

Social Problems: The Family

As told by Dr. Frank Elwell

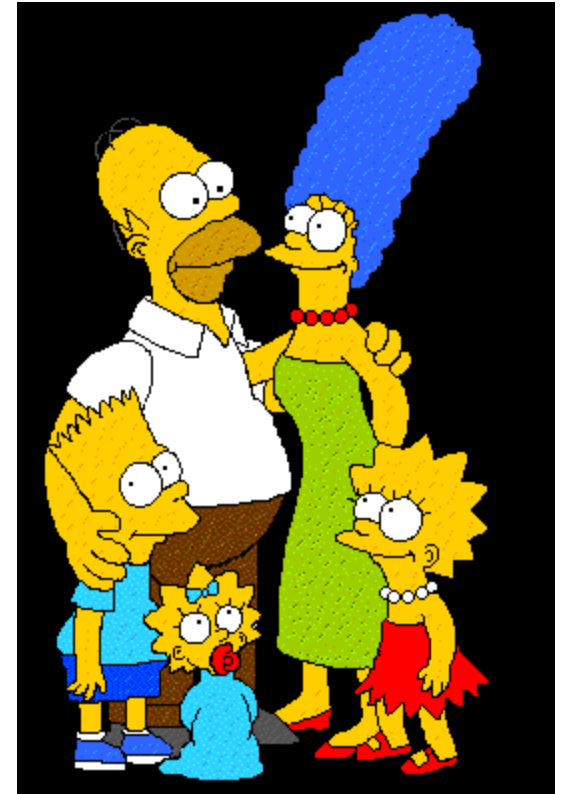


The Family

In America, potential marriage partners are free to choose their spouses. Naturally, there are some constraints. Some people will never have a chance to meet because of class, regional, ethnic, or racial differences. Also, parents usually make their preferences known.

The Family

- Marriage Constraints:
 - Class
 - Race
 - Ethnicity
 - Parents



The Family

However, the American norm is that despite these constraints, love is to conquer all, people are free to choose their marriage partners, to "fall in love."





LUV

This emphasis on love would seem strange to many people of the world, where the choice of one's spouse is often dictated by considerations of family, wealth, and other domestic considerations taking precedence over love.



Basic Tenets of Romantic Love

1. Selection of marriage partners is to occur in terms of personality traits--in terms of mutual attraction;
2. Love can overcome problems and troubles experienced by a couple;
3. Partners are to comprise a "oneness"--a sense of psychological fusion.
4. Sexual bliss is inevitable between couples who are truly in love.

LUV

The American emphasis on love is highly compatible with a kinship system that emphasizes the nuclear unit. It fits in well with the needs of a bureaucratic-industrial society.





Mobility

By casting the family adrift from close ties with extended kinship systems, industrial society has created an extremely mobile population (both physically and socially).

Mobility

Since it is the couple who must live alone, it is appropriate for them to select each other on the basis of such non-familial and non-utilitarian traits as love and compatibility.





Problems with Romantic Love

- However, this selection also poses some severe problems:
 - The romantic love system sets up some unrealistic expectations about what family life will be like.
 - Love can often be a rather insubstantial foundation upon which to build a lifelong partnership.



Problems with Romantic Love

Couple this insubstantial foundation with the internal and external conflicts on the present American family structure, and the wonder is not that the divorce rate is so high, but why it isn't higher.

Family Structure

- The internal structure of the family is composed of the normative expectations of three status positions:
 - Wife/mother
 - Husband/father
 - Child/adolescent



Adult Males

In general, the traditional expectation is that males are to be the "breadwinners." They are to earn enough money to support the family.



Adult Females

Traditionally, females were to perform domestic chores:

- taking care of the house,
- caring for the daily needs of the children,
- and providing sexual gratification for the husband.



Children

- Obey parents
- Internalize parent's values



Family Structure

Increasingly these traditional roles no longer fit the needs of people living in a hyper-industrial society. Consequently, there is tremendous pressure on the American family to change.



Women and the Workforce

The most powerful force for change comes from women entering the workforce. With two breadwinners, some of the male role are thrust into some confusion.



Women and the Workforce

For example, how much is the father to be involved in daily child care and in household chores?



Women and the Workforce

Who should change the diapers, wash dishes, shop, transport children, and do other traditional female activities. As wives have entered the workforce they have begun to recognize the drudgery of housework.



Women and the Workforce

Many women are finding it difficult to work full time and to perform traditional household and motherhood roles.



Women and the Workforce

To date, most men have refused these tasks, forcing many women to both work outside the home and to perform most domestic chores.





Women and the Workforce

Although the average woman earns substantially less than a man, women are no longer as heavily reliant on their husbands for economic support.



Women and the Workforce

Women who are newly confident of being able to support themselves are much more likely to abandon a marriage that has gone sour, Husbands are also much more likely to abandon such a relationship.

Decline in the Birthrate

- A further infrastructural change that has tremendous impact upon the family is the decline in the birthrate. This change can be traced to several sources.
 - Rising costs of raising a child
 - Industrialization
 - More married women working
 - More efficient contraception





Decline in the Birthrate

Having no or fewer children does not place a great strain on the family unit, but it does make it less stable. Not only do people work at marriage more if children are involved, but children are often a shared interest of the couple.

Adolescence

Adolescents are in the awkward period where biologically, at least, they are adult but have few of the social and bureaucratic role playing skills necessary to participate in adult roles.



Adolescence

It is inevitable that some parents and their biologically mature offspring will come into some conflict. Especially since the young are increasingly socialized by other and gaining new experiences that are often at variance with their parents





Changing Roles

We are the sum total of our roles, and our roles are constantly changing. Because so many husbands and wives work, they themselves are changing.



Changing Roles

You may marry a teacher in your 20s and find yourself married to a banker in your 30s. People change values with their jobs. "We grew apart" is one of the most common reasons given for divorce.



Coping Resources

Sources of strain are built into the American family system. Because industrial society demands a mobile workforce, other kin are unlikely to be around to shoulder household burdens, deflect emotions, care for children, care for aged parents, counsel adolescents, and to otherwise help family members to cope.



Coping Resources

The functions of the extended kinship system have been taken over, to a large extent, by formal service organizations staffed by professionals, steeped in the ideology of individualism, who have no personal stake in the marriage itself.

Coping Resources

The glue that holds the union together is romantic love. But romantic love is built on fantasy, mystery, spontaneity, bursting emotion, and surprise.





Coping Resources

When these expectations are confronted with the garbage, the diapers, and the weariness after a day's work, they tend to shrivel.

THAT'S NOT ALL THAT SHRIVELS.





Coping Resources

And when they do, millions of Americans assume that because the "thrill is gone" the partnership must have failed.

Functions of the Family

The American family has lost most of its basic functions in hyper-industrial society.



Functions of the Family

The primary function remaining is that it has become a “haven from the outside world,” the center of our emotional life. As such, it has become extremely unstable.



Functions of the Family

When it fails to live up to unrealistic expectations of permanent bliss, people tend to cut and run.



Family

As the functions of the American family change, its structure changes as well, and it becomes less important to our lives.



Family

Where we appear to be moving is toward a marriage system based on serial monogamy.

