

## FAMILY

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**The Agricultural Family** Families in agricultural societies were the primary units for conceiving and raising children, and many agricultural societies put much greater energy in trying to confine sexual activity to the family than had been true of many hunting and gathering groups. Of course families had wider emotional roles as well. But the economic functions of most families were particularly striking. Most agricultural and manufacturing production occurred in family units, though a few outsiders might join in, even participating in the household, to provide extra help. The family as a production unit helps explain other common features. Arranged marriage predominated, except in poorer classes where there were fewer property considerations. Parents negotiated to make sure that a new couple was economically viable. Independent courtship was limited or nonexistent. Dowry arrangements formed part of the negotiation – land or cattle, for peasant families, a stake in an artisanal shop in many urban settings. Many cultures encouraged the development of love after marriage, helping to arrange get-acquainted periods; this was a feature of Hindu practice, for example. By the same token, divorce was usually difficult if not impossible, because it would have such disruptive economic effects. China allowed disgruntled wives to return to their fathers, but this was an extreme move and a disgrace for the women involved. Christianity discouraged divorce outright. Islam was more permissive, particularly for men, but in practice family disruption was rare.

**Regional Variants** Regional specifics varied, of course – and not just in divorce. Polygamy was a key issue, common in some places, officially unknown in others. Most regions emphasized the extended family, with close links among generations and among siblings, based usually on the predominance of relationships among male family members with wives going to their husbands' households. But in Western Europe in the later postclassical period, marriage age rose for most ordinary people – with a substantial minority not marrying at all. The result was less overlap with potential grandparents, and more emphasis on the nuclear family. The position of widows varied greatly. Widows could be a real problem in the West, for women did not always have secure property rights which left widows at the mercy of male relatives. Protection was greater under Islamic law. African practice, encouraging marriage of a widow to one of her husband's brothers, was intended to provide protection, though men had disproportionate property right in the African tradition. While arranged marriage was widespread, conditions varied. In the Middle East and south Asia, girls might be officially married at a young age, to cement property arrangements; actual cohabitation with their usually older husbands might wait for several years. Christianity insisted in principle that both parties should consent to a marriage, though this did not always occur; but really early marriage ages were rare in Christian cultures.

**Emotional Functions** Historians are just beginning to try to deal with the emotional aspect of family life in the past, particularly on a global basis. Many cultures encouraged abundant love for children – more, probably, in East Asia than in Europe, though comparisons are difficult. In some cases mothers had particular incentive to form close emotional ties with their sons, for this would promote a protective relationship later on. Other kinds of love might seem a bit riskier, though they were often celebrated in literature. Young people were discouraged from “falling in love” on their own, whatever the patterns after marriage occurred. Historians also debate the impact of grief in family life. Deaths of children, deaths of husbands in war or accident, deaths of wives in childbirth were all quite common. They did spark grief, but this might be conditioned by some sense of inevitability; and religious rituals often provided solace as well.

**Modern Changes** In the long run, the great change in the global history of family life, over the past two centuries, has been the decline in the economic functions of families. With industrialization and urbanization the family is less likely to serve as production unit. It still has economic functions, in socializing children and in sharing spousal resources. And shared consumer patterns in the family can provide a newer economic outlet. But the change is real, and with it a potential decrease in the importance of the family, a greater opportunity for individuals to abandon families or not form them in the first place. In many industrial societies, divorce rates have risen over time on average; and in some, including Japan as well as parts of Western Europe, percentages of married people have declined as well. Changes in economic function may invite greater attention to other family functions, not only in consumerism and leisure, but also in emotional interactions. New pressures may arise to seek marriage relationships on the basis of emotional and sexual attraction; though many cultures maintain substantial stake in the earlier pattern of arranged marriage. Another common tension involves extended families. Urbanization often splits extended

families. More intense interactions within marriage, and between parents and children, may also discourage traditional levels of attention to older or lateral relatives. Even too many visits by extended family members may prove to be an emotional and economic burden, an issue mentioned by many urban African couples.

**Regional Variations** Western society entered the industrial age with a set of cultural changes that sought to emphasize the emotional importance of the family, as a refuge in a competitive economy. New expectations about love encouraged new kinds of courtship practices, with less parental role; they might also lead to new disappointments with actual family life. Later, the Western family was also greatly affected, particularly after World War II, by new levels of involvement of married women in the labor force. This might provide new resources for the family, but it also raised new questions about care for children and household. In Russia and China, family life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was deeply affected by the communist revolution. Communist authorities were somewhat suspicious of families as potential havens for outdated ideas; they set up youth groups to counter too much family influence, and on collective farms even sought to replace family roles at mealtime. In contrast to the West and (ultimately) Japan in industrialization, the communist regimes maintained the role of women in the labor force, complicating the roles of wives and mothers. Persistence of arranged marriages, despite some counterpressures, marks family patterns in south Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Conditions for older family members may be another important variable. The introduction of new welfare provisions reduced the role of the family in caring for older parents in Western societies by the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. In East Asia, despite or because of greater official veneration for the elderly, state pension systems are less well developed, reliance on family support greater. In India, attention to the elderly, as a policy issue, is complicated by the more obvious numbers and needs of young people. Virtually everywhere, however, the numbers of the elderly are growing, and where birth rates are low their percentages are growing as well. Here is another set of issues faced by families and, often, government alike.

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**Suggested Reading:**

*Emotions in History: Lost and Found.* By Ute Frevert (Central European University Press, 2011).

*Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy.* Edited by Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Indiana University Press, 2006).

*The Family: A World History.* By Mary Jo Maynes and Ann Waltner (Oxford University Press, 2012).

**Discussion**

1. What were the distinctive features of ancient Mediterranean and Mesoamerican families?
2. What were the functions of polygamy in the Agricultural Age?
3. Discuss the nature of family forms in sub-Saharan Africa? What was the impact of slavery?
4. What function did harems serve in Islamic society? What problems are there in scholarship focused on harems?
5. Discuss the possibilities in developing a history of the emotional functions of families in world history. What are some key regional patterns? What are some important changes over time?
6. What was the impact of industrialization on the structure and functions of family?
7. Why and how has marriage changed in advanced industrial, societies? How do the United States and Japan compare in this regard?