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Who Is Family Today?

(The Washington Post/Getty Images)

James Abbott (left) with children Caleb, 14 (second from left), and Alfred Gri-Abbott, 11 (far right), and husband, David Gri, as they pose for a portrait at their home in Oakton, Virginia, on Sunday, February 5, 2012. Virginia state law forbids gay couples from adopting a child together, and the General Assembly is moving to pass a bill allowing private agencies to turn away prospective gay parents for religious or moral reasons.

Family Redefined

By Paul McCaffrey

In 2010, *Time* magazine and the Pew Research Center conducted a poll analyzing American attitudes toward marriage. The results were striking. Around 40 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that marriage is becoming obsolete. Such attitudes are reflected in shifting family structure in the twenty-first century and the growing prevalence since the 1950s of more diverse and unorthodox family units. Though the conventional nuclear family—composed of a married mother and father and their biological children—is still the dominant structure, it has been waning for the past sixty years as single-parent families, stepfamilies, cohabitating families—those with unmarried domestic partners—and other arrangements have taken on greater prominence.

While marriage rates have declined and new family structures have become more common, the biological underpinnings of family have stayed central, as has the role of parents, whether biological or adoptive, single or step. A 2009 census report noted that approximately 93.8 percent of all children reside with at least one biological parent. Of the remaining 6.2 percent, 1.9 percent lived with one or more adopted parents. This left around 4.2 percent living without a biological or adoptive parent; of these, around 60 percent resided with grandparents. Biology notwithstanding, according to some estimates, up to 54 percent of children will live apart from one of their parents by the time they are fifteen years old.

Though single-parent families are by no means a new phenomenon, thanks to soaring divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates, their numbers have tripled during the last several generations and are expected to continue growing. In 1960, fully 87 percent of children under eighteen were being brought up by two married parents, compared to only 9 percent being raised by single parents. According to census data, in 2009, that 87 percent had fallen to 64.7 percent while the 9 percent had risen to 27.3 percent. Currently, over 40 percent of births are to unwed mothers, and about one in four children live with a single parent. Of those children who live with one parent, about 86 percent reside with their mothers.

Single parenthood is not an easy proposition. While most married and cohabitating families can rely on two incomes, a single-parent household generally only has access to one. In addition to being the sole provider, the single parent is frequently the only caregiver. These responsibilities are hard for one person to fulfill and research bears this out. Single-parent families, especially those headed by mothers, are more likely to fall into poverty. Children in these families are twice as likely to develop psychiatric problems and suffer from drug and alcohol abuse; they are also dropping out of school and committing crimes at higher rates. Even so, researchers maintain that attributing these statistics to the single-parent family alone is ill

advised. "You need to be careful in interpreting the data because you don't have the inner family details," Dr. Per-Anders Rydelius, a professor at Sweden's Karolinska Institute, observed. "This is really a complex situation and you cannot put it just on the single-parent family. There are many other complex factors that we have a hint of but no detailed information on."

The plight of single parents—and single mothers in particular—is not helped by popular attitudes. According to a Pew Research Center study, the majority of the American public, 69 percent, though accepting on the whole of working mothers, cohabitating households, gay families, and other nontraditional arrangements, were more skeptical of single motherhood and perceived it as a potential threat to society. "Working mothers are acceptable to almost everybody," Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University, commented. "Two parents who are unmarried are tolerated or acceptable. But many people, including single parents themselves, question single-parent families. There's still a strong belief that children need two parents."

Single parenthood is not the only family structure to grow more prevalent with the increase in divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births. Nor is it the only one to suffer from varying degrees of social disapproval. Stepfamilies have become especially common over recent generations. The US Bureau of the Census reports that 7.5 percent of children under eighteen have at least one stepparent, and according to the Pew Research Center, more than four in ten Americans now have a stepchild, stepparent, stepsibling, or a half sibling. These rates seem particularly linked to the age of the respondent's demographic; the younger the respondents, the more likely it is that they have stepfamilies. Thirty percent of the Pew respondents reported having a step or half sibling, 13 percent claim one or more stepchildren, and 18 percent have a stepparent who is still living. For those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, fully 52 percent have a step or half relative. What is meant by the term "stepfamily" has also evolved. "It used to be that stepfamilies mainly referred to divorced parents who remarried," Andrew Cherlin observed. "Now, unmarried people who have children from a previous relationship may start a stepfamily without either partner having been married."

Like single-parent households, stepfamilies face their own set of challenges. Age-old tales about wicked stepparents and stepsiblings have painted stepfamilies into an unenviable corner; many reject the label in favor of the more innocuous "blended family" or some other construction. Still, the stigma attached to stepfamilies is not altogether unwarranted. Various studies have pointed to a so-called Cinderella effect, wherein stepchildren suffer greater rates of abuse and neglect at the hands of their stepparents compared to their biological parents. There is also data to suggest that stepchildren tend to leave home earlier, citing family conflict as the cause.

On a larger level, building bonds of kinship within stepfamilies can take years and success is never assured. According to Pew, these connections are rarely as strong as those enjoyed by biological families. But that does not mean that people lower their expectations, with some holding on to the ideal of a perfectly blended

family as depicted in the television series *The Brady Bunch*. Consequently, many researchers feel that just as the stigma associated with a stepfamily is not entirely helpful, neither are the elevated hopes implied by calling it a blended family. As Brenda Ockun, the publisher of the online magazine *StepMom*, commented, "People come together with their own traditions and history, and in trying to define the new stepfamily, they struggle to determine what it's supposed to look like. Calling them a blended family can create pressure to instantly bond and look like the first family."

In 1990, barely 3 percent of families were headed by unmarried couples. That figure had doubled to 6 percent eighteen years later, the Pew Research Center reported. The accuracy of this data is open to some dispute. Unlike marriages and divorces, there are no official statistics on cohabitating families, so estimates may over- or underreport them. Moreover, the dynamics of cohabitating families tend to be a bit more fluid and less stable than conventional marriages. Still, while precise figures are unavailable, the consensus is that cohabitating families are expanding rapidly. As W. Bradford Wilcox, the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, commented, "today more than 2.5 million kids are living in cohabiting homes—up more than 12-fold from the 1970s. And more than 40% of kids will spend some time in a cohabiting household, either with their own biological parents or with one parent and an unrelated adult."

Cohabitating families are surprisingly diverse, so it is difficult to make generalizations about them. They can contain two biological parents, composing a typical nuclear family minus the parents' marriage. Or they can be structured more along the lines of stepfamilies. Either way, cohabitation enjoys some economic advantages over single parenthood, providing families with two potential incomes and allowing them to cut down on their living expenses by consolidating. Cohabitation also eases the caregiving burdens.

Nevertheless, cohabitating families have disadvantages, especially if one of the adults is not a biological parent of the children. In this regard, cohabitating families share some of the same downsides as stepfamilies. Even when the cohabitating family is headed by both biological parents, there is still more instability than in families where the parents are married. On the whole, cohabitating families tend to have fewer financial resources than married families, and couples are more likely to split up. Some researchers take an especially bleak view of such families. Even controlling for income levels and other factors, studies still find, according to Wilcox, "that children in cohabiting families are significantly more likely to suffer from depression, delinquency, drug use, and the like." Indeed, according to some research, children raised in cohabitating families have poorer outcomes than those raised in single-parent households. Still, cohabitating families are viewed more positively. According to a Pew poll, 43 percent of respondents disapproved of cohabitating couples raising children compared to 69 percent for single mothers.

In 2010, the US Bureau of the Census estimated that there were nearly 600,000 same-sex couples in the United States. Of these, about one in four was raising children. Most of these children, about 84 percent, were the biological offspring of

one of the parents and many were the product of a previous heterosexual marriage. Though same-sex marriage and civil unions have been legalized in a number of states over the past decade or so, many states still do not sanction them. As a consequence, of these 600,000 or so couples, most do not have their unions officially recognized by the government. This makes adoption more difficult since many states give preference to married couples in adoption proceedings. Nevertheless, same-sex families are growing. Between 2000 and 2009, for example, gay adoption rates more than doubled, with 18 percent of same-sex households reporting an adoptive child in the house, up from 8 percent just nine years earlier. Government officials estimate that gay families account for about 4 percent of all adoptions in the United States.

Though gay and lesbian couples continue to face discrimination, with most states not recognizing same-sex unions and two states—Utah and Mississippi—outlawing same-sex adoption, the majority of the public accepts same-sex families. In fact, only about 43 percent disapprove, a rate equal to that for cohabitating families, and given the trends of the past generation, that figure is expected to fall in the years ahead. Though same-sex families may be the targets of prejudice, studies tend to support the view that children raised in such structures fare just as well as those raised with a married mother and father. Bryan Samuels, the commissioner of the US Department of Health and Human Services's Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, declared, "The child welfare system has come to understand that placing a child in a gay or lesbian family is no greater risk than placing them in a heterosexual family."

Amid the growth of new types of family units, there has also been a return to larger, multigenerational households, those in which adult children continue to reside with their parents, for example, or families move in with relatives, where three generations—children, parents, and grandparents—may share a home. In 1940, according to the Pew Research Center, nearly one in four households were multigenerational; in 1980, however, a mere 12.1 percent were categorized as such. The prevalence of multigenerational households tends to depend on economic factors. During times of high unemployment, it makes more sense for families to pool their limited resources. In the midst of the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, 16.7 percent of the population, nearly five million more people than in 2007, lived in multigenerational households. Though these arrangements are often the result of unfortunate circumstances, they illustrate that during difficult times, people fall back on their families.

Though rates of marriage may be falling and many may question the institution's continued relevance in the face of the new family structures that are emerging, the family unit itself, even amidst all these changes, still retains its preeminent place in American society. More than three in four people polled by Pew named their families as the most important thing in their lives, and 85 percent say their family today is as close or closer than the one in which they were raised. How a family is built and defined may have shifted, but its value has not. Whether headed by traditional, single, step, cohabitating, or same-sex parents, the family is in no danger of becoming obsolete.

Address to the Iowa House of Representatives

By Zach Wahls
January 31, 2011

Good evening, Mr. Chairman, my name is Zach Wahls.

I'm a sixth-generation Iowan and an engineering student at the University of Iowa, and I was raised by two women. My biological mom, Terri, told her grandparents that she was pregnant, that the artificial insemination had worked, and they wouldn't even acknowledge it. It actually wasn't until I was born and they succumbed to my infantile cuteness that they broke down and told her that they were thrilled to have another grandson. Unfortunately, neither of them lived to see her marry her partner Jacki of fifteen years when they wed in 2009.

My younger sister and only sibling was born in 1994. We actually have the same anonymous donor, so we're full siblings, which is really cool for me. I guess the point is that my family really isn't so different from any other Iowa family.

When I'm home, we go to church together. We eat dinner, we go on vacations. But, we have our hard times, too; we get in fights. Actually, my mom, Terri, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2000. It is a devastating disease that put her in a wheelchair, so we've had our struggles.

But we're Iowans. We don't expect anyone to solve our problems for us. We'll fight our own battles. We just hope for equal and fair treatment from our government.

Being a student at the University of Iowa, the topic of same-sex marriage comes up quite frequently in classroom discussions. The question always comes down to, "Well, can gays even raise kids?" And the conversation gets quiet for a moment, because most people don't really have an answer. And then I raise my hand and say, "Actually, I was raised by a gay couple, and I'm doing pretty well."

I scored in the 99th percentile on the ACT. I'm actually an Eagle Scout. I own and operate my own small business. If I was your son, Mr. Chairman, I believe I'd make you very proud. I'm not really so different from any of your children. My family really isn't so different from yours. After all, your family doesn't derive its sense of worth from being told by the state, "You're married, congratulations!"

No, the sense of family comes from the commitment we make to each other to work through the hard times so we can enjoy the good ones. It comes from the love that binds us. That's what makes a family.

So what you're voting for here isn't to change us. It's not to change our families. It's to change how the law views us, how the law treats us. You are voting for the first time in the history of our state to codify discrimination into our constitution, a constitution that but for the proposed amendment is the least amended constitution in the United States of America.

You are telling Iowans that some among you are second-class citizens who do not have the right to marry the person you love. So will this vote affect my family? Would it affect yours? In the next two hours, I'm sure we're going to hear a lot of testimony about how damaging having gay parents is on kids. But in my nineteen years, not once have I ever been confronted by an individual who realized independently that I was raised by a gay couple. And you know why? Because the sexual orientation of my parents has had zero effect on the content of my character.

The sense of family comes from the commitment we make to each other to work through the hard times so we can enjoy the good ones. It comes from the love that binds us. That's what makes a family.

Thank you very much.

How America Changed

By Haya El Nasser and Paul Overberg
USA Today, August 10, 2011

What changes two decades have wrought.

The USA is bigger, older, more Hispanic and Asian and less wedded to marriage and traditional families than it was in 1990. It also is less enamored of kids, more embracing of several generations living under one roof, more inclusive of same-sex couples, more cognizant of multiracial identities, more suburban, less rural and leaning more to the South and West.

Results of the 2010 Census have been pouring out all year, an avalanche of statistics detailing the population characteristics of states, counties and cities. But the Census represents more than just a current snapshot.

The end of the first decade of the 21st century marks a turning point in the nation's social, cultural, geographic, racial and ethnic fabric. It's a shift so profound that it reveals an America that seemed unlikely a mere 20 years ago—one that will influence the nation for years to come in everything from who is elected to run the country, states and cities to what type of houses will be built and where.

The metamorphosis over just two decades stuns even demographers and social observers.

"It was always predicted that we would be diverse, but it's happened faster than anyone predicted," says Cheryl Russell, former editor in chief of *American Demographics* magazine, now editorial director of New Strategist Publications, publisher of reference tools. "Diversity and the rapid growth in diversity is one of the reasons we have a black president today. That's one thing that would never have been predicted."

The black-white racial dynamics that have dominated much of the nation's history have been scrambled by the explosive growth of Hispanics. In most southern states where the black-white legacy has deep roots, Hispanics have accounted for most of the population gains during the past decade.

"An entire Venezuela's worth of Hispanics was added in just those two decades," says Robert Lang, an urban sociologist at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas. That's about 30 million, or half of the nation's growth since 1990.

"Everything about America now has to do with diversity that we could hardly recognize in 1990," says William Frey, demographer at the Brookings Institution. The change will be felt for years to come as whites and blacks age and young Hispanics dominate in more places.

"By 2050, Americans will look back at the controversies around immigration, controversies about diversity and wonder what the big deal was," Lang says.

The starkest evidence of the cultural revolution the nation has undergone in two decades lies in the first government reporting of same-sex households.

"That is huge," Russell says. "Usually, attitudinal change occurs as one generation replaces another" but this happened faster.

"In 1990, people were still thinking of family as what you saw on TV sitcoms," Frey says—mainly mom and dad and two kids. "It still stuck in people's minds as the norm."

The Facts Behind the New Norm

Who's Home

The traditional nuclear family—one or two adults and their young children—continues to ebb. In its place, a grab bag of alternatives has appeared or begun growing after decades of decline:

Among families. Various forms of three generations under one roof; adult children returning to their parents' home, sometimes with a spouse and their own children or both; blended families that include stepparents or stepchildren; and extended families that include a parent, a child, cousins and others, related or not.

Among unrelated people. A wide variety of living arrangements have flourished among all ages: unmarried partner couples, both same-sex or opposite sex, sometimes with their own or related children or adult roommates.

Living solo. The share of one-person households continues to grow, up from 25% in 1990 to 27%. The recession has slowed the trend by forcing some young adults to live with parents or roommates. But as Baby Boomers flood into their empty-nesting years and beyond, the trend could accelerate. In many Western European countries, more than one-third of households consist of just one person.

Multigenerational households. At the other end of the spectrum, a growing share of homes includes more than one generation of a family. The average household size has stopped shrinking and begun to grow for the first time in a half-century, partly buoyed by the influx of immigrant famlies.

Immigrants are more likely to have young children and live with siblings, parents or other relatives. By one broad definition, 16% of U.S. households are multigenerational (two or more), up from 14% in 1990, according to the Pew Research Center. The Census defines multigenerational as three or more generations of the same family. In 2010, they made up 4% of households.

Fewer kids. Only one-third of households now have children, and the share of households that have kids under age 18 dropped in 95% of counties, changing the flavor of neighborhoods in cities and suburbs.

The opposite is happening in areas populated predominantly by immigrants. The 1.9 million-person gain in the under-18 population since 2000 was fueled completely by racial and ethnic minorities. Hispanic fertility is at 2.9 births per woman, much higher than the national average of 2.1.