

THE FAMILY IN HISTORY – Ancient Period

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Families in Hunting and Gathering Societies

Background Until about 12,000 years ago, humans lived in various versions of a hunting and gathering economy, in which men specialized in periodic hunts and women were responsible for gathering seeds, nuts and berries (which often contributed over half the calories to the total diet). These societies varied greatly depending on local environmental conditions; for example, where fishing was possible it could lead to somewhat more settled communities. But hunting and gathering groups did share some broadly common features. They were fairly small, usually with about 40-80 people roughly half of whom were children. Again, with some variation they moved around with some frequency, though this might occur within a roughly common area. The long hunting and gathering period – which persisted widely until about 7,000 years ago and still exists in some isolated regions – raises obvious questions for any effort to see the family in a world history context: what precedents did these societies set for family life? How, and how much, would family life change when hunting and gathering yielded to the predominance of an agricultural economy?

Evidence Discussions of hunting and gathering societies are constrained by available evidence, particularly on subjects like family. We have little relevant record of family conditions in the hunting and gathering groups that existed before agriculture; archeological data are helpful in many ways – for example, on average body size – but they have less bearing on family patterns. Generalizations thus rely heavily on anthropological findings from contemporary groups, whose conditions however might be somewhat different from those in the past. Further, these groups vary greatly from one region to the next, at least in some respects, limiting the credibility of generalizations. Nevertheless, some findings, while well short of a full picture of family life, are useful.

Basic patterns A typical hunting and gathering group consists of only a few, multigenerational families. Families are aware, however, of larger kinship ties with relatives in other groups, over a wider area. This kinship knowledge, or a sense of larger families/clans, is carefully transmitted through oral stories. It is vital to help families avoid incestuous relationships, which are widely shunned. However in some cases marriage outside the larger clan is also regulated. Marriage partners are frequently selected outside the single group, with the effect not only of avoiding incest but promoting greater genetic diversity and, also, helping to keep the peace among neighboring groups.

Sexuality Sexual pleasure is a distinctive part of family life, broadly construed, in many hunting and gathering societies. Children are sometimes encouraged to imitate sex acts. Among some groups, as in Australia, adults actively instruct children in sexuality. Once puberty occurs, sexual experimentation is common. This was anthropologist Margaret Mead's finding in studying Samoa in the 1920s, and while this was later challenged subsequent research has confirmed the main contentions. In some other cases, adults actively initiate teenagers into sexual activity. Sexual latitude continues even after marriage. In Papua New Guinea, groups build special huts for extramarital relations. In some cases, a person is expected to apologize to his or her spouse for such activity, but it is not proscribed. Clearly, at least in many hunting and gathering societies, the family is not defined as clearly in terms of sexual exclusivity as would be the case in agricultural societies; the difference seems particularly marked for women.

Family size Rather unexpectedly, birth rates in hunting and gathering societies are relatively low on average. A human couple, if no limitations on procreative sex are introduced from puberty to female menopause, can produce an average of roughly 15 children. The average includes that fact that in some couples, up to 20%, one or both partners will be biologically sterile, which means that many fertile couples exceed the overall average. Hunting and gathering families, however, average about 5-6 over a couple's lifetime. This makes excellent sense in two respects: the group seeks to avoid population increase, which forces some members to leave in order to preserve economic viability or which may require that the whole group seek new territory. And frequent mobility, seeking food, would make the presence of too many young children undesirable. How the desired birth rate is achieved, however, is not yet clear, but one method definitely involved prolonged lactation (which reduces though does not eliminate the chance of a new conceptions). Women nurse children for up to four years.

Childrearing Individual families take less responsibility for childrearing than does the small group as a whole. Children are also encouraged to play with each other without intrusive adult supervision, providing more abundant opportunities for spontaneous play than would exist in many later societies. In some regions, women take young children with them when foraging, though this resulted in lower productivity; in other cases, the children are left to the supervision of older women back in the encampment. It is vital to note that work on average requires relatively little time per day (two and a half hours is a common estimate), giving adults considerable opportunity to play with children or enjoy children's own activities.

Mortality and the family Death rates among children before age 15 are relatively high by modern standards – up to 40% in some cases, which helps explain how the average birth rate would not necessarily expand the group's size (though this was a recurrent possibility). Once adulthood was attained, life expectancy could stretch into the early 70s. Different groups have different approaches to the older adults in their midst. Some value elders for their wisdom (including kinship data) in societies dependent on oral transmission of knowledge. Grandmothers, particularly, often play a crucial role in child care, particularly when mothers themselves are dealing with more than one young child. In other cases however the elderly are seen as a dangerous burden to resources and are sometimes abandoned.

Economic life A hunting and gathering group depends much more on overall coordination for successful economic activities, than on specific family operations. This is particularly true in hunting large game, where team work is required. Women's foraging activities also usually involve group efforts, though here division of results by family might be more feasible. Overall, however, the family is less clearly a production unit than would be true in many agricultural societies.

Gender and stratification Hunting and gathering societies exhibit little or no social stratification, which as result is not a factor in family life. Gender roles however are clearly differentiated, leading to distinctive training of young adolescents and, sometimes, some gender specific play activities by youngsters. However, the status of women is high, based on their major economic contributions to the viability of the group, and presumably this applies to family life as well as group power structure.

Evaluation A fascinating literature has emerged among anthropologists and others, praising the high quality of life in hunting and gathering societies: relatively good diets, lack of much contagious disease or group warfare, social equality, absence of many unfulfilled wants or ambitions. This is worth serious consideration in world history, as against any notion of steady human progress, but interestingly it does not single out the quality of family life (except for the important point about relative gender equality). Family identity was clearly important at the kinship level, but the family had fewer functions overall – as opposed to the wider group – than would be the case with agriculture.

Study questions

1. What were the main purposes of the hunting and gathering family?
2. What was distinctive about the demographic patterns of these societies?
3. Why and how did gender roles not lead to major power distinctions in hunting and gathering groups?

Further reading

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The Impact of the Agricultural Revolution on the Family

Background Agriculture first developed on the shores of the Black Sea around 9000 BCE, from which it would gradually spread to surrounding areas –ultimately reaching South Asia, Europe, and Africa. Separate centers of agriculture later emerged in southern China (around 7000 BCE) and central America (5000 BCE), based on different staple crops. The spur to the invention of agriculture was some combination of a shift in resources that reduced game supply (over-hunting or climate change) plus overpopulation of some hunter-gatherer groups that forced a turn to a different economic base that could generate a greater food supply. This occurred despite the fact that agriculture also brought a number of disadvantages, including higher disease rates and more demanding work. Agricultural societies varied greatly – as we will see in discussing specific family systems. But they also generated some common patterns, very different from those in hunting and gathering groups – and here too, family loomed large. We lack any direct record of the transition, or the tensions it must have generated. But several broad outcomes would deeply affect family history for many centuries, wherever agriculture spread.

The family economy The labor needs of agricultural economies, combined with the capacity for greater food output, converted many agricultural families to basic production units. Family members, sometimes joined by outsiders regarded as part of the household, generated most of the output of peasant agriculture, and also that of most urban artisans in agricultural cities. Wider collaborations contributed as well, as in larger village groups that cooperated at harvest time, but the family unit was essential. Much of the basic history of the agricultural family flowed from the need to organize a satisfactory basis for economic production.

Demography This shift from the looser economic arrangement of hunter-gatherers was closely related to a measurably different demographic pattern: agricultural families had, and sought, higher birth rates on average. Family size moved up to a standard of 8-9 children (again, with great variation in individual cases) – still well under the biological maximum but capable of supplying much of the labor, and the legacy, that agricultural families required. (Correspondingly, lactation tended to drop to 12-18 months, meaning that child births were spaced closer together on average than had been the case before.) Between 30-50% of the children born died young, though it was still possible for a family to find itself burdened with more offspring than it could accommodate. Upper class families, wealthier and capable of placing children in various positions of power (or marrying off daughters to promote family alliances) had more children than did ordinary people. The culture of agriculture societies emphasized the importance of abundant children for happiness and as a sign of family (and masculine) success. At the same time many agricultural families faced a challenge in trying to prevent unwanted numbers, sometimes easing off on sexual activity after the initial decade or so of marriage (while often hoping for a final child shortly before menopause, who could help care for a couple in later age).

Property Agriculture quickly generated an emphasis on property, particularly of course in land. People wanted to protect the results of their labor in clearing land and digging wells, and also sought ways to transfer resources to later generations: and these criteria created the new desire to define property and to associate it with the family. (Obviously, social class differences affected this feature as well, with the upper classes based on a capacity to seize and maintain unusual amounts of property.) Property in turn would prove to be an important factor in marriage arrangements, which usually involved negotiations (mainly by parents) to make sure that a new couple had adequate property, often through a son's probable inheritance combined with an economic dowry provided by the bride's family. (Specifics here

varied with the region.) Inheritance loomed large in agricultural families, and gave parents a clear basis for encouraging obedience, and faithful labor, from their growing children.

Gender: the patriarchal family All agricultural societies emphasized huge distinctions in the power and roles attributed to men and women, with men now gaining clear superiority, regarded unquestionably as heads of household. Demography played a role here: women were spending more time in pregnancy and caring for young children; this did not end their economic contributions to the family economy but it tended to make them subsidiary. Women tended household gardens, sometimes cared for livestock, but in most agricultural societies the care for staple high-calorie crops was primarily a male responsibility. Simply stating the primacy of male power conceals a host of specific arrangements in actual family life, as later chapters will suggest, but its presence was inescapable. Gender role division was particularly marked in upper class families, where women's physical labor was not required so directly; it was somewhat more muted particularly for the peasantry, where shared work continued to be required particularly at peak times in the agricultural cycle.

Sexuality Not surprisingly agricultural societies placed a heavy emphasis on procreative sexuality, sometimes looking askance at other purposes in sexuality including mutual pleasure. Equally important was a concerted effort to confine sexual activity, particularly by women, to the family, with disapproval of sex before or outside marriage. It has been plausibly argued that the basis for this approach was a desire (by men) to assure that their offspring, to whom property would be bequeathed, were theirs biologically. Punishments for sexual transgressions, and efforts to assure sexual fidelity, bore disproportionately on women. All agricultural societies displayed these signs of a sexual double standard. Here too the changes from hunting and gathering precedent were striking. Finally, enforcement of family sexual norms, particularly around regulation and protection of women, was strongly associated with family honor, though to a greater extent in some regional cultures than in others; both violence and shaming might factor into this feature of family life.

Childhood The primary purpose of childhood in agricultural societies was preparation for work and actual participation in the family economy, with first steps taken at a fairly young age. Correspondingly all agricultural cultures placed heavy emphasis on the importance of children's obedience. This was not the whole story. Children might be valued for other reasons; they were usually given considerable time for play under village supervision; they might also receive some formal schooling. But the relationship between childhood and the family economy was always fundamental, and parental emphasis was shaped accordingly. The presence of frequent deaths in childhood, though not new, was also a major factor: it was the rare family that did not experience the deaths of several children, the rare childhood that did not involve experiencing the deaths of several siblings. Figuring out how the impact of child mortality factored into family emotional life is one of the challenges of evaluating the family in agricultural societies. Finally, gender distinctions among children, with boys valued more because of their future labor value and as heirs to family property, were a common feature of agricultural childhood as well – though individual girls might be deeply cherished.

Old age Despite a low average life expectancy, resulting primarily from children's death rates, a fair number of people lived into their sixties or beyond in agricultural societies. They might be valued for their wisdom or their parental service. But there was a tension based on expectations of property inheritance – that might be delayed by undue longevity – and by the fact that older people might no longer be able to contribute necessary labor. Tension applied particularly to older women, since their primary family function ended with menopause. Solutions varied, and widows commanded great power in some agricultural settings, but widowhood was a frequent challenge for all concerned.

Family stability Divorce was uncommon in most agricultural societies if only because it was difficult and risky to break up the economic unit, where contributions from both spouses were vital. In some cultures, and in upper class circles, instability was often slightly more common. But if outright divorce was rare, instability frequently resulted from the death of a parent (about one in ten women died because of complications in child birth, meaning that about one in eighty childbirths led to death). Men in these circumstances frequently sought remarriage; hence among other things the frequency of often unflattering stories about stepmothers. The question of what to do with a widowed young mother was a greater

dilemma. Family historians urge that the various complexities of family life in agricultural societies warn against undue nostalgia – even in a modern age when family instability is more frequently voluntary.

Conclusion

These general features of family life in agricultural societies are just that – general. They were translated into quite different specifics in different places and chronological periods. But they were not widely transcended, which is why they deserve emphasis before turning to particular regions. It is also important to remember, of course, that hunting and gathering societies persisted along with agriculture for many centuries, and that a third variant, the nomadic herding economy, would also generate distinctive family forms.

Study questions

1. What is the sexual double standard and why did it emerge with agricultural society?
2. How did the treatment of children change with agriculture, compared to hunting and gathering patterns.
3. Was the family more important in agricultural societies than it had been before?
4. What were some of the main structural differences between upper-class families and those of the bulk of the population, in agricultural societies?

Further reading

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Early Civilizations

Background The emergence of Sumerian city states in the Tigris-Euphrates river valley, about 3500 BCE, marks another major stage in the history of agricultural societies. These more complex social forms, often called civilizations, developed also in several other river-valley centers, including Egypt along the Nile, the Indus river valley, and a bit later northern China along the Yellow River. Civilization as a form of human organization added several important features to the contours of agricultural societies: it involved somewhat larger cities (even as the vast majority of the population remained rural), with more economic, political and religious functions; it generated organized states, as opposed to more informal leadership; and it depended on the introduction of writing. These features were not nearly as decisive in changing the family as the advent of agriculture had been; in some respects, they merely provided better evidence of agricultural characteristics thanks to the generation of written records. But there were some results worth noting, many of which would continue to describe the history of complex societies even after the early, river valley period.

Law codes One of the primary functions of early governments involved clarifying social rules, for example in defining the rights associated with property – in hopes of reducing private disputes. This in turn inevitably affected families, though again the results may have largely confirmed existing arrangements. The famous law code of the Babylonian emperor Hammurabi, in the 18th century BCE, thus stipulated that property brought by women into marriage belonged to the husband in most circumstances. It also clarified rules of inheritance for property ultimately passed on to the eldest son.

Dissolution of marriage and sexual fidelity The Hammurabic Code also defined conditions in which marriages could be ended, again with pronounced preference to the claims of husbands. Wives were not unprotected. A famous clause thus insisted that if a husband divorced his wife for her failure to bear children, he must return the dowry she had brought from her father – though he then could proceed. Husbands also had full power to decide on punishments for wives caught having sex with another man: they were completely within their rights to throw both of them into the river (where it was assumed they would drown), though he could also decide to forgive her. No such provisions applied to wives whose

husbands were adulterers. However, wives could legitimately abandon marriage if their husbands failed to provide for them (though they must also relinquish property in the process, so that the husband could form another family unit). But husbands could also abandon or even kill wives who shamed them by failing to take proper care of the household. Obviously provisions of this sort greatly privileged husbands but they were also clearly aimed at defining and protecting some of the basic purposes of the family. A full quarter of the provisions of the code applied to family life, including the rights of parents.

Early states Beyond law codes and other writings that clarified male primacy (common in Egypt as well as Mesopotamia), the key functions of early governments had little direct impact on families, which were largely left to administer their own affairs. However, the emergence of small bureaucracies and military staffs added a further division between men and women – for only men were qualified for service – as would long be the case.

Literacy The advent of writing, initially through fairly elaborate systems of characters, required the creation of some formal education; it took several years to learn the scripts. Most families did not participate in the new system, but provision for schooling would affect the family life of some largely upper-class units. Fathers would have to decide if schooling was a sensible option, and if their sons were qualified. Literacy in agricultural civilizations also created yet another division between sons and daughters, for it was always assumed that sons were the primary candidates for schooling – since only they would be eligible for resulting jobs. Here was another distinction that would last throughout the Agricultural Age, from this point forward.

City life Cities in early civilizations were small, embracing at most a tenth of the total population. Their existence could generate some changes in family lives, at least in certain cases. One relevant innovation was the advent of formal prostitution—identified as a profession from the first Sumerian lists occupational lists onward. There is no way to know how extensive prostitution was, or whether it mainly attracted unmarried men or men before marriage; it surely reflected the economic difficulties faced by unmarried women. Whatever the specifics it would be a feature of urban life from that point onward.

Civilizational differences The river valley civilizations for which the most abundant evidence exists, Mesopotamia and Egypt, exhibited some intriguing differences in family life, particularly relating to gender – despite a number of basic similarities. Egyptians, while emphasizing the importance of male control, took a more benign view of women than was true of their counterparts in the Middle East. A few exceptional wives or daughters wielded political power; women were more frequently represented in Egyptian art. But differences were not just a matter of tone. Travelers to Egypt from the Middle East remarked on another striking distinction: Egyptians apparently did not widely practice infanticide. In early Middle Eastern civilizations (and, as we will see, in many other agricultural civilizations), many families reacted to the problem of unwanted numbers of children by putting some to death, mainly by exposing them to the elements. And in this pattern, girls were far more commonly involved than boys, because of the greater utility of the latter to family work and inheritance. Egypt however, possibly because of the unusual prosperity promoted by Nile river irrigation systems, apparently did not participate in this practice, and indeed infanticide was punishable by law as well as proscribed by religious belief. Here was an early example of the different approaches individual civilizations might take to major features of family life.

Study questions

1. Did the advent of more complex societies fundamentally change family life in agricultural regions?
2. Why was it always assumed that schooling was more important for boys than girls?
3. What were the main reasons that might justify divorce, according to early law codes?

Further reading

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Judaism and the family

Background Though Jewish tradition posits earlier origins, the Jewish people begin to be identified in the Eastern Mediterranean by 1100 BCE, and Judaism as a distinct religion formed from about 500 CE onward. The religion was noteworthy for its emphasis on monotheism and its intertwining of ethics with religious authority, and of course its characteristics would also strongly shape later Christianity and Islam. Despite geographic dispersion, Jewish peoples and culture demonstrate remarkable continuity into the present day. From the standpoint of family history, Judaism offered some interesting emphases though its broad outlines fit within the general features of the family in agricultural societies. Several traditional features have been significantly modified during the past two centuries, particularly in the Reform movements.

Matrilineality An important feature of Jewish family tradition involves matrilineality, that is, tracing the family descent from mother rather than father. It is not entirely clear when this developed, though Orthodox tradition assumes early origin. Clear evidence however dates from the early centuries CE, when it was stipulated in Jewish law. Though most large cultures are now patrilineal (including Chief Native American tribes (Cherokee and Iroquois among others) and some groups in various parts of Asia and Africa. Some 19th-century anthropologists argued that matrilineality was the standard approach of early peoples everywhere, though this is now debated. An extreme of matrilineality involves newly weds taking residence with the groom's mother rather than father – a practice in some African groups – though this is not standard practice. More commonly, as in Jewish tradition, the main function of matrilineality is to identify kinships – including attribution of Jewish identity in cases of offspring of a mixed marriage. While matrilineal cultures sometimes accord greater importance to women than is common in agricultural societies, they can also coexist with strong patriarchal structures, as was the case with Judaism.

Centrality of the family As in most societies, the family was held as a basic pillar of society, divinely sanctioned and a supreme human benefit. References in the Torah made the point clear: “the family is the essential cell of human society”; “the family is one of nature's masterpieces”; “when trouble comes, it's your family that supports you”. Marriage was a major community event, with a variety of symbolic religious rituals attached. The family was also the core institution in handling death and grief, with a number of special ceremonies and periodic remembrances for family members. It is also important to note that, while social distinctions developed among Jews based on wealth, basic family practices varied less by class than was true of many agricultural societies, in part because of the common emphasis on monogamy.

Gender balance Jewish law and wider religious injunctions made it clear that husbands and fathers were heads of household, though mothers deserved esteem as well. Law and custom stipulated strict monogamy. Gender divisions might be enhanced in practice by the importance given to religious education and scholarship, which was a male preserve, and by the fact that men and women worshipped separately. On the other hand, the wife had a central role in weekly Sabbath ceremonies. Divorce was not encouraged but it was possible, however it could only be initiated by the husband, though some interpretations of Jewish law gave women some indirect opportunities as well.

Sexuality The importance of sexual pleasure was recognized, but the primary purpose was procreation. A father who did not or could not produce at least two offspring was regarded with disdain (interestingly, no direct onus was placed on women, presumably because they were under the husband's direction). Sexuality outside marriage was strongly reprobated, and homosexual behavior was forbidden in principle (as, also in principle, was male masturbation). Strong stigma attached to menstruation, and women were forbidden to have intercourse for at least seven days during their period; and in some versions of Judaism (as in Ethiopia) they were also banished to separate quarters.

Parental authority Children owed their parents the same obedience that adults owed to God. Injunctions in this category were very strong. Fathers had extensive rights to punish disobedient sons. As the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy specified, “If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother... Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him and bring him to the elders of his city. And they shall say... ‘This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ And all men of his city shall stone him with

stones, that he die.” On the other hand, belief in individual souls led to strong efforts to prevent infanticide. And Jewish scripture urged the importance of parental attention to the religious and moral guidance of children. It would be misleading to overemphasize the punitive aspect.

Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of the Jewish approach to the family? Did Judaism introduce major new principles for family life?
2. How did Jewish use of matrilineality mesh with a patriarchal family structure?
3. How did Jewish law and practice emphasize the importance of the family?

Further reading

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The Family in Classical China

The classical period In several key regions of the world – China, South Asia, the Middle East and Mediterranean – larger and more elaborate civilizations took shape in the centuries after roughly 800 BCE, in what is called the classical period of world history. The key theme of this long period – which would last until the fall of the great classical empires after the 2nd century CE – was the elaboration of characteristic social, cultural and political forms in these separate regional holdings. This was the era in which for example Confucianism was established in China, the caste system in India. Regional characteristics very much included some signature family values and institutions. These took shape within the context of agricultural society. They overlapped as a result in many ways – as in patriarchal authority structures. But they also differed, and some of these differences would persist well beyond the classical period itself, inviting ongoing comparative analysis.

China It was during the classical period that China unified its core geography and ultimately established its characteristic emphasis on relatively strong central government. The country included many different regions and ethnic groups, and these contributed to diverse family structures; a few ethnicities, for example, were strongly matrilineal in a country that overall emphasized patrilineality. Yet despite diversity, including pronounced social inequality, some generalizations about family forms have considerable validity.

Confucianism The Confucian value system, taking shape initially in a period of political instability but later promoted in support of the powerful Han dynasty, strongly emphasized the importance of the family as the essential building block of the social order and a training ground in appropriate political values. In addition to prioritizing families and the importance of procreation, Confucianism stressed hierarchy within the family, with husband and father atop the pyramid and careful gradations not only between males and females, but in terms of birth order. Children were to be trained in elaborate manners that would exemplify family hierarchy, with first-born sons, for example, given a special place to stand in relation to other siblings, in any family gathering.

The extended family China was unquestionably among the societies the placed heavy emphasis on kinship relations within the extended family, usually defined in terms of patrilineal relations. Household varied, between patterns based on coresidence of the eldest son (and his family) with the father, or coresidence of all the male progeny, with the household then divided after the father died (sometimes, with eldest son gaining the largest share). Manners stressed the importance of kin position, often more than individual names, with greetings identifying “uncle” or “third brother”; people outside the kin network, in contrast, were accorded far less attention unless they had some visible social rank or were to be treated as formal guests.

Gender Confucianism easily blended with the common agricultural emphasis on male authority. Daughters were far less esteemed than sons; one family guide urged that baby boys be placed as the side of the parents' bed, but girls at the base, to demonstrate their inferior position from the outset. Husbands assumed decision-making power over wives. Marriages might be dissolved; a woman might decide to leave her husband and return to her parents, but this was a clear and shameful failure, to be avoided if at all possible. The position of single women was quite unclear, given the assumptions that all would marry. Yet there were complications to the gender hierarchy. In the first place, in an extended family, if a woman survived her husband and had close relations with her sons (particularly, the eldest son), she might wield considerable power, including authority over her daughters-in-law. Second, it has been suggested that women devoted considerable attention to precisely this close relationship with sons; several stories suggested the obedience that sons continued to profess to elderly mothers despite the fact that, formally, they had the upper hand. Finally, while Confucianism emphasized hierarchy and female deference, it also urged respectful mutuality. A handbook written for women during the Han dynasty by Ban Zhao (an exceptionally well educated woman), that would be republished through the 19th century, urged the different duties and powers of husbands and wives, but insisted that wives who were diligent and deferential deserved good treatment and even an appropriate access to education.

Concubinage Many upper-class men, including government leaders, took one or more concubines in addition to their wives, presumably primarily to assure that they would be able to produce sons. This was not a practice most families could afford to indulge in. However, successful businessmen in addition to the more clearly privileged scholar gentry took up the practice. At various points, Chinese governments sought to regulate concubinage, mainly to protect the position of first wives. Internal family rivalries, and particularly disputes over the treatment of various children, were predictably common. As one statement suggested, "since the mothers have strong feelings, the sons become separate factions".

Parents and children The authority of parents was strongly emphasized. A saying was, "Parents are never wrong". Children were urged to ask their parents daily if they were warm or cool enough, depending on the season. In the upper classes (and in exceptional cases beyond this), providing education for sons was unusually important, particularly when the Han dynasty established the beginnings of the examination system for access to bureaucratic positions. The education of girls was unsystematic at best. Gender distinctions also showed strongly in infanticide, which was widely practiced as a means of family population control but also amid the preference for sons; girls were most commonly victim, and it is estimated that up to a quarter of all children born were exposed to death. Fathers expected to arrange marriages for daughters, sometimes in their mid-teens; at the imperial level, daughters might be sent as wives for nomadic leaders, as a diplomatic gesture, to the dismay of the girls themselves. With all this it is important to note moments of warmth, for example with fathers who took a particular shine to an individual daughter, like the man who noted "in the evening when I come home, she would welcome me with a big smile". Or the poet who commented on the death of beloved daughter as he visited her grave: "How I wept over you, I could see your eyes and face. How could I ever forget your words and expressions."

After the classical period Many of the key characteristics of Chinese family life persisted well beyond the classical period; some, like the preference for sons, are still operative today. Before the modern period, important changes often carried further values that had already been established. Thus a major shift that began with the Tang dynasty in the 7th century CE was the practice of foot binding, in which the bones in a young girl's foot were broken so that she could only walk with a halting gait, regarded as a particular sign of grace and beauty. This was not a practice that working peasants could afford to indulge in, because they needed women's work, but it spread beyond the upper classes particularly in the cities (some parents did it to girls in hopes of attracting attention for them from upper-class males), into the 19th century. Later Chinese governments also set up elaborate awards to commemorate women who defended their sexual virtue, even at cost of death, or widows who remained faithful to their dead husbands.

Study questions

1. How did Confucianism help shape family values and structures in China?
2. What were the main social class differences in family life?

3. How might gender relations in the family in practice prove more complicated than official hierarchies suggested?

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South Asia

Background The development of Indian society during the classical period highlighted three major characteristics. Religion was strongly emphasized (more than in China), as Hinduism took shape; Buddhism, the other major religion, ultimately had less influence in India itself as opposed to other parts of Asia. The caste system was closely linked to Hinduism, establishing rigid boundaries for social groups that defined what jobs they could do, what their social contacts were; marriage outside the caste was forbidden in principle and usually in fact. Finally, India was often divided by a variety of regional states; while there were two periods featuring larger empires, these did not establish strong traditions for central governments or, indeed, for extensive political life.

Hinduism Hinduism strongly emphasized the importance of marriage and procreation as religious duties, as well as obligations to the larger family and ancestors. Family life fulfilled *dharma* appropriate to the relevant phase of life. Having children, particularly male children, was obviously essential to preserve the family line. Husbands and fathers, in fulfilling their functions, paid a debt to the gods, along with appropriate sacrifices and prayers. Most Hindu households had a space for prayer and religious contemplation.

Extended family: functions Indian society placed great emphasis on the extended family. Households often combined several generations. Children were often encouraged to develop relationships with aunts and uncles that were as strong as those with their own parents. The economic importance of the extended family loomed large, providing the basic work force in agriculture and business alike. Kinship contacts could help rural migrants to cities find jobs. Many Indian merchants used kin to establish farflung trading links, rather than developing more impersonal business bureaucracies (this would also be true for merchant families in the Middle East).

Extended family: regulations Extended families also established prohibited categories for marriage selection, beyond immediate kin. These varied by group and region. At the same time, though again depending on region and linguistic group, marriage of certain cousins was both permissible and in fact common – for example, the children of two brothers (but not perhaps the child of a sister – again the specificity was important). Kinship marriage, subject to specifics, would also be an important part of both Middle Eastern and African traditions.

Marriage It is not clear if arranged marriage loomed larger in classical India, for family formation, than in other societies – it certainly does today – but it was certainly the standard basis for mate selection. Fathers took the lead, often consulting informally with their wives. Parental involvement may have been particularly important because of the complex caste and extended family rules about eligible partners. Children were expected to accept parental choice without dispute even though (in the upper classes particularly) they often had never met their bride or groom before the ceremony. (Girls might be married as young as 8, though in these cases they did not take up coresidence until later.) Hindu marriage celebrations themselves were unusually extensive and festive, multi-day affairs aimed at launching the new family with appropriate joy and support.

Sexuality and emotion Sexual desire was a category recognized in Hinduism, and it possible that it gained greater emphasis in the Hindu tradition than in some other regions. Certainly the famous sexual

manual, the *Kama Sutra*, produced in this period (probably around 200 CE), was an unusually elaborate guide to emotional and sexual fulfillment, with considerable attention to the pleasure of both parties. All literate cultures produced sex guides, but the detail and emphasis in the Indian document were distinctive. Sexuality was also strongly emphasized in much Hindu art. None of this provides direct evidence of sexual practice, but at least the cultural context was somewhat distinctive. On the other hand, early marriage for many girls was clearly designed to impose the institution before any signs of sexual stirrings. Marriage tradition interestingly allowed a get-acquainted period of three days for bride and groom after their ceremony but before undertaking sexual activity, possibly resulting in greater opportunity for sexual and emotional compatibility despite the fact that the marriage itself had been based on other criteria.

Parents and children Hindu emphasis on the spiritual potential of each person may have discouraged infanticide, though the data are not conclusive. Certainly both pregnancy and childbirth were widely celebrated, with special religious rituals at a birth. Young children of both sexes were indulged, with many opportunities for play, though more serious training set in after early childhood (including rigorous religious education for sons in the Brahman class). Mothers were particularly responsible for indulgence, offering breastfeeding as an occasional treat even after a child was largely weaned.

Later developments The creation of an Islamic minority in India after the classical period altered family patterns in some respects, particularly in northern India – even among Hindus (see chapter 11). After the classical period also, Hindu families in some regions – not all – adopted the practice of *sati*, where a widow would throw herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband, on grounds that she had nothing else to live for. As with foot binding in China, this showed a tendency for heightened gender distinctions in the further evolution of agricultural societies. At the same time, many of the traditions for family life established in the classical period continued with less adjustment.

Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of the traditional Indian family?
2. What were the differences between Confucian and Hindu endorsements of the family as an institution?
3. What are some obvious complexities in discussing the role of gender in Indian family relationships?

Further reading

S. Vats and S. Mugdal, eds., *Women and Society in Ancient India* (Om Publications, 1999)

Suvira Jaswall, “The Position of Women in Early India: problems and perspectives,” *Proceedings of the India History Conference* 42 (1981)

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Families in Classical Greece and Rome

Background Classical society in the Mediterranean region developed first in Greece and then the Hellenistic states, but was then followed by the rise of Rome and the expansion of the Roman Empire. The society was marked by a rather flexible polytheistic religion, which yielded stories of the often chaotic family life of the gods and goddesses but not the kind of religious endorsement provided by Hinduism. Political life was vital, as in China, but with less emphasis on the family as mirror of the state. In Rome, however, particularly under the early Empire, the government actively promoted the importance of family life and procreation. (The Emperor Augustus was concerned about signs of a decline in the birth rate of the aristocracy, and worked to redress this.) Social structure was marked by the importance of slavery, along with strong emphasis on the importance of an aristocracy at the other end of the social scale.

Household Extended families were emphasized both in Greece and Rome, and households often included grandparents, a variety of servants and others – providing a number of adults who might relate to the children involved. Extended families were defined, as in China, by relationship to the father.

Families were also responsible for the arrangement of marriage. While very young marriage was rare, women were often committed in their early teens, to males in their mid-20s.

Family honor Mediterranean society developed strong notions of family honor, associated particularly with the need to control female sexual behavior and punish deviation or violation. In Roman law, for example, the father of a married woman who committed adultery was authorized to kill her, while the husband was expected to divorce her; failure to do so was a mark of dishonor. Revenge efforts against rape were also prominent. To some extent the famous Trojan War was a demonstration of the power of possessive sexual jealousy.

Gender patterns Greek culture held women to be markedly inferior, and in the upper classes there was some effort to seclude them in the family compound. Roman attitudes were more lenient, though early Roman law stipulated the power of husbands to punish deviant wives. Later Roman law provided more protection for women, who also had considerable presence in public gatherings. At the same time, divorce was not uncommon among the upper classes in Roman society. In cases of divorce, as in all patriarchal families, the children went to the father.

Homosexuality Upper-class men widely indulged homosexual relationships with adolescent boys, even when the men themselves were married and heads of household. The practice continued in Rome to a lesser degree, though amid some disapproval. Romanic and sexual attachments often exceeded those involving wives. Lesbian experience was also described, but there is far less information about actual practice.

Slavery Slavery in the classical Mediterranean was a diverse state, though always involving the slave as property. Some slaves were assigned to difficult and dangerous work, for example in silver mines, but others served as tutors, operated shops, performed other services. It was not uncommon for slaves to marry, sometimes to freeborn men or women. Roman law devoted a great deal of attention to the legal status of the offspring of such mixed marriages, usually concluding that the children remained slaves though with opportunities for manumission. Mediterranean slavery does not seem to have involved the massive issues of family disruption that would be associated with American slavery in the early modern period.

Childhood Infanticide was widely practiced; it has been estimated that up to 20% of all female infants born in ancient Athens were killed, again mainly through exposure to the elements. Roman governments (like their Chinese counterpart) passed laws against the practice, but they had little effect. Again as in China, the Mediterranean provides vivid examples of the tension between grief at the death of an older child, and considerable resignation. Roman writers noted how dangerous it was to form attachments to a child given the uncertainty of its survival. (As one put it, "when you kiss your child, you say to yourself, 'Perhaps it will be dead in the morning'".) The importance of obedience to parental authority was strongly emphasized. On the other hand, classical Mediterranean society also admitted the beauty or energy of youth, and in some cases this may have created a certain degree of latitude. There is interesting evidence, from Rome, of adolescent boys openly complaining that their parents were not indulging them sufficiently.

Legacy The collapse of Roman society in the West by the 5th century CE, and the attendant rise of Christianity, differentiated families in the classical Mediterranean from those that would emerge later on in many, often decisive, ways, particularly in Western Europe. This contrasted with the greater continuity in China and India. On the other hand, some features, like the attachment to family honor, clearly persisted at least around the Mediterranean basin itself.

Conclusion Comparisons among the major classical societies are understandably complex. Similarities are vital, based particularly on reliance on extended families and patriarchal gender assumptions and on the importance of the family as an economic unit. On the other hand, distinctive features stand out as well. Some. Like the approval for homosexual relationships in classical Greece, would prove transient, but others were more durable. The obvious challenge is to sort out the shared and civilization-specific features, and also to tackle the issue of ongoing legacy after the classical period itself.

Study questions

1. What features of family life in the classical Mediterranean were most clearly shared by the other major classical societies?
2. Compare the impacts of Mediterranean slavery and the Indian caste system on family life.
3. One of the great unknowns of early family history is the rate of what today is called domestic abuse or violence. Do you think this kind of abuse was likely to have been widespread? Would it have been equally likely in all the classical societies?
4. Why did women not rebel against the inferior position in classical societies?

Further reading

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Thomas K. Hubbard, *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexuality* (Blackwell, 2010)