socioeconomic gap rather than closing it. In 2035, it is highly possible that a marriage certificate will function less as social support, or a safety net, and more as a marker of class distinction.

The Unfinished Evolution of Gender and the Perpetuation of the Patriarchal Hierarchy

Another major sensitivity of the modern family is the stark imbalance between men and women's roles. Women successfully entered the workforce in massive numbers–a huge revolution in society considering previous views on women in the workplace. But in home and

family life, women's roles did not change fast enough. Arlie Hochschild coined the term "stalled revolution" to describe this problem: women took on paid work, but men more often than not did not take on the unpaid domestic and emotional work (Hochschild, 1989). This leaves a clear imbalance of domestic workloads.

For dual-earner couples, this refers directly to the "second shift," which is the unpaid labor (referred to as domestic work) of housekeeping, cooking, childcare, and coordinating family life that disproportionately falls on women after their full day of paid work is over. In the U.S., we are dramatically behind other industrialized nations in providing social support like affordable childcare and comprehensive paid leave (Jacobs, 2002). When state government and corporate policies fail to provide support, families are essentially placed back into traditional gender roles—even if those roles don't work financially anymore (Lewis, 2001).

It is also important to note that this work imbalance is measurable, and that the measurement of it helps define the 'why' behind how families get pushed into traditional gender roles. Two measurable factors for this work imbalance are the motherhood penalty and the fatherhood bonus, as defined by sociologist Michelle Budig. Budig found that motherhood inflicts a significant wage penalty on women (Budig, 2014). Unfortunately, mothers are often seen by employers as less competent or less committed, leading to lower wages and fewer promotions. Conversely, the fatherhood bonus provides a wage gain for fathers (Budig, 2014), a technicality that may devastatingly remain considering the firm chokehold the patriarchy has–and has always had–on society.

With men consistently earning more–regardless of parental status, considering the gender wage gap–it puts women in a difficult position of not always being able to reach their full

potential. And with men having the ability to make such high salaries, it drives a continual perpetuation of gender roles that have been placed in society for centuries.

Along with this, Christine Percheski's work on professional women suggests the pressure of the second shift is so intense, it necessitates "opting out" of high-powered careers due to the immense difficulty of juggling work and motherhood without adequate support (Percheski, 2008). This stressor of domestic work in 2035 may still be one of the most significant sources of marital stress, proving that “having it all” will be structurally impossible without major policy changes that–as cross-national data shows–the U.S. has been historically slow in adopting (Jacobs & Gornick, 2002).

The 2035 Family: Kinship and Support Systems

Because the traditional American nuclear family is too financially unstable–as well as being too burdened by the second shift–a typical 2035 American family may consist of a flexible, intentional, and resourceful support network–extending far beyond the family's home itself. The kinship networks will be an essential and mainstream model of resilience. For example, the chosen kin concept is built on love, commitment, and mutual support rather than biology or legal ties to one another. This chosen kin concept will be a necessity for a large portion of the population, not just the LGBTQ+ community who structured it (Weston, 1991; Moore, 2013). The rising costs of childcare, housing, and elder care will require friends to become trusted “aunties” and co-residing “uncles” who share resources and labor.

Similar to this model, the black kindred model is where low-income families form expansive, mutual networks to fight against economic shocks (Stack, 1972). This system may become a major survival strategy as well, regardless of whether or not it is acknowledged by society.

Additionally, lesbian and gay families have often formed around the idea of equality, and this may continue as a sort of prototype for how relationships negotiate roles without relying on a male-breadwinner family structure. However, as Mignon Moore's work on black lesbian stepfamilies demonstrated, gendered power dynamics are deeply cultural (Moore, 2011). It is totally possible that in 2035, biological and caregiving ties will continue to hold greater power and authority over household organization and finance, revealing the persistence of the gender 'culture' even in the absence of a male partner.

Conclusion

To conclude, the family of 2035 may not have one established look, it will likely encompass a whole variety of family structures, some including non-blood-related individuals. While some financially secure couples will celebrate a "capstone" marriage, the majority will have an expansive, intentional, and resourceful support system that will be built to withstand the pressures that the singular traditional family "ideal" could not handle. This type of fluid, elaborate support system will be the real, strong family model of the future.

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