

## THE FATE OF THE FAMILY

E. W. BURGESS

*University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois*

One way to forecast the fate of the family is to observe trends in the past and at present and to project them into the future.

What are the chief changes affecting the American family in the perspective of time?

First of all, if we contrast the colonial with the modern American family, it is apparent that the family has lost, or is still losing, its historic functions. The family as a unit of production for the market is gone except in rural districts. Many home activities of economic significance as canning vegetables and fruits, baking bread, laundering, making clothes and cleaning and dyeing them are vanishing from the family. Recreation has departed in large measure from the home, the only counter gain being the radio which paradoxically brings the entire outer world into the home. The education of the child is taken care of by the day nursery, the kindergarten and the school. Health and protective functions have been assumed in ever increasing degree by the state. Even religious practices like family prayers and grace before meals are on the decline. There can be no doubt that the family has lost so many of its functions that some ask what is left of sufficient significance to justify its continued existence.

The second great change is that young married couples are increasingly separated from the in-laws, in space and of more importance in spirit. Less and less each decade do husband and wife after marriage seek guidance from their parents. No longer is the larger kinship group an indispensable factor in regulating and guiding the small family unit.

A third big change, in part related to the preceding two, is the growing emancipation of the family from community controls and from the mores.

Many observers see in the superficial manifestation of this shift such as the smaller family and the increasing divorce rate evidence of family instability and perhaps its eventual disintegration.

Sorokin like Le Play before him bewails the decline of the stable family and the rise of the unstable family.

Other sociologists and I count myself in that number welcome this change although granting the conflicts and losses incidental to a transition period because of its promise for a higher type of family in the future.

This break of the family with tradition is all-important because it means that each family is now on its own to realize in its own way its potentialities for development. Family stability based on the mores was valuable in a static society but in a dynamic society it can prevent the family from making necessary adjustment to new conditions and so stifle the freedom of family members for self-expression. The modern family face-to-face with a changing situation finds adaptability to be a more important characteristic than integration which we have all tended to value higher perhaps than is warranted by the facts.

This point, however, has recently been documented by a restudy of the original case-records upon which Robert Cooley Angell based his findings in his book, "The Family Encounters the Depression." He had indeed found that the adaptability as well as the integration of the family was important for its success in meeting the impact of the depression. The restudy of cases by the use of a rating scale and statistical methods shows that the adaptability of the family is much more important than integration in meeting a crisis such as the depression. In fact, when the factor of adaptability is held constant integration shows only a zero correlation with success in meeting the depression. This finding does not mean that integration played no part in adjustment to the depression. But it does indicate that only those elements in integration which made for adaptability aided the family in meeting this crisis.

It follows, in all probability, that the adaptability of the family and its mem-

bers in meeting changing situations provides the key to the future of the family.

That is why no tears should be shed over the loss of the historic functions of the family. They are a case of good riddance of old rubbish. Their disappearance allows the family to concentrate upon its essential functions, namely, affection-giving, the bearing and rearing of children and their informal education which can be and often is far superior to the education of the best schools.

The emancipation of the family from the in-laws and the mores frees it to substitute science for custom in the shaping of marriage and of family relations.

Already in one large area of family behavior tradition is in the discard and science is supreme. Children are now being reared by intelligent parents not as they were brought up by their parents but according to the advice of the pediatrician, the psychologist and the psychiatrist. The more intelligent the parent, however, the more he takes the advice of the specialist with a grain or more of common sense. The significance of this change cannot be over-emphasized. It means a revolution in our thinking and our way of life.

Signs are multiplying that this reliance on science first evidenced in child rearing is spreading rapidly to other areas of family behavior. Courses on education for marriage and family living are now being given in colleges and universities, in high schools and in programs of adult education. Most significant in its implications for the future is the mounting demand of college students for courses in preparation for marriage. Marital counseling services are being set up to give information and advice to couples before and after marriage. Young people are eager to obtain the latest findings of scientific research which may be of assistance to them in marriage and family relations.

Those who see the golden age of the family in the past and would seek to return to the large patriarchal family or some substitute for it are fighting against the trend of the times. Le Play was wrong when he thought the old stable French family "famille souche" (the stem family) could be restored. Marshall

Pétain will fail in any similar attempt. Sorokin is mistaken when he believes that the contractual state of family relationships can or will be revived. Hitler and Mussolini are engaged in a losing battle in their reactionary efforts to turn back the hands of time. The trends of family life can only temporarily and not permanently be thrown into reverse.

Many at present are pessimistic about the effects of the war upon the family. Certainly marriage and the family will be subjected to great stress and strain. Without question every effort should be made to protect the family in this period of crisis. But the general effect of this War for Survival as of World War I will be to speed up the changes taking place. The greatest gain in my judgment will be in the increased status of woman brought about by her achievement of more of the substance of equality with man to square with the appearance of equality with which she has been all too satisfied.

There is no evidence that family life of today is less happy than in the past. Even the increase in the divorce rate may in the total accounting represent a net gain of happiness since the dissolution of an unhappy union may contribute its part to net gain in happiness. In fact, there is some evidence that the city family as representing future trends is on the whole happier than the rural family which retains more of the characteristics of the past. A White House Conference study of "The Adolescent in the Family" revealed that on the average the rural child was less well adjusted than the town or city child. Studies in marital adjustment seem to indicate a larger proportion of rural than urban families clustered around average happiness with smaller percentage at the very happy and very unhappy extremes of marital happiness. These findings taken together seem to show not only the present status but the future promise of greater family happiness in the emerging type of family united by the subtle intangible but binding ties of affection, congeniality, and mutuality of interest, adaptable to changing conditions, and utilizing scientific knowledge with intelligence in the solution of its problems.