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C O N T E M P O R A R Y F A M I L Y T R E N D S

# Changing Families, New Understandings

*Meg Luxton*  
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### *About the Author*

Meg Luxton is a Professor of Women's Studies and Sociology at York University and has been active in the women's movement for many years. Her research focuses sex/gender divisions of labour in the paid labour force and in the home; on the women's movement in Canada and internationally; on international efforts to measure and value women's unpaid labour; and on public policies designed to help people manage the competing demands of paid employment and caregiving responsibilities. Her most recent work examines the economic (in)security of older immigrant women.

She has won awards for teaching, and for her contribution to the field of Sociology, and The Sarah Shorten Award, awarded by the Canadian Association of University Teachers / L'Association canadienne des professeurs et professeurs d'université, in recognition of an outstanding contribution to the advancement of the status of women in Canadian universities.

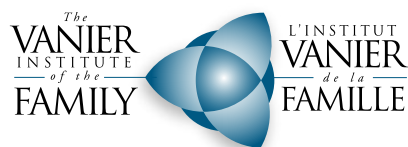
### *About the Institute*

The Vanier Institute of the Family was established in 1965 under the patronage of Their Excellencies Governor General Georges P. Vanier and Madame Pauline Vanier. It is a national voluntary organization dedicated to promoting the well-being of Canada's families through research, publications, public education and advocacy. The Institute regularly works with businesses, legislators, policy-makers and program specialists, researchers, educators, family service professionals, the media and members of the general public.

*Contemporary Family Trends* (CFT) is a special collection of documents written by Canadian experts on a wide range of issues facing today's families. CFT papers are descriptive, interpretative, and provide a critical overview of relevant topics involving families.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Vanier Institute of the Family.

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## FOREWORD

In communities across the country, men and women are raising children on their own without a partner. Unmarried couples are living together, with and without children, sharing their lives, providing for and caring for one another. Gay and lesbian couples are caring for each other and raising children together. Adult children are living with parents or siblings. There are empty nesters whose children have gone on to establish their own households and families. And increasing numbers of people are living on their own – people who are no less connected to family. And other families of choice.

These types of profound shifts in both practice and social consciousness certainly impact how we understand and experience family. What families “look like”, how and when they form, what they do, how they feel, and the challenges they face, are in many ways, far different from the experiences of earlier generations.

How then, in a world which is constantly changing, and in which family life is characterized by diversity and transformation, are we to understand the continuing importance and centrality of family in our lives? How do we ensure that all families have access to the supports and resources that they need to carry out their vital roles and to meet their obligations of care?

Dr. Meg Luxton, a Professor in the School of Women’s Studies at York University, explores these questions in “Changing Families, New Understandings.” Dr. Luxton is one of Canada’s leading social scientists and has published widely, with several highly acclaimed books and articles on women’s work, paid and unpaid, and relations among work, family and class.

In this paper, Dr. Luxton outlines the key debates about the contemporary family in Canada, pinpointing points of contention and the impact of different understandings of “the family” for evolving family practices. Dr. Luxton makes the case that unpacking our understanding of family – and tackling the hard questions – is key to crafting policies and programs that support families, in all of their diversity, in the essential work that they do. This careful discussion of the roles and responsibilities of “family” should be essential reading for all of those thinking about – and working on behalf of – Canadian families.

*Katherine Scott*  
*Director of Programs*  
*Vanier Institute of the Family*  
*June 2011*

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## **Abstract**

Families in Canada have changed dramatically since the 1950s, provoking widespread debates about what kinds of families should be recognised and supported socially, especially in law and public policy. This paper reviews those changes, asking why families matter to individual members, to communities and to society as a whole. It identifies some of the key debates provoked by these changes and explores their implications. It argues that the challenge for contemporary thinking about families is to focus on functions and practices – on what people do to take care of themselves and each other, to have and raise beloved children, and to ensure as best as possible, the well-being of themselves, their households, their communities and their society.

# Changing Families, New Understandings

## INTRODUCTION

Young adults coming of age in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century face very different worlds than those of their parents and grandparents. Marriage and families, gender relations, sex/gender divisions of labour, and typical life cycle patterns have all changed dramatically. As a result, there is much greater diversity in the ways young adults organise their lives as workers and as family members – as partners, as parents, and as members of family networks. The implications of the rapid changes and growing diversity are often unclear and unsettling. They also invite us to understand families in new ways.

Families remain central in the lives of most people and to Canadian society, but there is considerable disagreement about the significance of new family forms and practices and about which are more desirable. Controversies about “the family”<sup>1</sup> touch deep emotional commitments that shape the social and political positions people take and their willingness to defend their position or to compromise. They raise debates about the kind of society we value and aspire to. As Barrett and McIntosh argue in *The Anti-Social Family* (1982:9), “the family is a contentious and emotive subject.”

Family values, that is, convictions about ideal family forms and functions – or those that are presumed legitimate – are deeply embedded in all aspects of Canadian culture and are hotly contested. The stakes are often high as different groups vie to ensure their values, and not those of others, are reflected in culture, law, social policy and practice. In this paper, I argue that the way people understand families, both individually and collectively, is central to how family practices get normalized or rejected, with important personal and social consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “the family” has been criticized for implying that there is only one legitimate family form. Instead the term “families” is used to make explicit the recognition of many different forms of families.

I also argue that how family is understood is significant for the effectiveness of public policy and law. Prevailing and unexamined beliefs about families often inform legal and social policies so that the policies do not always take account of the actual ways in which families live. I argue that social policy is most effective, that is, most likely to achieve its intended aims, when it is based on the actual diverse ways in which families live their lives.

The paper begins by tracing various changes that have occurred in Canadian society over the past half century, changes that are shaping the lives of contemporary families. I identify some of the key debates provoked by these changes and explore their implications, by asking why families matter to individual members, to communities and to society as a whole. I examine the varied constraints imposed, and the possibilities opened up, by these different understandings.

I hope that this review offers ways of thinking about this topic that promote laws and policies, social practices and values that foster the well-being of people in Canada. The challenge for contemporary thinking about families is to focus on functions and practices – on what people do to take care of themselves and each other, to have and raise beloved children, and to ensure as best as possible, the well-being of themselves, their households, their communities and their society.

## **CHANGING FAMILIES: THE 1950s TO THE PRESENT**

In the mid-twentieth century, the ideal family was considered to be a married man and woman, committed to each other for life, and their children – the heterosexual nuclear family – where men were the income earners and women were homemakers (Adams 1997; Bradbury 2005). Underpinning this ideal was the assumption that couples married for love, that parents and children loved each other and accepted responsibility for each others' care, and that families were the main, if not the only, relationships in which people could find emotional security (Luhmann 1986). As Fox with Yiu notes (2009:186-7)

The popularity of this investment in nuclear family is reflected in the changes that occurred: the age of marriage dropped, a very high percentage of people married, teen pregnancy became common (and was seen as unproblematic because it was usually within marriage), birth rates rose after a long decline, divorce became rarer, and the number of lone-parent families decreased. ...the vast majority of the adult population lived in breadwinner-homemaker families.

Men of all classes, as husbands and fathers, typically engaged in income-generating work, either by producing for the market (for example, by farming or fishing), by running businesses, or by working for wages. Most women, as wives and mothers, devoted themselves to running their homes and caring for their families. In 1951, only 9.6% of married women were in the paid labour force and women were just 22% of the total labour force (Leacy 1965:107-23). The higher and more secure the man's income relative to household costs, the easier it was for the family to conform to that idealized division of labour, although doing so left women vulnerable to economic and social dependence on their husbands and undermined their ability to participate in social and public life. Where family incomes were more precarious, women were under pressure to take up income-generating work and risk being labelled as



bad mothers (Little 1998, Wall 2009:95). This ideal also imposed responsibilities on men to secure an income adequate to support a family and undermined men's capacity to be involved in child care and other household labour.

Just as the heterosexual nuclear family form predominated, most people shared a similar family life course. Typically, young adults lived with their parents until marrying and setting up an independent household. For men, securing income-generating work was a necessary precondition to marriage. For women, marriage typically meant giving up paid work. Married couples were expected to have children; having a child outside of marriage was socially unacceptable in most communities. Couples typically remained married until death; divorce was hard to get and carried a heavy social stigma. In their old age, parents expected their children, especially daughters, to care for them.

In the 1950s, this family pattern was widespread (Wilson 2009) and came to represent a cultural ideal or ideology that thoroughly permeated society, was embedded in laws and public policies, and taken for granted in popular culture. This ideal informed everything from housing design and urban planning to education policy.<sup>2</sup> The nuclear family model came to be seen as the 'natural' family form and 'normal' adult life was expected to conform to dominant family life course patterns (Adams 1997). Today, for some, it represents a lost ideal that needs to be revitalised (Gairdner 1992); for others, it is an imaginary ideal that never was (Coontz 1992).

Some activists have explicitly contested the privileging of this family form. Gays, lesbians, intersex and transgendered people have fought for legal and social recognition of same-sex marriages, for the right to have and adopt children (Gavigan 1995), and for recognition that having same-sex parents, in and of itself, has no negative effects on children and offers some benefits (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Waves of immigrants and refugees and Aboriginal peoples have lobbied for recognition of other family and household forms, usually based on wider groups of kin (Hathaway 1994a; 1994b; Arat-Koc 2006).

The feminist movement has won formal equality rights for women and actual improvements in many aspects of women's lives (Prentice *et al.* 1998). New reproductive technologies and the successful struggle to decriminalise abortion have given women the possibility of having sex with men without the fear of unwanted pregnancies and have made it possible for women to choose if, when, and how many children they have.

At the same time, women's increased labour market participation began to challenge sex/gender divisions of labour in both the home and the work place (Luxton and Corman 2001:58-60). The erosion of wages and an increase in precarious employment over the last thirty years has effectively undermined the economic viability of the man-as-income-earner / woman-as-homemaker model (Vokso 2000). For example, in a growing percentage (29%) of different-sex couple families, the women are now the higher earners. (Statistics Canada 2010a). And men are under greater pressure to be more involved in domestic labour. Some men are pressing for recognition of their parenting rights, while women are fighting for, and winning access to, jobs traditionally reserved for men (such as steelworkers, police, and senior managers).

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<sup>2</sup> One of the anonymous reviewers of this paper pointed out that in this period, suburban developments were often referred to as "bedroom communities" reflecting the fact that men went off to the city for paid work and failing to appreciate that a significant percentage of the population (i.e., women) spent their days in "bedroom communities".

Changing demographic patterns have also altered family life in a number of important ways. Women are delaying child bearing and having fewer children than earlier generations. As a result, more children are growing up without siblings. Separation and divorce and subsequent new relationships produce “blended families” in which the adult partners may parent step-children who live with another parent part-time, while children have multiple parents and siblings who do not all have the same parents. At the same time, both women and men are living longer. These changes mean that most parents spend less of their lives as active parents than previous generations and couples may spend many years living alone together after their children leave home. As family size gets smaller, and more seniors live longer, more frail seniors do not have children to look after them.

This complex interaction of social, economic and cultural changes has led to greater diversity in family forms and reduced the dominance of the nuclear family ideal as people have adapted to their changing circumstances. Same-sex marriage, common-law partnerships, single parents, childless couples, interracial partnerships, and adoption are all more widespread and acceptable. For the first time, the 2006 census enumerated more unmarried people aged fifteen and over than legally married people and more than half the population had never married. Compared to previous years, growing numbers of people live in common-law relationships and more people are living alone.<sup>3</sup>

What statistics offer, however, is a snapshot at one moment in time. What these snapshots can’t capture is the range of family experiences that people have over their lifetimes.<sup>4</sup> With a life expectancy of 78.3 years for men and 83.0 years for women (CBC 2010), someone could expect – at some point – to be single, married, divorced, living communally, remarried, widowed, in a common-law partnership, living with children, living with an elderly parent and/or living alone. While fewer people live the idealized family life of the 1950s, the majority of people do marry at some point in their lives, most have children, and almost all have some experience living as family members.

## **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: WHY FAMILIES MATTER**

Family relationships are among the most significant relationships we have. They evoke deep and strong emotions. As Bittman and Pixley point out (1997:xi): “Family life arouses feelings of elation and disappointment.” Family relationships offer (or at least promise) opportunities for intimacy, warmth and interdependency rarely available in other relationships. They can foster profound loving connections that may offer joy and happiness and make all the difficulties of life seem worthwhile. They allow members to expose a degree of vulnerability and dependency, and provide opportunities for the expression of emotional needs not legitimate elsewhere. According to a 1994 Angus Reid opinion poll, two-thirds of Canadians strongly agreed with the statement that their families are “the greatest joy in their lives” (Milan 2000:4).

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<sup>3</sup> For Canadian statistics on changing family forms, see: Statistics Canada 2002, 2006, and 2010; and Vanier Institute of the Family 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Longitudinal studies offer much more useful information but are more expensive and much more challenging to conduct than studies that draw on cross-sectional information at a moment in time. Some excellent research of families over time during the 1990s were conducted by Marcil-Gratton, Le Bourdais, Lapierre-Adamcyk and their colleagues (Marcil-Gratton, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2000; Juby, Le Bourdais and Marcil-Gratton 2003; Juby, Le Bourdais and Marcil-Gratton 2003; Martin, Mills and Le Bourdais 2005).

Equally compelling, family relationships can provoke feelings of loneliness, hostility, anger, jealousy and resentment. Much interpersonal violence occurs between family members (Statistics Canada 2005). When family relationships are dissatisfying or painful, the distress they cause is sharpened by what Bittman and Pixley refer to as the “endless inconsistencies between ‘the family’ that most people hope for and the family as they experience it” (1997: xi). The powerful emotional commitment to families and the strong cultural imperatives that stress the importance of families are significant reasons why families matter.

Kinship ties are ascriptive: we can’t choose our kin. They can be constraining but they can also provide a level of security, both emotional and material, not offered by most other relationships, based on similarity and a shared history that results in familiarity and belonging. Such personal experiences of the importance of kin are strengthened by the numerous ways in which kin relationships are validated, supported and celebrated. The appeal of family relationships is also enhanced by the contrast with other relationships. Non-kin relations such as friends and neighbours are often vitally important sources of emotional support but rarely offer the kind of material and social support kin are expected to provide.

The deep investment individuals have in families is further bolstered by the remarkable lack of alternatives in contemporary society. Those who live alone often suffer from loneliness and isolation. Those without families are vulnerable, especially if they need care. By rendering other relationships less socially important, the possibilities for non-kin relationships are delimited, further strengthening the social importance of family relationships.

Family relationships are also important to the ways in which people maintain their cultures and languages. Many Aboriginal people point out that, just as government policies of assimilation destroyed families by removing children to residential schools, the survival of their communities depends significantly on the well-being of their families and their ability to raise children who know and understand their culture. Francophone and québécois parents make similar claims, and many immigrant families struggle to retain their own traditions, languages and practices while adapting to their new circumstances. Families also play a central role in helping racialised children cope with the racism they face, and engage in anti-racist efforts.

Families also matter because they serve basic social and economic roles that affect the standards of living and well-being of their members (Beaujot 2000; Luxton and Corman 2001; Bezanson 2006a). Family members earn income, care for physical and emotional needs, have children, participate in the community, and pool and share resources over the lifetimes of their members, and at death, through inheritance. Thus, it is through family relationships that most people are materially sustained on a daily basis and reproduced generationally as citizens, workers, consumers and members of their communities.

In this way, families are also instrumental in the reproduction of social class. While access to education and a labour market that takes account of merit have increased opportunities for many people, the life chances of most children are still deeply influenced by the economic class position of their families. Class position is most obvious in relation to material well-being. The wealthier a family, the more opportunities and benefits are available to its children. In the current period, as income inequality increases (Yalnizyan 2010) and the labour market becomes tighter, differences between economic classes become more noticeable and more significant in shaping the potential options available to young adults.<sup>5</sup> But

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<sup>5</sup> While there is an extensive literature on class in Canada, little of it deals directly with families and the way families reproduce class. There are several ethnographic studies from the United States that focus explicitly on families and the reproduction of class (Lareau 2003, Swartz 2008).

class is also revealed in more subtle ways, in the ways parents care for their infants (Fox 2009), through parental expectations, the relative self-confidence they encourage in their children, and the social networks children are part of (Macionis and Gerber 2008; McMullin 2009).

Families matter to society at large. Societies such as Canada are largely organised in three arenas: states, markets and households. Households function as the sites of daily life or the places where people live; they are the bases from which people go out to work or study, to play, to shop and to engage in social and political life.<sup>6</sup> Family households provide most of the working population of the country, are a major source of consumer purchasing and one of the most important institutions for providing care and ensuring the relative well-being of the population. Families depend on markets for both employment and the goods and services of household livelihood (Braedley and Luxton 2010). In turn, markets depend on families for a supply of labour and consumers.

States regulate some aspects of families (for example, through marriage and divorce laws) and of markets (for example, minimum wage rates) in ways that directly affect how families are organised. States also regulate and mediate the relationships between families and markets through a range of laws and policies relating to pro- and anti-natalist policies, labour laws, health and safety regulations, and through the provision of a range of services such as child care, education and health care. Given the insecurities inherent in the labour market, states also take some responsibility for income security through measures such as employment security, social assistance and pensions (Bakker and Gill 2003).

The various responsibilities of states, markets and families fluctuate in response to changing political, economic and social dynamics in different historical periods. Individuals and families make decisions and choices about how they will live their lives, but always in the context of circumstances shaped by prevailing social and economic structures. As these structures change, the options available to individuals and their families also change. What has remained constant over time is that families bear the ultimate responsibility for care – when market services are unavailable or out of reach because of cost or state services fail to adequately meet family and community needs.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the 2006 Census, there were 12,437,500 households and the average household size was 2.5 people. The majority of people lived in family households (69.6%), a significant number lived alone (26.8%), and a smaller number lived with one or more unrelated persons (3.7%) (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 2010).

## CHANGING FAMILY FORMS: CONSTRAINTS AND POSSIBILITIES

The most significant change affecting definitions of families over the last fifty years has been the gradual uncoupling of socially acceptable sexuality, marriage, parenting and cohabitation. Regulations and expectations about mutual economic support have also changed. In response to changing practices such as the growth in common-law unions, and campaigns to overturn existing constraints such the movement to recognize same-sex marriage, social norms have become much more diverse and legal constraints less restrictive; it has become easier for more people to engage in different practices and as a result, families have changed dramatically. The brief survey that follows illustrates the complexity of issues defining family life today.

### Heterosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage

Historically, legal heterosexual nuclear marriage was central to family formation. Marriage, based on the British common law definition, was “the lawful union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.” In other words, only two people, one woman, one man, could legally marry (Gillis 1985). In related legislation, prior to the 1970s, men’s homosexuality was a criminal offence in Canada. Those accused of homosexual activities were charged as sex offenders and, if convicted, could be sentenced to long prison terms. Gay activists and their supporters campaigned against such homophobic legislation and its related practices (Kinsman 1996). Finally, in 1969, the federal Liberal government instituted sweeping reforms of Canada’s criminal law, which included decriminalizing homosexuality. In discussing the amendment, Pierre Trudeau, Justice Minister at the time, stressed the importance of individual freedom in the context of sexuality. Trudeau stated: “It’s bringing the laws of the land up to contemporary society I think. Take this thing on homosexuality. I think the view we take here is that there’s no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation. I think that what’s done in private between adults doesn’t concern the *Criminal Code*” (CBC 2009a).

By the late 1990s, homosexuality had been decriminalized, and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation had been prohibited in areas such as immigration, employment, military service, pensions, and income tax. Same-sex partners were increasingly able to live together openly and some of them demanded the right to marry and form families just as heterosexual couples could.<sup>7</sup> In June 1999, after various provincial courts had challenged the definition, Canada’s Parliament reaffirmed it by passing a motion defining marriage as being between a man and a woman (Government of Canada 1999). However, in July 2005, Canada legalized same-sex marriages nationwide with Bill C-38, the *Civil Marriage Act* (Government of Canada 2005). In 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s new Conservative government introduced a motion to restore the traditional definition of marriage but the motion was defeated in the House of Commons by a margin of 175 to 123. Prime Minister Harper publicly stated that the vote was decisive and that his government would not return to the issue. Since then, increasing numbers of same-sex couples have married.<sup>8</sup>

7 On 14 January 2001, two couples (two women and two men) went through a marriage ceremony at the Metropolitan Community Church in Toronto. Recognizing the depth of the opposition to same sex marriage, the presiding minister wore a bullet-proof vest and the church was protected by armed security guards and police. Two years after the ceremony, the marriage was formally registered (Equal Marriage for Same Sex Couples nd).

8 The 2001 census collected data on same-sex common-law couples for the first time: 34,200 couples identified themselves. In 2006, there were 37,885 same-sex common-law couples, an increase of 11%. Of these, 83% were not married: 7,500 same sex couples or 17% were legally married, making up 0.1% of all married couples (Statistics Canada 2006b).

## Nuclear Families and Polygamy

While the sex of the partners is no longer regulated, the restriction of legal marriage to two people is still reinforced under Section 293 of the *Criminal Code* of Canada which explicitly bans polygamy – marriage with more than one spouse – and threatens offenders with a five-year prison term and, under Section 290, makes bigamy a serious crime. However, in practice this law has not been imposed on known polygamists living in Canada, the most prominent of whom are the Mormons of either The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or a group which split off from it, both of which live in Bountiful, B.C. In 2005, in response to allegations that the communities were exploiting and coercing young women, then Prime Minister Liberal Paul Martin commissioned a series of reports designed to revise the polygamy laws, either to enforce or repeal them. In the late 2000s, the Attorney General of British Columbia sought legal opinions about whether he could issue charges under the existing laws. Although the legal advice he received proposed that the laws should be submitted to the Supreme Court to determine whether or not they violate the right to religious freedom, association and liberty under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, in January 2009, the two rival leaders of the Bountiful sect were charged with practising polygamy (Bramham 2007; CBC 2009b).<sup>9</sup>

The issue of whether or not Canada recognises polygamous marriages is also raised by the growing number of immigrants from countries where such marriages are widely practiced and legal. Some Muslims believe the Qur'an permits a man to have up to four wives under certain conditions. In parts of Africa, men take multiple spouses as a cultural practice.<sup>10</sup> Canadian immigration officials have turned down applications from men in legal polygamous unions abroad to bring more than one wife to the country under a family class visa but challenges to such decisions are increasingly likely. People living in Canada who have “polyamorist” relationships (defined as three or more consenting adults who have conjugal ties and live together as spouses) argue that if anti-polygamy laws are enforced, their unions could be attacked. It is also possible such legislation could apply to adultery or open marriages, where spouses permit each other to have sex outside their union.

## Marriage and Adoption, Ethnicity and Racialization

Marriage and family formation have also been deeply affected by racist values which have restricted marriage to people of the same racial or ethnic groups (Backhouse 1999). Unlike the United States (Romano 2003), Canada never had laws prohibiting miscegenation or “mixed race” marriages, but informal social taboos made such relationships unlikely and, in some cases, legal regulations imposed penalties on such relationships (Thompson 2008).<sup>11</sup> The federal *Indian Act* of 1951, based on over a hundred years of similar acts and proclamations, held that Indian women who married non-Indian men lost their legal status as Indians while Indian men kept their status if they married non-Indian women.<sup>12</sup> This rule was challenged on the grounds of sex discrimination and was finally overturned in 1985 by Bill C-31 which amended the

9 The case was dismissed on technical grounds in 2010 and the case is now proceeding to determine whether polygamy is a protected religious practice or a crime (CTV News, 2011).

10 There are some societies in which polyandry, where one woman takes several male spouses, is practiced. To my knowledge, no request for immigration status has been presented by a polyandrous family.

11 In Anglo-American societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “mixed race” marriages between blacks and whites were socially unacceptable and sometimes illegal. “Miscegenation” or the mixing of two races, especially by having “mixed race” children, was illegal in Nazi Germany and Apartheid South Africa and in most American states in the 1940s. In 1967 a US Supreme Court ruling overturned such laws (Romano 2003).

12 In 1973 a Supreme Court of Canada decision said that this rule did not discriminate against women even though Indian men kept their status if they married non-Indians.

*Indian Act* to remove the discrimination and bring the *Act* in line with the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Many women who lost status through marriage were reinstated as Indians and as band members. Their children gained Indian status but did not necessarily gain band membership.<sup>13</sup> Their grandchildren and other descendants continue to fight for legal recognition as Indians and band members.

Racist immigration laws and labour regulations also acted to shape marriage and family formation (Backhouse 1999; Arnup 2001:13). For example, the 1923 *Chinese Immigration Act* (the *Exclusion Act*) basically prohibited Chinese immigrants from entering Canada. As a result, many wives and children in China were unable to join their husbands and fathers who were already in Canada. The Act was only repealed in 1947. The formal constraints and strong social taboos on “mixed race” marriages in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century limited the numbers of people willing to risk publicly recognised partnerships. As challenges to racism became more explicit and effective through the latter half of the century, mixed-race unions became more common. The 2006 census recorded 289,400 mixed unions, an increase of 33% from 2001 (Milan, Maheux and Chui 2010).

Race issues shaped families through adoption practices, too (Dubinsky 2010). Until the 1950s, Canada had racially restrictive child welfare policies which meant children considered black or mixed race were not placed with white parents. In 1958, a white Montreal couple became, apparently, the first in North America to adopt legally non-white children (Dubinsky 2010:61). Very slowly, mixed race families became legally possible and socially acceptable, although the chances of Black parents adopting white children were much less likely. The adoption by white parents of Aboriginal children has been much more problematic as the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities is now widely understood as contributing to cultural genocide (Kimelman 1985). Since the 1970s, transborder adoptions have increased as parents in Canada have adopted children from countries such as Vietnam, Korea, Guatemala and China. Inevitably the new families formed by such adoptions have to deal with issues of racism and cross-cultural challenges. But at the same time, their presence validates both adoption and interracial intimacies in ways that undermine older racist assumptions and provide models of new family arrangements.

## Legitimate and Illegitimate Children

The centrality of legal heterosexual nuclear marriage also meant that only the children born to a legally married couple were considered legitimate. Other children, designated “illegitimate” or “bastards,” were not entitled to the same rights to support, recognition, and inheritance as legitimate children.<sup>14</sup> Where legitimate children automatically had to take their father’s last name, illegitimate children were often prohibited from doing so. References to children in wills was usually taken as referring only to legitimate children, but by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century this practice was rarely enforced. Increasingly parents were deemed to owe a duty to support their illegitimate children and most provincial legislation provided for such applications.

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<sup>13</sup> This amendment resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of status Indians – nearly double by 1995 – but was not accompanied by any recognition that the population increase would strain already stretched band budgets and limited land resources, generating gender-based tensions and conflicts with the bands.

<sup>14</sup> Children’s legal status is a provincial/territorial matter. For a detailed discussion of the Ontario situation, see Chambers 2007.

Since the 1970s, the legal status of illegitimacy has been repealed in several provinces and even in provinces where the distinction remains, the legal effects of illegitimacy have been reduced. As more women have children without being married, the discrimination and social stigma of being a “bastard” has diminished. As a result, concern for children’s legitimacy is no longer a serious force in compelling people to marry although popular opinion continues to encourage prospective parents to marry (Blossfeld and Mills 2002) and the more children a couple has, the more likely they are to be married (Statistics Canada 2010b).

## Divorce

At the same time as the requirements to marry diminished, it also became easier to divorce and divorce became less socially stigmatised.<sup>15</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Canada had one of the lowest divorce rates in the Euro-North American world. Divorce was uncommon until the late 1940s. It was legally difficult to get and widely condemned socially. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, divorce gradually became more acceptable so that in 1968 the first federal *Divorce Act* was passed. It retained fault-based grounds including adultery, cruelty and desertion, but also recognized the concept of permanent marriage breakdown and allowed both wives and husbands to sue. While it made divorce more available, the grounds and proceedings were still limiting. However, divorce became increasingly acceptable leading to the *Divorce Act* of 1985, which instituted major reforms. Subsequently, divorce has become easier to obtain legally and is increasingly socially acceptable. Statistics Canada estimates that the divorce rate is about 38% – meaning that based on divorce trends today, about 380 out of every 1,000 marriages can be expected to end within 30 years (Statistics Canada 2004).

Numerous court cases have struggled with the most important legal issues in divorce, particularly the custody of children, the division of property and the question of whether to allocate responsibility for post-divorce financial support by one party for the other (Mossman 2004). Marriage and divorce laws show the connections between marriage, property and obligations for mutual support. They also indicate that the laws are designed to reduce the chances of individuals being eligible for state support if any familial obligations can be imposed.

## Co-habiting and Common-Law Partnerships

As legal marriage declined in importance, more people have opted to live openly together without getting married. They do so for various reasons and the expectations of, and commitments to the relationship may be the same as, or different from, those they would have of marriage. In some cases, people co-habit as an explicit rejection of marriage. Others are simply indifferent to marital status. Some live together assuming, incorrectly, that by doing so they have the same rights and responsibilities as married couples. For some, co-habiting is a precursor to marriage or a strategy when divorce from a previous relationship has not occurred. Co-habiting relationships have a growing legal recognition as common-law unions.

Common-law relationships are still a minority of families: 82% of all couple families are married, while 18% are common-law (Statistics Canada 2010b). However, a much higher percentage of people have

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<sup>15</sup> The following information about divorce comes from Snell 1991 and Backhouse 1991.



lived in common-law relationships at some point in their lives. As common-law relationships became more openly acknowledged and more widespread, they became increasingly subject to legal regulation. While the actual rights and obligations of common-law partners are not the same as those pertaining to married couples and vary by jurisdiction, they typically assume that opting to live common law imposes some obligations for pooling and sharing certain income and resources (Canada Revenue Agency 2010). In February 2011, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that in cases where common-law partners “work together for the common good” with one doing income generating work and the other “performing most of the domestic duties” including child care, the resources accumulated should be divided equally (Demsey 2011: A4; Makin 2011: A9). Couples who want to live together without being subject to those, or any, legal rights and obligations to each other might have a difficult time; ironically, these couple will probably need to draw up a legal contract to “opt out.”

## Parents and Children

While co-habiting partners, married or common law, are central to understandings of family, parent-child relationships are also key. Here the most significant changes over the last fifty years have involved broadening the range of people eligible to be recognised as parents and to be assured custody or access to the child. While family law has had to grapple with complex issues relating to contested custody and support, especially after parents separate, its commitment to “the best interest of the child” has prompted it to acknowledge that biological parents are not always the best people to care for a child, that step-parents or grandparents may have meaningful relations that warrant support, and that in some circumstances, other adults may be significant (Shaffer 2004; Law Reform Commission of Nova Scotia 2007).

At the same time, same-sex partnerships, adoptions and reproductive technologies have created new distinctions among parents and led to situations where sperm or ovum donors, the woman who carries the foetus to term, and infant care-providers may all be different, and unrelated people. These new possibilities have generated a range of legal and social questions about children’s rights to know their biological history, adults’ rights and responsibilities to their biological offspring, and the relative competing rights of biological and social parents.

As the people involved work out their answers to these questions, they are generating new family relationships and new understandings about kinship and family. To give just one example, on 3 January 2007, the Ontario Court of Appeal recognised that three people could be legal parents of a child: the biological mother and father and the mother’s female partner. Noting that “present social conditions and attitudes have changed,” the court said that: “Advances in our appreciation of the value of other types of relationships and in the science of reproductive technology have created gaps in the ... legislative scheme. Because of these changes the parents of a child can be two women or two men. They are as much the child’s parents as adopting parents or “natural” parents (Bourassa and Varnell 2007). In most access and custody cases, the court focuses on the actual relationship between the child and the contending adults, typically ruling that adults actively involved in a child’s life have rights to access.

However, many adults who have significant relationships with children have no basis on which to make legal claims. Nannies, child care workers, neighbours and friends may be actively involved in a child’s daily life, but may have no ability to insist that their relationship be recognised if the parents are not

available or willing to support their involvement. Grandparents have repeatedly noted that if their grandchildren's custody goes to their in-law, they may have no rights to access while the in-law's new partner does, despite the fact that the grandparents have had a life-long relationship with the children (Kruk 1995; Goldberg 2003; Milan and Hamm 2003). A study of divorced families in Alberta found that 54.2% of extended family members reported difficulties in visiting and maintaining contact with their grandchildren, nieces and nephews (Leahy-Johnson and Barer, 1987; Andreiuk, 1994). Long-term lovers or intimate friends may have no access to children they previously parented, or to an ill or dying loved one if the legally recognised kin forbid it.

As individuals and families confront existing constraints, they adapt and resist in ways that can consolidate those practices or challenge them. Through the complex interactions of changing socio-economic conditions, political struggles, shifting social values and norms, and the various ways in which people themselves act, family forms change and new definitions of family evolve. How families are defined both reflects prevailing social practices and shapes the kinds of relationships people are able to form and the ways in which they are able to live their lives. Such definitions, and the regulations they embody, offer insights into what are deemed to be the central social relationships and functions of families.

## **UNDERSTANDING FAMILY FUNCTIONS: PERSONAL DECISIONS AND PUBLIC CONCERNS**

As the struggles over definitions suggest, the core functions of families relate to forming intimate partnerships, maintaining households in which people pool and share resources, and having and raising children. Family functions typically also include providing various kinds of support and care for other kin, such as adult siblings or elderly parents. Such functions form the essence of personal life for most people. They also form an essential part of the basic infrastructure of social life for the society as a whole. Families are simultaneously about very private, intimate relations and about profoundly public concerns. As a result, there are on-going tensions and debates, and changing values about what aspects of family life are private and up to the individuals involved and what are appropriately of public or social concern and subject to community or state intervention.

Two examples illustrate the complexity of the issues involved. The first concerns child bearing and rearing. A woman who gets pregnant, carries the baby to term and gives birth is having a child for her own very personal reasons. In doing so, however, she is also producing the next generation and ensuring the reproduction of the population – a vitally necessary and profoundly social (or even species) act. As she raises her child, and influences the kind of adult that child becomes, she is also producing a member of her society. Thus child bearing and rearing, like other family functions, are simultaneously intimately private and profoundly social matters. At the present time, the decision whether to have a child or not is considered a private matter and parents are deemed to be responsible for their children's care and upbringing. But they must meet certain standards of care or risk losing custody.

The second example concerns spousal violence. Prior to the 1970s, spousal violence, and especially sexual assault, was largely considered a private matter. That changed as feminists showed that men's vio-

lence against women in intimate partnerships was widespread and symptomatic of women's social subordination. In the 1980s, woman assault was recognized as a social problem that demanded intervention (Kinnon 1981; Denham and Gillespe 1997; Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2000). For example, before 1983, rape was considered an offence only outside of marriage. That meant a husband could not be charged with raping his wife, and a wife could only charge her spouse with indecent assault, common assault or assault causing bodily harm. Bill C-127 came into effect on Jan. 4, 1983, making sexual assault against one's wife an offence. A wife can also charge her husband with aggravated sexual assault if the crime involves a beating (Sampson 2010).

The following section reflects on connection between the very private decisions that propel and shape family life and public concerns about the critical work that families do in maintaining households and caring for children and other family members.

### **Families and Households: Workers, Consumers and Domestic Labourers**

Households are the most basic socio-economic institution in capitalist societies. Households are where families live and where many of the public/private tensions gets played out. Most people understand their household as a home, as their own or their family's personal space. But households are also an integral part of the economy, closely linked to both the labour and consumer markets of capitalism through two interdependent labour processes of production and consumption. The majority of people in Canada make a living by combining income generating work and unpaid domestic labour to maintain themselves and their households. A small minority of wealthy elites may gain an income from investments, a larger population of seniors rely on pensions and investment savings (Conference Board of Canada 2011), but most working-age people rely on paid employment in which they exchange their capacity to work for pay. In other households, people generate an income by labouring to produce commodities for sale, for example, by farming or fishing, or by operating a small business.

However their income is generated, people use the income available to purchase goods and services in the consumer market, ranging from basic necessities such as housing, food and clothing to whatever luxuries they can afford. While sexual divisions of labour are negotiated and sometimes contested in the labour market and in the home, women continue to carry the major responsibility for domestic labour in most households, even when they are also employed full-time in the labour market (Luxton and Corman 2001; Armstrong and Armstrong 2010). For example, in 2000, Statistics Canada showed that since the 1960s, women have continued to do about two-thirds of all unpaid work in Canada (Statistics Canada 2000:97). Women who were employed did more than their male partners; in fact, men living with employed women did less than men whose wives were not employed (Statistics Canada 2000:111). According to the 2001 Census, women were 2.5 times more likely than men to spend more than thirty hours a week looking after children without pay, 2.9 times more likely to spend more than thirty hours a week on unpaid housework, and 2 times more likely to spend ten or more hours on unpaid caregiving to seniors (Statistics Canada 2003). The same pattern is evident in the 2006 Census data (Statistics Canada 2009).

While domestic labour includes a range of housekeeping tasks, it also comprises care, all the activities involved in looking after and providing for a range of emotional, physical and social needs (Oakley

1974; Luxton 1980). This labour supports members in their workplace attachments, providing space for daily recuperation and regeneration. Where children are being raised, domestic work also ensures a generational reproduction: as one generation of working people becomes too frail or ill to continue working, another generation is appropriately socialised and ready to take their place in the labour market. If this generational reproduction doesn't result in enough people to meet labour force needs or to ensure enough employed and tax-paying people to support dependents, governments can take steps to address the situation. The Conference Board of Canada (2010) for example, noting that by 2030, about one-fifth of the population will be over 65 years, points out that there are "a number of ways to offset the labour force and fiscal pressures that will arise as a result of Canada's aging population: 1) increase immigration; 2) introduce family-friendly policies to increase fertility rates; 3) develop policies and practices to increase the labour force participation of older people."

Thus, what women (and men) do, looking after their homes and the people they live with, is work that contributes, not just to the survival of their own households, but to the daily and generational maintenance of the population that sustains the formal economy. Traditionally, the unpaid work women do in their homes, looking after their families, has not been recognized as work, nor valued for its contribution to the economy, and therefore, was not taken into consideration in policy priorities.<sup>16</sup> In response to demands that women's work be recognized, the United Nations reported in 1995 that the monetary value of unpaid labour around the world was \$16 trillion, \$11 trillion produced by women (UNDP 1995 chapter 4). In 1992, Statistics Canada assessed the value of unpaid household work at \$285 billion, equal to 41% of the GDP and 60% of personal disposable income (Chandler 1994).<sup>17</sup> More recent evidence suggests that unpaid domestic labour in Canada continues to be a significant part of the economy, that women do most of it and that without the care work of families, Canadian society would not function.

## Having Children, Reproducing the Population

Parents and families play the primary role in children's lives, and a nurturing supportive family is the best foundation for good child development (Council of Ministers 1999).

One of the most deeply held values in Canadian society is that children should be raised by their parents or other immediate family, and, as the Council of Ministers report cited above indicates, a widespread assumption holds that "a nurturing supportive family is the best foundation for good child development." Because child rearing involves ensuring the physical, emotional and social development of a child from the total dependency of infancy to the relative autonomy of the adult, parent-child relationships are among the most important and compelling in most people's lives.

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<sup>16</sup> The systematic denial that domestic labour contributes to the economy was consolidated globally by the United Nations' System of National Accounts (UNSNA). Widely implemented since 1953 as the international standard for the production of national accounts and labour force statistics, membership in the UN became contingent on adopting this system. It establishes a "production boundary" which differentiates between those activities which have a market value, or are paid for, and those activities which are not paid for and are therefore, in this system, not considered to be economic activities. Marilyn Waring (1988) offered a detailed critique of UNSNA showing how it ignores both women's work and environmental issues, creating problematic assessments of economic growth. Such critiques prompted a range of activists to call for a revision of not only the UNSNA but of the underlying economic theories that informed it. At the 1995 U.N. Beijing 4<sup>th</sup> Conference on Women, the Platform for Action, agreed to by most, committed member countries to measuring and valuing women's unpaid work. At the time, Canada was recognized as a world leader in doing so. In the years immediately after, Statistics Canada produced some of

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, neither the UN nor Statistics Canada have updated these figures as of March 2011, the best studies globally. However, recent government changes have meant that the commitment to acknowledging the significance of unpaid household work has diminished.

The relationship between parents and children has both biological and social aspects. As biological progenitors, women and men have very different relationships to conception, pregnancy, child birth and breast feeding. It has always been possible for the biological father to be unknown or someone other than the mother's recognized sexual and marriage partner. Lactating women have often fed other women's children, either as co-mothers or as wet nurses. However, the new reproductive technologies of recent decades have unsettled earlier biological certainties as sexual intercourse is no longer essential for conception, fertilization may occur in a petri dish, and the pregnant woman carrying a child to term may not be the egg donor. At the same time, technology now permits greater biological certainty about paternity. These new possibilities have complicated biological parental relationships and raised important questions about whether children have the right to know the identity and/or medical history of their progenitors and about what rights and obligations biological progenitors have to be unknown or recognized, to provide material support for the child or in other ways be recognized as "family".

Parents are also those socially recognized as primarily responsible for the raising of a child. They are often the biological parents but adoption and fostering have always been practiced and in recent years have become more openly acknowledged. Similarly, parents' partners, or step-parents, usually play an important role in raising children. The focus on families as the "best foundation" reflects and reinforces the idea that parents are the preferred child care providers. However, governments also recognize that there is a public interest in "good child development" and pursue public policies that help to shape the social environment in which child rearing occurs, especially by supporting families to provide good care. In September 2000, for example, the Government of Canada, in partnership with provincial and territorial governments, reached an agreement to improve and expand the services and programs they provide for children under 6 years of age and their families. In the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Early Childhood Development Agreement, Canada's First Ministers committed to help young children reach their potential, and to help families and the communities in which they live support their children.

This commitment raises a number of questions: who determines what will help children reach their potential? What kinds of support are most appropriate and for whom? To what extent can parents determine how their children are raised and under what conditions do parents lose access to and control over their child? On what basis can or should others be involved? Who should bear the costs of child raising?

### *Raising our Children: Who Decides?*

These questions illuminate the on-going tension between the widely held beliefs that children are the private responsibility of their parents, on the one hand, and the recognition that governments and policy makers have roles to play in determining appropriate child rearing practices, on the other. And, while there is widespread agreement that "society" as a whole has a vested interest in the social development and education of its children, there is a good deal of discrepancy around what kinds of interventions into private family life are appropriate when it comes to how children are cared for. Clearly, some circumstances require social intervention. Which circumstances warrant intervention and whether the intervention should aim to encourage or enforce certain practices is less clear. Debates swirl around issues such as physical punishment (Barnett, Laura. 2008),<sup>18</sup> access to medical treatments such as blood transfusions or

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18 Under Canadian law, parents of children between two and twelve have the right "to use reasonable force to discipline a child and correct their behaviour." In 2008 Bill S-209, which passed third reading in the Senate, proposed to eliminate parents' right to physically discipline. It was the subject of extensive and heated debate and eventually was blocked by the ruling Conservative party, although it remains on the table in 2011 as Bill S 204 (CBC News 2008, The Toronto Sun 2011).

inoculations (CBC 2009c), arranged marriages, or the age at which children can make and act on decisions their parents oppose (Bala and Cruickshank 1986). The more parents' practices deviate from prevailing social norms, the more likely it is that others will challenge their rights to control their children.

In Canada, each province or territory is responsible for developing and maintaining its own child welfare system, creating a high degree of intervention and service variability across the country. Typically, child welfare services are obligated to intervene if they consider that a child is at risk of abuse or neglect, ideally offering supportive services, removing a child they deem at risk when necessary, placing the child in a foster home, a group home or with a new family, through adoption. Most child welfare workers note that heavy case loads and inadequate resources mean that they generally intervene when there is a crisis, rather than providing support to prevent a crisis and most parents dealing with child welfare services consider those agencies hostile rather than supportive (Swift and Callahan 2006).

Differences in parenting standards and practices between child welfare agencies – influenced by middle class, Euro-North American ideas of “the family” – and Aboriginal, working class and immigrant communities have also led to considerable conflict. Aboriginal communities are still recovering from the devastations imposed by government policies that, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s, seized children from their families and communities and imprisoned them in residential schools (Walker 2009). Generations of survivors have struggled to learn how to parent well, often in communities whose traditional way of life has been destroyed without new viable options emerging. The combination of decades of colonisation and racism, social disruption and on-going poverty has made child care particularly difficult in many aboriginal communities (Johnston 1983:2).

Many regions have developed Native child welfare agencies as part of an effort both to assert Aboriginal rights to self-determination and to develop culturally appropriate services. However, colonial attitudes continue to inform child apprehension practices in Aboriginal communities (Union of BC Indian Chiefs 2002:9; Lavell-Harvard and Lavell 2006). Karen Dubinsky (2010:82) points out that colonialism produces infantilized relations between Aboriginals and the Canadian state which “worked to undermine one of the mainstays of our [Canadian] culture: that the family takes care of its own....In what other circumstances can we imagine children living with their grandparents being described as ‘deserted’?” Leaders and activists argue that children in need of care must remain in their communities and, in the absence of their parents, can be best cared for by others in their extended kin or community, but they also note that such communities, especially in the north and in remote areas, need economic support in order to provide good care for their children.

This debate about who provides the best care is sharply focused when parents, especially mothers, are incarcerated (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women 1989).<sup>19</sup> Women account for less than 10% of inmates and are usually incarcerated for offences relating to theft and drug abuse rather than violent crime. They are much less likely to reoffend than men. They are typically young, poorly educated and unemployed; almost 25% of women in provincial-territorial prisons and 20% in federal prisons are

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<sup>19</sup> While the same concern applies to fathers who are incarcerated, there is less concern about ensuring that the bonds between fathers and children are established and maintained and few assumptions that fathers are responsible for raising their children. There are, to my knowledge, no Canadian programmes that allow fathers to care for their children in prison.

Aboriginal (although Aboriginal women are about 2% of the population in Canada (Trevethan 2009). Many have mental health issues, often because of childhood abuse.

As of 2003, it was estimated that at least 25,000 Canadian children a year experience separation from their mothers as a result of incarceration (Blanchard 2009). It is widely recognized that such separations are damaging to both mothers and children (Cunningham and Baker 2003). They also mean that alternative care must be found for the duration of the mother's incarceration. In many cases, the children are placed in foster care, a situation which imposes further problems for the mother who must begin legal proceedings to regain custody of her child or children when she is released. In some jurisdictions, children in temporary care for between one and two years (depending on the child's age) automatically become wards of the court and may be put up for adoption. Regaining custody becomes a legal nightmare and few women have the resources to fight.

Child apprehension is a direct intervention into family life in which the state overrides parents to impose its regulations on children. Other, less direct types of public policy create circumstances which also influence the ways in which parents raise their children. Parental leave policies are a good example of how government legislation and regulation can shape family life. Since 1971, mothers with enough insurable weeks of employment have been able to claim up to 15 weeks of paid maternity leave. In 1990, the Parental Benefits Program introduced 10 weeks of paid leave which could be shared by qualifying parents. In 2001, this was increased to 35 weeks and eliminated the second two week waiting period if both parents used the leave. The stated goals of the extended programme were to promote gender equality by encouraging fathers to take parental leave. Policy developers argued that encouraging men to participate in child care would strengthen their bonds with their children, encourage couples to share child care more equally, and reduce discrimination against women in the labour force (based on the assumption they would be more likely than men to take leaves). As the policy became more supportive, more men took advantage of it (HRSDC 2005). In 2005, Quebec's Quebec Parental Insurance Plan instituted a five-week individual, non-transferable paternity leave paid at 70% of previous earnings (as well as coverage for self-employed). This had the effect of encouraging even more fathers to take the leave, fostering greater participation of fathers in infant child care.

### *Infant Care and Socialisation*

Since the 1970s, two distinct trends have dramatically transformed how families organize and provide infant and pre-school child care. In the early 1970s, a majority of families could rely on the husband/father to earn typical industrial wages working about 44 hours a week – enough to support a dependent spouse and children. Thirty years later, the typical family needs the earnings of people working about 65-80 hours a week (de Wolff 1994; Vanier 1997; Beaujot 2000) to make ends meet. The majority of women are now in the paid labour market, earning incomes that are essential to family economic security. In particular, the increase in the labour force participation among mothers with children under 16 has been significant (Statistics Canada 2006c). By 2009, 64.4% of mothers whose youngest child was aged 0 to 3, 69.7% of those whose youngest was aged 3 to 5, and 72.9% of those with a child under 16 years were employed (Ferrao 2010).

Reactions to this change have generated extensive and often heated debate. Some advocate that mothers should stay home with young children or not have children if they can't afford to do so, because, they believe, infants and toddlers do best under their mother's care. Mourning the loss of the mother at home, some warn that child neglect and social chaos are likely to result (Gairdner 1992). However, most research shows that women's labour force participation has no negative impacts on their children, is usually beneficial for both mothers and children, and that high quality child care is good for children (Wall 2010). Bonnie Fox's recent study (2009) goes further, showing that labour force participation has a positive effect on parenting. Parents who consider themselves to be successful in the labour force are typically confident and capable as parents while those who did not consider themselves successful in paid employment were insecure and less competent as parents.

The debate about whether parents are naturally the best care providers for children is integrally tied up with the question of who should bear the costs of child care (Folbre 1993, 2008). Those who insist that mothers should stay home with young children, argue that the economic sacrifice is offset by the emotional rewards (Warner 2010). And yet, many women are in the labour force precisely because their families need the income. This has prompted calls for economic compensations such as increased pay rates for men to enable them to support dependent wives or a home-care allowance paid to parents who stay home during the first five years (Gilbert 2008:172). Some argue that having children is a personal choice and therefore a private matter. But when in government, these same groups acknowledge that parents need some minimal support (Bezanson 2010).

In contrast, those who support family diversity have pointed out that while many women chose to be mothers, they cannot always choose the circumstances of parenting (Fox 2009). Feminists have also argued that having children and raising them is socially necessary work that ensures the reproduction of the population and particularly of the labour force (Luxton 1980; Bezanson and Luxton 2006). On that basis, they argue that society as a whole has an obligation and a responsibility to offset the costs of child bearing and rearing. Furthermore, they note that policies that require families to bear the costs of child rearing inevitably reinforce women's inequality and subordination. Instead, they insist, states have a responsibility to foster gender equality.

A range of policies has developed in response to the pressures families experience from the competing demands of paid employment and family responsibilities (Baker 2009). Maternal leaves help to ensure that women do not lose their jobs for having babies (CBC 2009d, Pigg 2009). Parental leaves for those who are eligible offer new parents some time at home on reduced income (Marshall 2003). Some professional and unionised workers have even negotiated top ups so that their loss of income is reduced. In 2004, the federal government introduced Bill C-28 (effective January 2004) to address the needs of workers who provide care to dying family members. Since then, this policy has been somewhat revised.

While such policies offer short term help to families, and especially women, juggling paid employment and family responsibilities, the most important issue is child care. In its 1970 Report, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women noted that a system of regulated child care centres was necessary given women's involvement in paid employment. Every federal government since then has been under pressure to establish such a system; most have resisted. By 2006, fewer than 20% of children in Canada



under 6 years of age had access to a regulated child care space compared with 60% in Britain (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2007). Since then, the Conservative minority federal government, elected in 2006 and again in 2008, eliminated the federal-provincial child care agreements negotiated by the former Liberal government. In its place it implemented the “Choice in Child Care Allowance”, later renamed the “Universal Child Care Allowance”, a taxable allowance of \$100 per month per child under 6 years. While recipients are happy to have any additional money, they point out that the allowance would buy about three days of child care a month and it does not guarantee that child care spaces will be available (Friendly *et al.* 2007; Bezanson 2006a; 2010).

In 2010, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that Canada spent less than 0.2% of GDP on child care, ranking 36th of 37 countries for which data were available. It recommended that Canada increase its funding to about twice its current levels (OECD 2010). The absence of a national child care policy means that access to child care varies regionally. In 1997, the Quebec government introduced a \$5.00 per day child care programme, which was raised to \$7.00 per day in 2000. The programme has been wildly popular although there are not enough child care places to meet demand (Albanese 2006). In 2010, Ontario introduced full-day kindergarten for 4 and 5 year-olds in some schools, promising to eventually include all schools in the plan. This proposal represents a significant investment in early childhood care and education but does nothing for parents with preschool children and leaves employed parents of school-aged children to find care before and after school and during school holidays.

Most jurisdictions recognise that government support is necessary to help parents raise and care for their children. Canadian policy, however, still rests on the premise that individual families are exclusively responsible for child rearing and care, hampering efforts to introduce more effective and much needed supports.

### *Family Responsibilities, Obligations and Legitimate Dependencies*

Linked to the ideal of the nuclear family is a widespread assumption that, ideally, all adults should be able to rely on their own resources to provide for the needs of daily life. Those resources include family members who can be called on to offer care and other kinds of support. One of the most compelling examples of this assumption and its shortcomings is care provision to the frail elderly. Family members, typically spouses, children or siblings, provide the majority of care to frail elderly or dependent adults (Almey 2007). About 30% of women between the ages of 45 and 64 are combining care of seniors with child care, a double responsibility that for many generates high levels of stress and undermines their capacity to remain in the labour force (Williams 2004). Family care providers, and women in particular, spend extensive amounts of time and expend considerable energy in unpaid care, often doing so because they love the person they are caring for, out of a sense of duty, and because to do so validates their sense of themselves as loving and responsible members of their community. They also often do so because there seem to be no other available alternatives.

The social costs of such care provision are often high (Fast, Williamson and Keating 1999; Keating, Dosman, Fast, and Swindle 2008). Women report leaving the paid labour force or working reduced hours because of family care responsibilities. The resultant loss in earnings and pension contributions

mean that many women risk experiencing lower living standards and/or poverty in their own old age. Not surprisingly, many care providers report high levels of stress and increased illnesses.

In addition, the demands of such care provision often undermine the very relationships of care that are mobilised. As numerous studies have shown, the more resources a care recipient can draw on, such as state provided services, the more likely family members are to be actively involved in providing care. Conversely, the more care providers believe they are solely responsible, the more likely they are to back away from the relationship (Finch 1989). The abuse of frail seniors is another concern (Seniors Canada 2009). When family caregivers are not the sole care providers and when they have support themselves, they are far more likely to provide extensive and good quality care (Bezanson 2006b; Luxton 2006).

Applying a narrow definition of family to the practice of care providing and receiving, rather than an orientation to community care, tends to limit the actual care people provide for each other, imposing increased costs on the various health and social services. For example, two private sector employers offer employees five days of unpaid leave each year. In one case, the leave is specifically to provide care for family members, specified as parents, spouse or children. In the other case, the five days are for personal leaves, to be used as the employee wishes. The latter allows employees to provide care for neighbours, co-workers and others in their community. The lack of community-based care for people who do not have family available to look after them not only means such people are forced to rely on government services but often this increases the amount of care they actually end up needing (Luxton 2006).

An alternative to the prevailing perspective argues that care work is beneficial to society at large – and not only to care recipients. This is especially clear in the case of children. Nancy Folbre (1994) has argued that well-raised and nurtured children can be regarded as *public goods* in the standard economic sense, i.e., as goods that are such that it is impossible to restrict their consumption only to those who contribute to the costs of production. Thus, even those members of society who do not contribute to the work of raising well-nurtured children, will reap the benefits. Similar arguments have shown that adequate health care provision, especially long-term care for people with physical disabilities and mental health issues, ultimately reduces social costs and benefits everyone (Braedley 2010). If care work is understood to contribute to public goods, then governments must relinquish their practice of assuming care is largely a private matter. Instead, family care functions warrant recognition in public policy and practical economic support. Evidence supporting this perspective comes from a recent study by Miles Corak, Lori Curtis and Shelley Phipps (2010) which compared the relationship between family economic background and adult outcomes for children in Canada and the USA. They found that the degree of intergenerational economic mobility was much higher in Canada because of public policies that result in greater investment and support for children.

All these core functions of families, related to intimate relationships, maintaining households, raising children and caring for each other, are readily understood as vitally important to the personal life of the individuals involved. While they are also generally understood to be central to the well-being of society as a whole, their essential contributions are less well-understood. When people have babies, they rarely announce that they are reproducing the population. When people go home to make supper for their family, they don't usually say they are going home to reproduce the labour force. The idea that domestic

labour, all the unpaid work that sustains a household and its members, is a major contribution to the economy has been acknowledged in recent years, but is rarely taken into consideration by economists and public policy makers in their analyses of the economy. The idea that care work and especially child rearing, and the domestic labour that facilitates it, are essential to the daily and generational maintenance of the population and so contribute to the public good has not been widely accepted. These ongoing tensions and debates reflect changing values about what aspects of family life are private and up to the individuals involved and what are appropriately of public or social concern and subject to community or state intervention.

## **FAMILY FORMS OR STRUCTURES: HOW DO WE EVALUATE CHANGE?**

Making sense of how families are changing, and evaluating the effects of such changes is difficult, precisely because so much of family life is private, personal and individualized. One of the easiest ways of tracking family changes is demographically, so there is a wealth of data surveying general changes in family forms and life course patterns. What is more difficult to evaluate is the internal workings of families. Studies of family dynamics, or how families actually work in real life, depend on small scale, qualitative investigations that may reveal wonderful insights about small numbers of families but do not allow for generalizations.

Harder still are studies of the impact of changing family patterns on society as a whole, especially when such assessments are complicated by the deeply entrenched belief that the normative family of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century represents the ideal. Here the challenge is to untangle the social effects from the various and often competing views of what is preferable or desirable (Stacey 1993; Popenoe 2008). The success of families is too often measured by the extent to which they conform to the ideal, rather than by the effectiveness of families in providing emotional and material well-being to their members. For example, marriage duration is highly valued and assumed to be an indicator of well-being. Anniversaries are celebrated and couples are congratulated. Divorces are tolerated but considered to reflect failure or breakdown and to indicate larger social problems (Popenoe 2008). But are high rates of marriage and low divorce rates a positive social measure? Do they indicate a stable society or one in which failure to conform is punished? Do growing numbers of people living as singles indicate that individuals have become more self-centred and selfish, or that living as a couple is no longer the only way to find security and happiness? What are the changes in family structure and what do they mean?

Perhaps the most compelling and persistent question that gets raised about the social impact of family changes relates to the impacts on children. One of the most common ways to explore this question has been to compare children living in two different family structures, one the “traditional” married heterosexual nuclear couple, and the other one of a common-law, lone-parent, same-sex or blended family. Typically large-scale studies tend to find that the “traditional” married heterosexual nuclear couples generate greater security and stability for the adults and more successful children. They present divorce, remarriage or lone-parent families negatively (HRDC and Health Canada 2003; Amato 2000; Ambert 2002/2010; Kelly 2003).

These findings tend to get lots of media attention and generate dramatic claims about the family in crisis or the “death of the family.”<sup>20</sup> They provoke claims that non-two-parent family structures undermine the best interests of children and stimulate calls for policies that promote two-parent families in which the mother stays home to look after pre-school aged children (Gilbert 2008:159-183). However, as both HRSDC and Health Canada report, and research by Karen Robson more recently has shown, a correlation between family structure and certain social patterns, such as developmental difficulties among children, does not in fact mean there is any direct causality, that is, that family structure harms children. Rather, the social conditions that are associated with certain family structures, and not the family structure itself, are the causes of poor child outcomes (HRSDC and Health Canada 2003; Robson 2010). Furstenberg and Cherlin (2009), in their review of research on the impact of divorce on children, point out that only a minority of children have problems. They too note that neither divorce nor family structure is the problem but the related factors such as parental conflict, income, safe neighbourhoods, the support available to parents, and good schools.

Similar findings show that existing social structures create a situation where the standard of living in general and the quality of child care is higher for those raising children in two-parent households than for lone parents. Immediately after divorce, most children live with their mothers who, at least initially, are typically lone parents and who usually experience a decline in income. Lone-parent families typically have lower incomes and fewer resources than other families and lone parents inevitably are under more pressure and have less support than most couples (Morissette and Ostrovsky 2007). To what extent do such factors influence children’s lives and behaviours? While it is quite likely that children develop behaviour problems if their parents are not getting along, there is no easy way of measuring the proportion of children living with parental conflict as long as the parents continue to live together. It can only be presumed in families which have separated. Conversely, parents caring for children with complex needs may well be more inclined to divorce. To what extent are parents more likely to stay together while their children are young if their children do not face these difficult challenges?

Sorting out the actual causes of problems demands more than just large-scale surveys that show correlations and confirm widely held beliefs; it requires careful research that reveal the complexities of social life. What the latter has shown is that household standards of living, the quality of parenting practices, extended social and family networks and government support, not family structure in and of itself, are the determining factors affecting children’s well-being. As Robson (2010:81) notes, “it is not the case that some family forms are objectively better or worse than others, but that social conventions in societies foster the support or stigmatization of life choices made by individuals.” Such findings underscore the importance of focusing on the correlates of family structure, not family structure *per se*, and of understanding families as they actually are, rather than an idealized version of how they used to be.

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<sup>20</sup> The widespread belief that family structure shapes children’s well-being is strengthened by clinical studies based on people seeking help. Families which are coping well with divorce or living in family structures which are not nuclear and heterosexual tend not to show up in clinical studies.

## CONCLUSIONS: NEW FAMILIES, CHANGING UNDERSTANDINGS

Families in Canada have changed dramatically since the 1950s in ways that have challenged prevailing assumptions about “the family.” There is much greater diversity in family forms and practices than ever before, and families that in earlier times would have been marginalized or shunned are now generally accepted. These changes have precipitated a more complex and nuanced way of thinking about families. But changing the way we think about families – in our own lives, in popular culture, in public policy, in law and in beliefs and practices – is challenging. The notion of a “traditional family” haunts contemporary thinking and evokes nostalgia for an imagined, more stable and secure family life, making many people nervous about new family forms.

Historically, families have typically provided the main sources for subsistence and care for their members. However, changes in labour market attachment, labour mobility, the growth in precarious employment and changing family structures mean that families may not be available to provide the kinds of support they used to provide. At the same time, it has become more possible for people to live independently of families. Family relationships have become somewhat more voluntary and people have greater choice about which family relationships they maintain; kin ties of responsibility and affection remain significant while “families of choice” or non-kin ties of mutual support are increasing. As family relationships become more fluid and as a wider variety of family practices exist in Canada, notions of responsibility and obligation are less clearly understood. It is less clear how people should behave towards each other.

At the same time, people are working harder just to get by and to care for loved ones. Social and economic changes are increasing the pressures on families such that many are not able to respond in ways they would like. In fact, these pressures undermine existing relationships of care, leaving people more vulnerable and socially alienated. Cutbacks to public services – and calls for privatization – are exacerbating the challenges families are facing (Bezanson and Luxton 2006; Braedley and Luxton 2010). Effective public policy and support are vital to helping families cope and thrive in today’s world. The challenge for people in Canada who care about families is to figure out how to create the most effective conditions to foster well-being for everyone.

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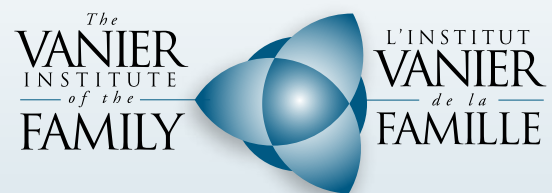
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