



Family

by Tina Gianoulis

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Novelist and playwright Dodie Smith captured much of the modern ambivalence toward the family when she defined it in the dedication of her 1938 play *Dear Octopus* as "that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to."

In ancient Rome, the word *familia* originally referred to everyone who lived in a household, including relatives, boarders, slaves, and employees. Over the millennia, the term has generally come to mean a domestic social unit, usually bound by blood ties. However, the exact definition of the family has never been fixed, but has varied widely from culture to culture and era to era.

The social upheaval of the 1960s, particularly the women's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement, caused a radical redefinition of the family in the United States. This redefinition is still in progress, as in the twenty-first century many people reject a fixed definition of the family, which is imposed by society, and instead claim the right to define their own families as they choose.

Historical Configurations

In past centuries, before the era of industrialization, the family represented a self-sustaining economic and social organism. Usually comprised of several generations, each member of the family, including elders and very young children, worked toward the survival of the whole.

It was not until the early 1800s that husbands became defined as wage earners outside the home while women were given the refined role of "homemakers." As the nineteenth century progressed, family traditions began to evolve, such as family vacations and family celebrations at Thanksgiving and Christmas. While these supposedly universal features of family life applied to members of the white middle class, working-class families and families of color evolved differently. One notable difference was that--out of economic necessity--the women and children of these families often still worked outside the home.

Cultural Ideal vs. Reality

One significant characteristic of the family in modern society is that the cultural ideal of the family remains firmly established even when many actual families do not resemble it. In other words, people remain quite loyal to the current idea of what a family is supposed to be, even in the face of a wide range of evidence that many--indeed, most--families are simply not like that.

The social upheaval that began during the 1960s led to fundamental changes within the family unit. The women's liberation movement began to change women's role in the family by encouraging women to seek fulfilling lives outside of the home. The counter-culture movement promoted alternative approaches to relationships and an openness about sexuality that led to more couples living together without marriage. The rising divorce rate (almost 50% by the 1990s) also began to create new kinds of families.

Single-parent families became common, as did a different sort of extended family that included the new spouses and children of divorced parents. As the baby boom generation matured, the reality of the family continued to change, as it became mixed-race and interfaith, and included children adopted from many nations.

Queer Families

One of the biggest shifts in the history of the family has been the proliferation of queer families that began during the last decades of the twentieth century. This shift has not been caused simply by the existence of queer families, but mostly by the insistence of those families that they be accepted in the community and receive the same societal benefits as traditional families.

The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the civil rights, women's liberation, and gay liberation movements, produced a generation unwilling to live in secrecy. Therefore, while non-traditional families no doubt also existed in the past, they were usually separate and isolated and did not have the support or visibility afforded by a widespread social movement and a mass media addicted to publicizing the unusual.

At the start of the twenty-first century, some social analysts estimate that between 6 and 14 million children have at least one gay parent. Celebrities such as Rosie O'Donnell and Melissa Etheridge have brought gay families into the public eye. In the lesbian resort town of Provincetown, Massachusetts, a gay family week, which drew 45 families in its first year in 1995, hosted more than 400 families in the summer of 2002.

However, queer families have not had an easy road to acceptance. For over three decades gays, lesbians, and other queers have fought to achieve such rights as same-sex marriage, access to fertility services, second-parent adoption, lesbian and gay adoption rights, domestic partner benefits, and survivor benefits. Ranged against them have been conservative governmental forces, such as the 1975 federal appeals court that ruled that homosexuality undermines family life, and groups such as the anti-gay American Family Association, founded in 1977, who are determined to keep the definition of family under their tight control.

Indeed, social conservatives have depicted homosexuality as utterly incompatible with family values.

Lesbian Mothers and Gay Fathers

Because children have long been viewed as an indispensable part of a family unit, and because women can bear children, much of the broadening definition of the queer family began with lesbians. Many lesbians had children, and the status of these children as part of a family had to be determined. Some had children from previous heterosexual relationships and were forced into custody battles with ex-husbands who were either homophobic or not above using homophobia in order to gain possession of their children.

These custody battles were not only painful personal struggles, but were also the birthplace of a new definition of family. For example in *Belmont v. Belmont*, a precedent-setting case in 1979, a Washington, D. C. court granted a lesbian mother custody of her two children, defining her home with her female partner as a nurturing family.

Groups such as the Lesbian Mothers National Defense Fund, founded in Seattle in 1974, help provide support and legal advice to women fighting for custody of their children. However, as recently as 1993, a Virginia judge awarded custody of Sharon Bottoms' son to his maternal grandmother because of Bottoms' lesbian lifestyle. Bottoms fought unsuccessfully for another three years before finally giving up on regaining her son.

Many lesbians who had never had relationships with men also wanted to bear children. Those who did not

wish to have sex with men in order to get pregnant turned to artificial insemination. Established fertility clinics sometimes discriminated against lesbian women and were often quite expensive.

In response to these obstacles, many lesbian communities developed informal networks to help lesbians find anonymous sperm donors. Although this process was simpler during the 1970s, when HIV-AIDS had not yet become an issue, informal arrangements between lesbians and donors remain common in the twenty-first century. Anonymous artificial insemination allows for the creation of truly fatherless families, which appeals to many women who wish to live independently of men.

Gay men have also struggled to become and remain parents, some through fostering or adoption and some through surrogacy arrangements, as well as through maintaining custody of their biological children. Because of negative stereotyping of gay men as sexual predators, and of men as non-nurturing, the mainstream public has often found it difficult to accept gay men as parents.

Both lesbians and gay men who attempt to adopt children have run into many legal obstacles. In 2002, popular talk-show host and famous adoptive parent Rosie O'Donnell came out as a lesbian mother specifically for the purpose of challenging the law prohibiting gay adoption in the state of Florida. As part of her very public coming out, she hosted a television special highlighting several gay families.

In many states, even some that permit gay or lesbian individuals to adopt, it is difficult or impossible for gay or lesbian couples to adopt children jointly. As of 2002, only 8 states allowed second-parent adoption for gay and lesbian families.

Support for Gay and Lesbian Families

There are a variety of organizations that offer support for gay families: the Family Pride Coalition is a support group for gay parents, while Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) offers services to children of gay families. There is even a slick journal for gay parents called *And Baby*, and R Family Vacations offers cruises for gay families.

In many ways, the situation for gay families has improved. In 2001, the Netherlands became the first country to legalize same-sex marriage, and Vermont became the first state in the United States to officially recognize same-sex relationships as civil unions. In many European countries and Canada, gay and lesbian couples are recognized as spouses or spouse-equivalents and are extended such rights as the power to make medical decisions and to inherit automatically. In the 2003 ruling in favor of gay marriage in Massachusetts, that state's supreme judicial court based its decision in part on the advantages that marriage would confer on the children of gay and lesbian couples.

Families without Children

However, there are members of the queer community who challenge the idea that families must be comprised of couples with children. These counter-culture queers question the emphasis some in the gay and lesbian movement place on gaining acceptance for families that are traditional in every sense except heterosexuality.

Rather than merely wanting the rights and benefits that go along with marriage and children and blood relationships, these visionaries seek a truly broad definition of family, one that includes chosen families of friends and extended community. Any benefits, rights, and recognition accorded by society should be provided across the board, they argue, and not reserved for those who seek and find committed relationships with one person or who rear children.

Moreover, these radicals contend, if queer families can find acceptance only if they look just like straight families, then little has really changed in the overall definition of the family.

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