
Diverse Families: Islands of Refuge in the Midst of Troubled Waters?

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A quick perusal of chapters composing the *Handbook of Marriage and Family, 3rd Edition*, reveals that American families are faced with many challenges from the larger societal context of the twenty-first century, a circumstance that seems likely to continue for some time to come. Current evidence does not support the idea that these contextual challenges will be met exclusively by “cookie cutter” nuclear families, which have often been the falsely imagined nostalgic ideals of America’s domestic past (Coontz, 2000, 2005). Instead, a society of rapidly expanding complexities and growing ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity will certainly be the constant theme that drives our societal future. Moreover, families will likely require a variety of structural arrangements and processes to foster the necessary interpersonal resources in varied ways to meet the evolving challenges from the larger macrosystem, exosystems, and mesosystems of society (see Chaps. 6, 9, and 32; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1994, 2005). Many families of diverse structure and ways of conducting everyday life may need to function as safe havens in which interpersonal resources such as security, autonomy, resiliency, problem-solving strategies, and coping skills are fostered during persistent times of trouble. These interpersonal

resources, in turn, will be essential for dealing with challenges associated with a precarious future involving rapid changes in the larger societal context consisting of social, cultural, economic, political, and technological dimensions (Bowlby, 1988; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1994, 2005; Raef, 2006). Diverse families may increasingly be needed as island refuges in a vast context of troubled waters.

In his first novel entitled *2030: The Real Story of What Happens to America*, (Brooks, 2011) the comedian, actor, director, and screen-writer, Albert Brooks paints a vivid portrait of our society that, if he is correct, will certainly serve as a challenging context for families in 2030, the not so distant future. Expressed in the parlance of our current times, the America he envisions has shed the image of “too big to fail” and is limping along in a much dilapidated state in an agonizing downward spiral. A continuing message in Brooks’ prognostications is that the fabled American Dream is either greatly diminished or is no longer feasible for much of the population by 2030, a theme shared by a few contemporary commentators who see this decline as happening much faster than Brooks proposes (Huffington, 2010; Reich, 2010).

Brooks is able to find humor and redeeming qualities in the human condition against this backdrop of an America living on borrowed time, like an old jalopy with high mileage and bald tires, lumbering along a rough road strewn with massive potholes, nails, and other sharp objects. It is important to recognize initially, of course,

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that not everything, just 19 years in our future, is terribly bad. Such positive circumstances are evident because most cancers and Alzheimer's disease have been largely cured and people are now living much longer on average. Medications have been developed that reverse obesity and, more or less, actually do keep the weight off permanently. If families can afford luxuries in 2030 (and this is a big "if"!), the precise movements and locations of a family's teenagers, or anyone else for that matter, can easily be tracked with new GPS technologies (e.g., implanted inside a person or the person's clothing). Other technological breakthroughs include the development of highly sophisticated robots that can service a wide range of pragmatic, frivolous, exotic, and erotic human needs.

The rest of the Brooks' story about the period from 2011 to 2030 is grim indeed, with the overall economic conditions of American society and its families experiencing substantial decline. One development, resulting from chronically bad economic conditions, is the pervasive disappearance of America's "real jobs" that can sustain a middle class standard of living. A multitude of continuing economic maladies, further automation, diminishing job-related benefits, and declining salaries are playing key roles in this long-term demise. Most American individuals and families of 2030, including particularly those from the middle class, have experienced serious declines in their standard of living as growing numbers face insurmountable debt and financial ruin. The result of these trends, of course, is greater inequality in the form of a widening gap between a small number of super rich and a rapidly growing number of poor, and a rapidly declining middle class, consistent with the circumstances of Third World countries. Of great concern are the large numbers of very angry, alienated youth who are becoming more vocal, and whose present and future circumstances have become much worse than it was for previous generations. This set of circumstances is becoming disastrous for Americans who have traditionally clung to the premise that "our kids will do better than we did"—a belief in 2030 that has become largely an unattainable aspect of the past.

An increasing source of discomfort is that many of these unlucky youth, who are experiencing downward mobility, are forming "resentment gangs" and expressing growing anger toward the long-term elderly. Gangs of young adults are even beginning to commit acts of violence or terrorism against the long-term elderly who are living much longer lives in lavish circumstances compared to the younger population. These senior elderly, are referred to as "the olds" (i.e., or those over 70 years of age), and continue to receive maximum benefits from entitlement programs, have extended lives (due to life-extending medical breakthroughs) and are increasingly disliked by young adults for monopolizing much of the nation's dwindling financial resources. Moreover, continuing efforts by Right-to Life advocates and medical breakthroughs (e.g., life support machines) have allowed the "lives" of many of these older Americans to be extended in vegetative states for decades after their conscious lives have ended and at great cost to dwindling healthcare resources.

Compared to their predecessors, the younger adult generation and anyone younger than "the olds" (i.e., below the age of 70) are taxed higher, earn less, and are destined to receive much less government assistance from entitlement programs. Despite the existence of life-extending technologies, therefore, the majority of those who are younger than "the olds" are increasingly unable to afford the expensive healthcare that is available. Only an increasingly small number of the wealthy and the "olds" are able to extend their mortality by benefitting from the emergent medical breakthroughs of 2030. The results of these unequal circumstances, in turn, is growing anger by the younger generation who increasingly express this resentment in more hostile ways.

Another development in 2030 is that a college education no longer translates consistently into lucrative and meaningful careers. The primary outcome of diminished career opportunities is that many young people are deciding not to go to college because the cost is too great and the return on investment has become too low. Moreover, if parents don't launch the young out of the family nest to live independently by their late 20s or

later, many of these youth are increasingly unlikely to leave their parents' homes voluntarily in the foreseeable future. The consequence of such practices is that the new stage of emerging adulthood has become increasingly normative and young people are attaining economic and other forms of autonomy from parents much later if at all. In addition, things have gotten even more impersonal in the society of 2030, with face-to-face human communication being greatly reduced in favor of contacting others through elaborate communication devices and virtual reality experiences.

At the national level, the federal government's debt of 2030 has risen to insurmountable levels and no solution is in sight any longer. Health insurance covers fewer medical problems in affordable fashion and the rising costs of healthcare is ruining the financial well-being of individuals and families. Safety nets that traditionally helped to assure a dignified existence for the middle class, retirees, and lower income populations, have greatly diminished and are continuing to decline. Political gridlock is pervasive at the federal, state, and local levels of government, with little financial capacity remaining to solve the nation's problems through new corrective programs.

In the years leading up to 2030, terrorists successfully pulled off both a biological attack with small pox virus and the detonation of an atomic weapon, a dirty bomb, in a large American city (Chicago). Climate change is no longer challenged in 2030 because dramatic changes in the weather have actually happened in the form of terrible winter blizzards and blistering heat waves on the East Coast of the United States that consistently exceed 105° for almost 6 consecutive weeks. To top things off, the "Big One" finally hits in California, a 9.1 earthquake that occurs up and down the San Andreas Fault, which utterly destroys Los Angeles and adjacent areas of the West Coast. About 50,000 people perish in the quake almost instantaneously and there are an incalculable numbers of injured, homeless, and dislocated individual and family victims.

Perhaps the most crippling dilemma is that, because the US government is deeply in debt, it is financially incapable of responding adequately to

deal with the immense devastation in California (the estimated cost of rebuilding and restoring Los Angeles from a state of almost total destruction is 20 trillion dollars) and China initially rejects American overtures for additional loans to finance the needed reconstruction efforts. The result is that China eventually agrees to provide the necessary funds in stages through a joint ownership plan with the US government—an arrangement that essentially means that China now is part owner of Los Angeles! An overall message of Brooks' novel, therefore, is that America and the majority of its families who endure all these developments are sliding down a slippery slope toward Third World status and major reductions in the quality of their lives.

A convenient way to avoid coming to grips with this "Brooksian" view of the societal context that families may face in the near future is to say "oh well, this is only fiction and it hasn't happened yet, so something will save us from these imagined future horrors." If one takes a step back, however, and ponders what has recently happened in America during the past 10–15 years, an apt response would be "are you really sure it hasn't already happened?" A sobering but honest response to this question may be that Brooks actually may be underestimating the grim circumstances we are experiencing as predecessors of what may continue to confront us in the not so distant future. It is important to remember, of course, that Brooks is only projecting 19 years into our future and, more importantly, many of his troubling predictions or even worse circumstances seem to be developing currently before our very eyes.

A prominent aspect of the societal context of today's families in 2011 is the occurrence of the Great Recession or a severe global economic crisis that began in December of 2007 and took a very sharp downward plunge in September of 2008 (i.e., the Financial Crisis of 2008). This Great Recession and an associated financial crisis in banking and Wall Street have ignited and built upon long-term economic forces that could lead us to an America much like Albert Brooks has imagined. This severe recession, which ended (perhaps only technically) in the United States

during June or July of 2009, created serious short-term economic problems and worsened previous long-term economic hardships that had been developing for many years and that continue today (Gross, 2009; see Chap. 24). For the United States in particular, the Great Recession and the period of slow economic growth that has followed involves persistent high unemployment, declines in real wages, a collapse of the US housing bubble, an increase in housing foreclosures, greater numbers of personal bankruptcies, declining retirement accounts, rising gas and food prices, as well as an escalating federal, state, and local debt crisis.

In a short-term sense, the Great Recession was initiated by the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s that was triggered by several developments. Included in the factors precipitating the Recession were sharp increases in crude oil prices in 2001–2007, reduced interest rates, easy credit, sub-prime lending to poorly qualified home buyers, increased debt burden at the personal, family, and governmental levels, as well as a growing practice of incorrect pricing of risk. An important additional contributor was a liquidity shortfall in the US banking system that failed to provide sufficient funds to struggling business interests. These conditions resulted in the collapse of large financial institutions, the bailout of banks, and some of the American automobile industry by the federal government, as well as sharp downturns in stock markets around the world (Baily, & Elliot, 2009; Gross, 2009; Huffington, 2010; Reich, 2010). These factors contributed to the failure of large and small businesses, declines in consumer wealth estimated in the trillions of US dollars, and a significant decline in economic activity, all of which added up to a severe global economic recession in 2008. Most of these economic hardships, of course, provided societal contexts that threaten the welfare of many of today's families through declines in their well-being in ways similar to the "fictional" observations of Albert Brooks about our near future (Baily, & Elliot, 2009; Gross, 2009; Huffington, 2010; Reich, 2010). Some economists are now predicting that a "double-dip" recession may occur and that many condi-

tions of the great recession will be with us for a long time to come.

Although somewhat less dramatic than the disasters described by Brooks, the United States has been faced recently with many severe calamities, such as the 911 terrorist strikes, massive hurricane, and flood devastation in New Orleans, a huge oil spill that contaminated much of the Gulf Shore area, a higher frequency of F-4 and F-5 tornado strikes (some up to a mile wide!), and involvement in three foreign wars. So far, the United States has been spared from a massive earthquake like Brooks describes, but Japan sustained a "big one" of comparable dimensions only to be followed by a devastating Tsunami and a horrendous nuclear disaster. Many of these catastrophes also illustrated the increased difficulty of our federal and state governments to respond to the needs of communities, businesses, families, and individuals whose circumstances were drastically disrupted by these calamities.

The short-term financial crisis and recession also exacerbated long-term economic issues that have increasingly added to the burden of many families in our society and seem to be headed in a direction that Albert Brooks predicted for the near future. Such long-term economic problems include an accelerated decline of the US manufacturing base, corresponding job losses in manufacturing but also significant employment losses in the service and technological sectors. The result is an America that generates wealth much less by manufacturing (i.e., by making things) in favor of creating wealth and economic resources through minimally regulated "financialization." This form of economic resource creation disproportionately benefits investors (who often make investments with other people's money) and the currently wealthy. These financial interests have money to invest, with the goal being to generate more money for themselves without the intent of contributing much wealth to the "real economy" in the form of manufacturing products, providing sufficient financing for main street businesses, and job creation for American workers. One result of these problematic economic practices is a growing disparity or economic inequality between the rich and the poor and the greater difficulty of families

to maintain a middle class status (Huffington, 2010; see Chaps. 3 and 24). A recent report by the Pew Research Center using census data, for example, indicated that the country's wealth gap (i.e., median household net worth or total assets) has recently grown extensively to the widest level since such data gathering began. Specifically, the wealth of White households in 2009 was \$113,149, while being only \$6,325 for Hispanics, and only \$5,677 for African Americans, respectively. These differences in dollar amount translated into ratios of roughly 20 to 1 for White compared African American households and 18 to 1 for White compared to Hispanic households (Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011)—figures that represent almost a threefold increase in these ethnic/racial disparities since 1995. Moreover, according to the annual 2011 *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011), there has been a significant decline in economic well-being for low income children and families. The official children's poverty rate, which is a conservative measure of economic hardship, increased 18 % between 2000 and 2009. This means that children's poverty essentially returned to the level of the early 1990s. Another way of viewing this is that about 2.4 million more children were living below the federal poverty line in 2009 compared to 2000 (Annie E. Casey Foundation).

Other examples of chronic economic problems having important implications for families are rising home foreclosures, the decline of home equities, rising individual and family debt levels, declines in real wages, growing educational costs (e.g., increases in college tuition and serious financial shortfalls in public education), serious losses in retirement plans and accounts, and rising prices for many consumer goods (Huffington, 2010; see Chap. 24). The rising debt levels of federal, state, and local governments also are likely to have adverse consequences for families in the form of greater potential for raising tax rates, diminished funding for their children's education, the cost and quality of healthcare coverage, reduced retirement funding and the growing decay of the nation's infrastructure (Huffington; Reich, 2010). Perhaps, as a lead-in to a "Brooksian View" of America, we seem to be on the verge of

reconsidering our ability to retain our current safety nets for families provided by Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid in a country that remains engaged in three armed conflicts (i.e., Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya) and many other manifestations of the Modern American Empire (see Huffington, 2010; Chap. 31).

From the perspective of many family members, the political world of America in 2011, like the Brooksian world of 2030, is characterized by political gridlock in which real solutions to problems take a backseat to partisan warfare, uncompromising ideological conflict, and political power struggles simply for the sake of winning the next election. An example of such political strife is the recent struggle over raising the debt ceiling, which many experts considered an unnecessary conflict spawned more by partisan wrangling and posturing for the next election without much real substance. Much like the world of 2030, the US Congress is deadlocked and seems unable to deal with major political problems through compromise and reasoned solutions. Political party squabbles over how to deal with the national debt, stimulate employment, and attain a path to renewed prosperity have reached repeated impasses. Such deadlocks over issues include whether or not to cut federal government expenditures or raise taxes on large corporations and the wealthy (largely millionaires and billionaires). Frequent reference is made of the large tax loopholes for large corporations and the extremely wealthy that are not only significantly lower than the tax rates paid by the middle class but also are the lowest tax rates for the privileged in many decades. American CEOs also have dramatically increased the disparity between their own incomes and those of average workers in their own industries and those of CEOs of corporations from other countries (Huffington, 2010).

Most economists argue that cutting the federal budget without raising tax revenues is unlikely to be a viable way of solving governmental debt problems because there is little flexibility as to how this problem can be addressed without the implementation of both solutions (Huffington, 2010; Reich, 2010). For one thing, disproportionate economic gains have been characteristic of

large corporations and the wealthy during this time of economic stagnation and slow growth. Moreover, a lack of flexibility exists in reducing the federal deficit, in part, because 77 % of federal spending is tied up in Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, net interest owed on the national debt, and national defense appropriations. Less than 23 % of the federal budget is devoted to discretionary spending beyond the basic entitlement programs and defense spending, which leaves little flexibility to solve federal debt problems simply by cutting governmental functions without raising taxes. An overall assessment, therefore, is that Albert Brooks did not have to leap very far ahead from the conditions of 2011 to give us a grim view of the difficult financial and economic circumstances of American families in 2030 (Huffington, 2010; Reich, 2010).

Beyond such political struggles over the economic issues described above, recent partisan political strife also specifically addresses family life or, more specifically, the definition of what constitutes a “normal family” and what similar close relationships should be like. Here we refer to the present-day *culture wars*, with the central component of this strife being advocacy for or opposition to *family values*, a general perspective most clearly identified with social conservatives within the Republican Party. The basic elements of a family values perspective are as follows:

- Support for traditional marriage and opposition to sex outside of conventional marriage, including such things as pre-marital sex, adultery, polygamy, and incest.
- Support for a retreat from aspects of feminism and greater emphases on traditional roles for women in families.
- Resistance to diverse family forms such as same-sex marriage, cohabitation, and single parent families which took its most overt legislative form in the Defense of Marriage Act.
- Support for and parental involvement in traditional education, including such things as vouchers for private, non-secular education.
- Opposition to the legalization of abortion and support for policies that encourage abstinence and adoption instead.
- Support for abstinence education exclusively in regards to dealing with risks associated with early sexual activity such as teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Opposition to teaching such topics of sex education as human sexual behavior, safe sex, and birth control.
- Support for policies that are said to protect children from obscenity and exploitation. The promotion of morality based in Christian values and the belief that the nuclear family is the religious ideal for the care and socialization of children and adult marital relationships.
- Rejection of the constitutional principle of separation between church and state for family values issues.

Many social conservatives wish to roll back the societal clock on these family values by using their electoral power to capture state and federal governments and impose Christian family values on the rest of the population. This is, of course, a direct challenge to the constitutional principle of separation between church and state, a fundamental principle upon which the nation was founded. Throughout our history, immigrant populations repeatedly came to America to practice freedom of religion (or to be free from any obligation to believe in or practice any religion), but to do so in a country that did not have an established religion that was imposed on citizens by government sanction.

A quick glance at the complicated, present-day diversity of American families, and the speed through which these social changes have occurred makes it seem quite naïve for social conservatives to believe that these powerful social forces are reversible through use of ephemeral government power. A glaring historical example of such folly was America’s abortive flirtation from 1918 to 1933 with extremist morality in the form of national prohibition of alcoholic beverages (The Volstead Act or National Prohibition Act) should serve as a lesson in the futility of trying to put a deeply ingrained “social genie” back in the bottle. The result of this effort was a policy that was vigorously resisted, widely violated, inconsistently enforced, and spawned widespread corruption. This lesson from history illustrates how legislative

efforts to reverse natural processes of social change away from nuclear families toward diverse family forms would certainly be doomed to failure. Most certainly, any legislative efforts to reverse current complex patterns of family change would face many more genes to put back in the bottle than was true for national prohibition.

Cast against this backdrop of potential impending disasters in the social, economic, political, and technological context is evidence that families, in their increasingly diverse forms, may be needed, even more than in the past, as refuges from the growing uncertainty in the larger human ecology. Supportive of such a perspective are themes in this Handbook about family life including: (a) increased diversity of successful/resilient families; (b) increased gender equality; and (c) continued desire for marriage and satisfying family relationships. Before discussing the first of these positive themes, it is important to recognize that distinctive or opposing perspectives are used frequently to define what is considered to be a “successful” family. These opposing views are often couched in the terms of viewing diverse family forms (i.e., non-nuclear) as signs that the American family is either (1) declining as it evolves away from the nuclear family structure (e.g., Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002) or (2) adapting to the moving target of a social ecology with rapidly changing demands and challenges (e.g., Bianchi, & Casper, 2000; Coontz, 2000, 2005). The obvious result is that a person’s perception of “successful” forms of family life will be substantially shaped by which side of this debate is accepted and used for assessing the contemporary condition of American families.

A perusal of chapters in this *Handbook* provides continuing evidence of what seems to be an inexorable movement away from nuclear families toward much greater diversity. Combined with patterns of greater domestic variation is growing evidence that diverse family forms are persistent and resilient (see Chap. 3). In reference to lesbian and gay families, for example, Patterson in Chap. 27 concludes from current research that the overall picture is one of resilience, even in the midst of continuing discrimination and oppression. Despite substantial obstacles, lesbian and gay couples

often are able to create supportive relationships and social networks in a society with improving but still conflicted attitudes about families with diverse sexual identities. The weight of the evidence also indicates that, compared to families with heterosexual parents, home environments provided by lesbian and gay parents are equally likely to foster psychosocial growth among family members. Adding to this positive view, is the chapter on remarriage and stepfamilies by van Eeden-Moorefield and Pasley (see Chap. 22) who indicate that, compared to nuclear families, adults in remarriages and stepfamilies experience largely similar levels of well-being, life satisfaction, and marital quality. Moreover, on average, children in stepfamilies tend to do well over time as their young enter and progress through adulthood. Stepfamilies are functioning well with remarkable resilience, in spite of the many challenges, both within their family systems and within the broader social and legal contexts.

The structure of American families increasingly provides extensive options, including stepfamilies, single parent families, non-married cohabiting families, and nuclear families. Moreover, these varying structures have been increasingly found to support healthy and satisfying family relationships and individual development (see Chaps. 12 and 22). Recent research emphasizes the importance of process and relationships, not simply formal legal obligations (e.g., marital status) or structural compositions within families (e.g., two parent vs. single parent, or binuclear remarried/cohabiting family) (see Chap. 13). Not only are diverse family forms becoming more common, but they also are demonstrating considerable success in producing/maintaining relationships and individual outcomes.

Given growing economic uncertainty, relationships within diverse family structures may function in flexible ways to mediate, ameliorate, improve, or worsen these circumstances. Recent research supports the notion that economic conditions alone do not solely determine the extent to which individuals or families experience success and satisfaction (Chaps. 10 and 24). The possibility does exist that our increasingly diverse family forms, with their adaptive qualities, may

function as islands of restoration for mustering our resources and resilience in the face of what appears to be formidable and impending external challenges.

Although some of the developing patterns identified within this *Handbook* may provide reasons for substantial concern, a deeper examination into these issues also reveals a positive side of these circumstances. For example, while rates of divorce and non-marital births remain relatively high (see Chaps. 3 and 21) divorce rates have actually declined modestly and stabilized somewhat since their peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Moreover, a higher frequency of these “out of wedlock” births (approximately 40 %) are now occurring within the context of relationships involving stable, cohabiting couples who increasingly appear capable of promoting the development of social competence in children (see Chaps. 10 and 12).

Other positive signs include the fact that the rates of remarriage and recoupling through cohabitation continue to provide families with structural options for supporting one another. Thus, although both remarried and long-term cohabiting families often experience more complex relationships and barriers (e.g., increased financial responsibilities, prior relationship complications, and deficient legal support due to unmarried status), these families are proving to be very resilient, increasingly stable, and quite capable of fostering successful family relationships and positive individual outcomes (see Chaps. 12 and 22).

Despite the fact that our society is nowhere near the attainment of gender equality, progress toward this goal has been evident in several areas of American family life. Considering the current economy and gender roles, the fact that a majority of couples now have both spouses in the work force, serves as an important safety net in the event of economic reversals. Although many families increasingly depend on incomes from both spouses to maintain a middle class standard of living, having two incomes also provides greater assurance of being able to weather the many storms of difficult economic times. Moreover, within two parent families with children, both

parents appear to be sharing more domestic and childcare responsibilities (see Chaps. 16 and 25). This pattern contrasts sharply with traditional gender role divisions that existed within idealized nuclear families of the 1950s consisting of bread-winning husbands/fathers situated primarily in instrumental roles and stay-at-home wives/mothers who were focused primarily on expressive functions (Parsons & Bales, 1955).

Changing gender roles also may mean that women and men are looking for spouses or long-term partners who have similar characteristics (e.g., good earning potential, communication skills, parenting skills) that can lead to (or are created from) more equitable relationships between partners, regardless of gender (see Chaps. 10, 18, and 23). Although women still perform the bulk of household labor, research during recent decades has revealed that women have slightly decreased and men have slightly increased the average number of hours they spend on housework. Some observers assert, however, that men have not stepped up sufficiently to compensate for women’s decreasing hours, but, instead, some household labor is either not getting done or is being outsourced (Chap. 25).

Examinations of the work and family literature suggest that indeed the time allocated to both paid and unpaid labor is starting to look quite similar for men and women (Chap. 23). Although improving, however, structural constraints that exist in society continue to impede gender equality and make it more difficult for men and women to assume the same roles equally (see Chap. 7). Such barriers include persisting gender differentials in pay which make it more likely that couples will focus on the male’s job/career. Another example is the persistence of discrimination, based on traditional gender assumptions, that leads to difficulties for the growing number of men who are assuming “non-traditional male roles” by becoming stay-at-home fathers and/or taking time off from work to care for children. Continuing obstacles also deter women from assuming more “non-traditional female roles,” such as becoming primary breadwinners and/or taking secondary roles in caregiving (see Chap. 7). These engendered processes are illustrated in the more robust

impact that family-to-work spillover (e.g., time off of work to care for family) has on women compared to men (see Chap. 23). Despite such continuing obstacles, however, gender equality is being made in all of these aspects of the workplace and other social and institutional settings. Further progress toward gender equality is likely to continue in the future.

Although, in an overall sense, fewer Americans are getting married or at least are waiting longer to do so, both of which are patterns that might be viewed by some observers as negative developments for family life. Instead, a contrary view is that most Americans still desire marriage and will try it out at least once during their lives (see Chaps. 10 and 11). Such trends as those to delay marriage, engage in cohabitation, and for divorce rates to stabilize, suggest that people are (or will be) continuing to seek marriage even though they are spending less time actually being married during the life course.

Despite increases in cohabitation and other forms of non-marital lifestyles, therefore, these trends do not translate into widespread patterns of giving up on marriage, intimate relationships, or parenting as central goals of adult life. Instead, many of these alternatives seem to be precursors to (e.g., the majority of marriages are now preceded by cohabitation) or common alternatives to marriage (or remarriage). Such varied domestic patterns allow individuals to create familial relationships other than conventional marriages (e.g., cohabitation) and traditional nuclear families (e.g., binuclear remarried families), all of which seek a similar form of personal fulfillment through structuring a balance between autonomy and connectedness within their intimate relationships (See Chap. 1). These diverse family forms allow greater capacity for the co-parenting of children, mutually supportive couple relationships, and related benefits for personal well-being that typically have been reserved solely for two-parent nuclear families (Chap. 12). That is, individuals who desire intimate relationships, and/or seek to become parents, but desire different relationship arrangements than traditional nuclear families, now have options that more closely fit their preferences, goals, and needs. Although a

major concern about cohabitation is its relative instability compared to conventional marriage, the diverse nature of these relationships diminishes some of the concerns about this volatility. Some researchers, for example, assert that cohabitation is actually becoming either part of or a step in the dating process (see Chap. 10). In other words, cohabitating relationships have diverse goals (e.g., a trial marriage, sexual gratification, an alternative to marriage, financial security), trajectories, role manifestations, and satisfaction levels. Consequently, it is increasingly recognized that cohabitation will have diverse outcomes and goals that cannot be reduced simplistically to an initial step along an inevitable pathway toward marriage (Chap. 12).

An important concluding message, therefore, is to emphasize the importance of focusing on processes within the families and less so on family structure. That is, compared to all other family forms, the tendency to tout one type of family structure, such as the nuclear, two-parent family (or any other family form for that matter) as the “normal” or optimal arrangement for successful childrearing and adult relationships seems anachronistic at best and an even greater folly in the future. Such a presumptive conclusion is likely to be time-limited in the face of rapid social change and may obscure the adaptive, evolving qualities of diverse families that contribute to strength and resilience. For example, the term “cohabitating couples/families” is a structural construct created for categorizing non-married cohabiting couples who are involved in romantic relationships. In reality, however, not all non-married cohabiting couples fit neatly into a common category having the same expectations, goals, resources, and trajectories (see Chap. 12). Instead, a better approach will be to focus on patterns of relationships within the whole family system, the component relationships between family members (e.g., parent–child, couple/marital, and co-parenting relationships), and the strengths common to relationships across all family structures. Family researchers then will be better prepared to understand and facilitate the strengths and resiliency of diverse American families that are currently a reality and becoming more so everyday. Perhaps more than ever, these

diverse family relationships may be in urgent demand during a time of growing social contextual uncertainty—our island refuges in the midst of troubled waters.

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