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Inequality and the Family

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Inequality is related to families and family structure in complicated ways. Family forms may be cause, or consequence, of various forms of inequality. In hard times, families may provide comfort or serve as resource pools to protect against scarcity. For the privileged, families are conduits for the intergenerational transmission of wealth and status. For others, the burden of caring for family members sometimes imposes impediments to economic mobility.

In this chapter, we describe four forms that the relationship between families and inequality may take. First, *families reflect inequalities*, because the unequal distribution of various resources – economic, social, and political – affects the availability or accessibility of some family forms. For example, low incomes increase the likelihood that poor people will find themselves living in extended families even when they would prefer the privacy of a smaller, nuclear family.

Even as inequality affects the forms that families take, however, it is also the case that *unequal outcomes result from different families and family forms*. This is the second relationship we discuss. This dynamic has both proximate and intergenerational components. A common example of the proximate effects is the disproportionate odds of poverty experienced by single mothers and their children. In terms of intergenerational effects, families remain perhaps the most important mechanism for the transmission of unequal life chances.

But families are not unitary subjects, experiencing the same consequences or impacts of the wider social world. Thus, our third observation is that *families contain and reproduce inequalities*, both personally intimate and economically pivotal. For example, the division of labor and resources within families usually privileges men, with women dominating unpaid housework and child-care while men hold privileged positions in the paid labor market. Further, children are subject to the often unchecked authority of their parents.

Thus, inequalities impose constraints on family forms, and the weight of each generation's troubles often falls on the shoulders of their children. And beyond these

dynamics, the family is a cauldron of inequality in some ways all its own. However, we must not exclude the paradoxical reality that *family relationships offer response to inequality and hardship* – our fourth dynamic. Without the cooperation and mutual support of individuals within families, survival itself would be compromised, at least for the poorest people. We address each of these relationships in turn.

Families as Unequal Outcomes

In the modern era, it has been suggested, people use families for their personal, instrumental, rather than collective, purposes. However, not everyone has equal access to the growing range of options regarding family forms. Unequal access to family forms is an expression of inequality that is often invisible, confounded by our belief that decisions about whom to marry, how many children to have, and with whom to live are deeply personal and individual. But these personal decisions are made in very unequal contexts.

Family formation

One prominent explanation for the higher rate of single motherhood among African Americans in the US is that inner-city black women face a shortage of "marriageable" men (Wilson, 1987). Specifically, the combined effects of higher black mortality, incarceration, and chronic unemployment – all of which are concentrated in American inner cities – have greatly reduced the likelihood that a given Black woman will be able to find a man, or at least a man she wants to marry. In addition, Black couples are more likely to cohabit instead of marry than are white couples, which may reflect their decisions to postpone or forgo marriage under conditions of economic uncertainty (Raley, 1996). A shortage of available mates – for demographic, economic, or other reasons – can also run against men's odds of marriage. In China, for example, the historical practice of female infanticide, coupled with polygamy on the part of richer men, led to a shortage of available women, keeping many men, especially poor men, from ever marrying (Lee and Feng, 1999).

If a shortage of mates prevents the formation of some nuclear families, a lack of financial or other resources often leads to the growth of extended families. Asians, Latinos, and blacks in the US are all more likely to live in multigenerational households than are whites. Although culture and tradition play a role in these differences, it appears that such arrangements are more generally the result of economic or health conditions leading people to choose arrangements that run against their preference for more private family lives (Cohen and Casper, 2002). Low earnings, job insecurity, child-care expenses, health problems, and high housing costs may all contribute to the likelihood of living in extended households.

The poor are more likely to live in extended households, but extended family arrangements also reflect complicated patterns of intergenerational support. Older Americans are much more likely to have younger relatives move in with them than they are to move into the homes of others. To some degree, this reflects generational inequalities. Because of government support for middle-class homebuying after World War II, and partly because of Social Security support and other savings, older Americans are more likely to own homes than are their younger relatives. In a pinch, then, the younger generation may show up on the doorstep of their parents'

or in-laws' homes. Additionally, difficulties finding jobs, connecting with marriage partners, and paying for college have led increasing numbers of young adults to delay forming their own households (Treas and Torrecilha, 1995). Multigenerational arrangements also reflect gendered patterns, as men are more likely than women are to live with their mothers (Cohen and Casper, 2002).

Legal and social restrictions

The legally recognized formation of families also requires rights that not all enjoy. Family life therefore may be conditioned on inequalities in political power. Gay and lesbian couples, for example, have had to struggle for the right to have or adopt children and, in most places, are still prevented from legally marrying. Even the right to maintain familial relationships – such as visiting loved ones in hospital, making medical decisions for spouses, and passing on custody of children or property upon death – is often contested for gay and lesbian couples. On the other hand, the religious practice of polygamy among Mormons in the US has been legally curtailed as well. In these and other ways, state practices directly or indirectly affect the kind of families that may be formed or legally recognized. This is the case even though state affirmation is rarely visible to those making more mainstream family choices; married couples rarely, if ever, are asked to produce legal proof of their marriage.

Beyond the effects of state policy, there are strong social norms and taboos that support some family forms while condemning others to marginality or disparagement. These have been eroded in recent years, especially in some places – such as San Francisco, California – where advocates have been able to affect local policies and practices to explicitly protect unmarried couples. Nevertheless, informal enforcement of social expectations with regard to families remains quite strong, even though it may be subtle, as in the practice of paying married men higher wages or promoting them faster than single men.

Pierre Bourdieu writes:

> the family in its legitimate definition is a privilege instituted into a universal norm . . . Those who have the privilege of having a "normal" family are able to demand the same of everyone without having to raise the question of the conditions (a certain income, living space, etc.) of universal access to what they demand universally. (1998: 69)

Thus, the "normal" family is not accessible to everyone, for various reasons, but it is almost universally expected. And despite formidable barriers to this normalcy, those who fail to conform are generally considered to have made personal choices that cement their outsider status.

Families Transmitting Inequality

As we have seen, there are many factors that determine what kind of family people are born into or live in. Equally important, however, are the effects that families and family forms have on their members, in the short run as well as intergenerationally. Family structure, background, and the resources available to children, including

financial resources and education at home and in school, can affect children's lives and their future as adults.

Family structure

Some kinds of families are at higher risk of poverty and other economic disadvantages, especially those headed by single women. In Britain, four out of five single-parent families qualify for poverty-level public assistance (Allan and Crow, 2001); in the US, about 40 percent of single-mother families live below the official poverty line (Casper and Bianchi, 2002). This is primarily because single women are often compelled to maintain families with one (woman's) earnings (Thomson et al., 1994). The increase in single-parent households in the US has been pronounced, and remains much higher for black families; only a third of African American children lived in two-parent families by the late 1990s, a decrease from two-thirds in 1960 (Sandefur et al., 2001). During that time, out-of-wedlock birth replaced divorce and widowhood as the predominant entry into single parenthood for women (Bianchi, 1995). Like other single mothers, never-married mothers have no male income to rely on. But divorced women have less difficulty obtaining child support because divorce procedures involve some court intervention (although many still do not receive adequate payments). Also, never-married mothers have lower average levels of education and are less often fully employed than divorced mothers, increasing the likelihood that they will have lower incomes and higher levels of poverty.

With at least 20 percent of all single-parent families headed by fathers, the implications of single-father families for children have also come under scrutiny. Single fathers usually have higher incomes and more material resources than single mothers, which allow the children of single-father families to gain some of the benefits accruing to the affluent. However, single fathers have fewer social resources and more difficulty with the parenting role than single mothers (Griffiths, 1999).

The conditions of life for poor families can have a significant immediate effect on children. Although conditions have improved among the poor in the US in recent decades, many still live in dilapidated homes, where walls, floors, and ceilings have open cracks or holes, and leaky roofs, exposed wires, and rodents, which all present health hazards (Mayer, 1997). Poor children are on average less healthy than other children, with higher rates of infant, child, or adolescent mortality and increased risk of infectious diseases. In addition to direct economic mechanisms, however, Guo and Harris (2000) found that some family-related factors, including cognitive stimulation and parenting style – along with physical environment and health at birth – contribute to developmental problems for poor children.

Class mobility

Adherents of the benefits of modernity believe that with the spread of industrialization, and the bureaucratization that accompanies it, the effects of family background on children's futures should be gradually reduced as individual effort and natural ability are increasingly rewarded by the meritocratic system. Although there was evidence of declining father influence on sons' occupational standing in the 1960s and 1970s, more recent research shows a persistent and possibly increasing tendency for fathers to pass on their occupational standing to their sons. As Steven Rytina writes, "the apple lands as near the tree as it ever did, if not a little closer" (2000: 1270).

Most social scientists are not persuaded by the evidence for inherited intelligence as a powerful determinant of economic success later in life. But we know that families do affect their children's futures in many ways. Depending on the circumstances and measures used, it has been shown that the parental education and family income experienced as a child affect the odds of poverty as an adult. According to a multivariate analysis by Fischer et al. (1996), parents' income is the most important factor (although in the case of African Americans, parental education also plays an important role).

In general, families at the top and bottom of the economic hierarchy are most likely to produce children who replicate their families' social position. That is because the very rich have the most opportunity to advance their children's prospects, and the very poor have the least access to the kind of resources necessary to propel their children into a higher social position. There is considerably more fluidity in the middle of the economic distribution, which is more consistent with assumptions about modernity (Kerbo, 2000). So, although individual factors are clearly important, the reproduction of inequality takes place at least in part within families, and parental characteristics are among the most important predictors of adult outcomes.

The transmission of life chances from parents to children is complex, taking many forms. Outcomes for children of single-parent families, for example, are affected not just by income, but also by time spent with parents, parental help with schoolwork, and parental supervision (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). The mechanisms by which the children of single parents pay an economic penalty as adults are still contested. But it is safe to say that, at least for children of single mothers, lower income is probably the most important factor leading to poorer outcomes (Amato and Keith, 1991), including lower standardized test scores, lower levels of education, and lower income as adults (Downey, 1994). On the other hand, at least one major study has found that children from single-father families also grow up to attain lower socioeconomic status than children from married-couple families (Biblarz and Raftery, 1999).

Some family determinants of children's outcomes do not depend directly on the families' income, or on behaviors within families, but rather result from the areas or neighborhoods in which they live. Mary Corcoran suggests that the mechanisms by which neighborhood effects operate include a combination of "neighborhood poverty, neighborhood welfare use, an inadequate tax base, poor public services, neighborhood family structure, absence of middle class role models, or a host of other possibilities" (1995: 258), which may include local criminal activity and peer-group activities.

Certainly, where families live contributes to one major stratifying force for children: schooling. According to Alan Kerckhoff, "Especially in secondary school, there is an association between family social status and student access to favored educational locations – better schools, more academically challenging courses, and classes taught by the 'better' teachers" (1995: 328). Schools in more affluent areas have more resources, including more contemporary books, computer resources, or better staff, as well as advanced placement and honors courses. These advantages allow children from affluent families to have greater access to higher education and ultimately higher earnings. This may be one reason why children raised in poverty have lower incomes and lower educational attainment as adults – including a higher risk of dropping out of high school and a lower likelihood of attending college.

Less complicated, but no less important, is family transmission of wealth the old-fashioned way: inheritance. Affluent parents are able to leave wealth behind for their

children when they die. They also pass on large sums of money at key life-course milestones, especially marriage and buying a home. These one-time investments in the next generation turn out to have important implications for future development. For example, in the US, these transfers play a very significant role in the widely divergent asset portfolios of whites and blacks with similar earned incomes (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995). In this way, family background can mean the difference between security and insecurity in early adulthood, influencing decisions about education, the accumulation of assets early in adulthood, and investments in children – which in turn affect the security of retirements and inheritances for future generations.

Children of affluent families also inherit less measurable but no less important assets from the formal and informal networks of their parents. Private schools and universities, for example, may give preferential admissions status to the children of alumni. Family connections among the wealthy also provide many opportunities for children. Because friendship networks among the wealthy are concentrated at the upper end of the class hierarchy, the casual intervention or assistance of friends is also highly stratified. Many young adults have a family friend help them get a summer job, for example, but who their parents are will affect the nature of those jobs. Family social networks, especially among the rich, also often bring young adults together in marriage (Domhoff, 2002).

Inequality within Families

In some respects it is tempting to discuss families as functional units. By working together families increase efficiency; money and other resources are often shared, and decisions about how to deploy them often are made jointly. But as the age at marriage has increased, along with divorce rates, and more parents are raising children either alone or with unmarried partners, it has become increasingly obvious that people do not relinquish their individual interests when they cross the threshold of the family home. Like workplaces or other social arenas, families are themselves sites of negotiation and exchange, power and conflict, and inequality.

Divisions of labor

In the majority of American married couples, both husband and wife are now in the labor force. Nevertheless, men still devote more time to paid work while women do more housework and child-care. As with any division of labor, whether mutual or coercive, the division of labor within couples – and the dynamic it sets in motion – have implications for inequality.

According to the US Census Bureau, the wife was the only spouse in the labor force in just 6 percent of all married couples in 2000. Among couples with children, that number fell to 3 percent of couples. On the other hand, 22 percent of couples send only the husband into the labor force, which rises to 28 percent in couples with children. Thus, in most couples, even most couples with children, both spouses are in the labor force. But the "traditional" breadwinner role is much more likely to be filled by the husband. Even without gender inequality in the labor market, then, we would expect husbands to earn more money than their wives. In fact, 59 percent of husbands have earnings $5,000 or more over their wives', compared to the mere 15

percent of wives who earn $5,000 more than their husbands. That gap is also wider in couples with children.

Despite substantial narrowing over the last several decades, the housework imbalance persists as well. In 1965, US married women spent 33.9 hours per week on all housework tasks, compared to 4.7 hours per week performed by husbands, a ratio of more than 7 to 1. By 1995, the ratio was below 2 to 1, as wives cut their hours down to 19.4, and husbands increased theirs to 10.4. However, there was little change in the 10 years after 1985, indicating that the convergence may be leveling off (Bianchi et al., 2000).

Female dominance of housework is by no means restricted to the US. An analysis of data collected in 22 industrialized countries in 1994 showed that no country approached equality in the division of housework between husbands and wives. The most egalitarian were the socially liberal countries – Norway, the US, Sweden, and Canada. The socially conservative and Catholic countries – Austria, Ireland, Italy, and Japan – had the most unequal divisions of labor. Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia fell into the middle range (Batalova and Cohen, 2002).

A number of explanations have been offered for the persistence of the housework gap between husbands and wives (South and Spitze, 1994). The simplest is that wives do more housework because they have more time for housework, as the labor force consumes husbands' time. This explanation is problematic, however, because labor-force commitments have changed more rapidly than the division of housework has. This lends support to the second explanation, which is that the imbalance favors men because men bring greater resources – especially their incomes – to the family negotiation over housework. Housework is considered drudgery, so men use their stronger bargaining position to get out of it. Finally, it is clear that childhood socialization plays a role in the expectations that both men and women bring to marriages. Therefore, any change in the division of housework is likely to lag behind changes in the economy or other influences, as adults model behaviors they experienced decades earlier in their own families.

Even if the division of labor within couples were mutually agreeable – representing joint investment in the family unit – it would have consequences for inequality in cases where the marriage ends in divorce or widowhood. The time women spend out of the labor force takes a toll on their future earnings if they later choose, or need, to find full-time employment. However, even when work experience is taken into account, women who have had children suffer a wage penalty (Budig and England, 2001). It is possible that employers discriminate against mothers in hiring, or fail to promote them to positions with higher pay, because they believe mothers will be less reliable or committed to their jobs. That would fit with the considerable evidence that married men earn more than single men – even when differences in education, skill level, and experience are taken into account – perhaps because employers believe married men are more responsible, or will devote themselves more fully to their jobs (Cohen, 2002a). Thus, social norms and expectations about family life may magnify the effects of the gender division of labor within families, enhancing men's privilege and increasing women's dependence on men's earnings.

Power, violence, and authority

Partly as a result of economic inequalities, the hierarchy within families generally ranks men at the top, followed by women and then children. Among children, there

may be an additional hierarchy by age and gender, depending on the cultural and economic context. Thus, inequalities outside the family permeate families as well, contributing in turn to the reproduction of inequality in the wider social world.

Inequalities work through family relations to create hierarchies, partly through differential power among family members. Consider the role of children. They depend on parental support, supervision, and other resources in order to thrive. For example, in the US, children with more than one sibling on average attain lower levels of education than those with fewer siblings, presumably because of lower parental investments per child (Hauser and Kuo, 1998). The affect of parental decision-making is even more pronounced in many parts of Eastern and Southern Asia, where parents exhibit a strong preference for sons. This leads to sons getting more food and better health care at young ages. Also, if parents with a strong son preference stop having children only when they have reached the desired number of sons, girls on average will grow up in larger families, which itself is a disadvantage. Paradoxically, this also means that daughters will be more likely to live in families with a strong son preference, where they will be still further disadvantaged (Clark, 2000).

Despite its traditional overtones, however, the preference for sons is not just a fading feudal practice. Parents' preference for sons may be more common in societies with a dowry system, but son preference also results from calculation of the relative economic potential of boys versus girls, and thus reflects contemporary gender inequalities, regardless of their origins. And traditional son preferences interact with evolving state policy as well. Evidence from China suggests that girls living in communities that strictly enforce the government's one-child policy receive less parental care than girls living in other communities (Short et al., 2001).

Perhaps the clearest example of power relations within families, however, concerns sex and violence. The US Bureau of Justice Statistics, from data collected in the 1990s, reports that three-quarters of sexual assaults against children occur in a residence. The perpetrators of sexual assault against victims under 6 were family members in half the cases. The likelihood that a sexual assault will be perpetrated by family members decreases as children grow older and interact more outside the family, but even among children age 12 and over, 24 percent of sexual assaults are committed by family members. As with adults, girls are more likely to be sexually assaulted than boys, but at the youngest ages about 1 in 3 victims is a boy. Other violence within families usually but not exclusively targets women. In 1998, women comprised 72 percent of people killed by spouses and other intimates, and 85 percent of the victims in nonlethal, intimate violence. Sadly, for some, the family is a source of violence, degradation, and even death.

The patterns of family violence help illustrate the underlying power relationships, and how they interact with the hierarchies of the wider social world (Andersen, 2000). Despite difficulties in reporting, for example, it is clear that family violence extends up and down the economic spectrum and racial–ethnic hierarchy. However, stresses related to economic inequality, including unemployment, do contribute to incidences of family violence (Kimmel, 2000). Although both men and women may perpetrate family violence, there is some evidence that violence plays a different role for each. In keeping with men's more powerful positions, some research has shown that men's violence tends to be more instrumental, that is, men tend to use violence to gain obedience or acceptance of their dominant position within the household. Women, on the other hand, tend either to react defensively or to express immediate

frustration or anger. Among same-sex couples – who overall experience similar levels of family violence as opposite-sex couples – violence may also be exacerbated by internalized homophobia, which provides a source of displaced anger, feelings of despair, or loss of control (Andersen, 2000).

Families Resisting Inequality

For every story of hierarchy and domination within families, there is another that tells of families pulling together to make ends meet, support each other, and soldier on to produce the next generation in even the toughest of times. The centrality of the family as a social institution emerges when one observes that the family is so crucial both to the reproduction of inequality on the one hand, and to the resistance to inequality and hardship on the other. In this last section we outline some of the ways the family plays this latter role.

In recent years, careful longitudinal studies have been able to confirm some assumptions about the positive role that families can play, especially for children facing economic, health, or emotional hardship. For example, on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, a long-term study of vulnerable children showed that emotional support from family members, including extended family members, was an important factor in surviving and thriving into adulthood (Werner and Smith, 2001). For adolescents in American rural areas facing economic hard times, close relationships with grandparents and other extended family members provide an important source of support when parents cannot fulfill their protective roles, with positive effects on children's academic success and emotional well-being (Elder and Conger, 2000).

Similarly, the challenges single-mother families face, and the disadvantages in childhood that result, do not necessarily lead to reports of lower psychological well-being (Hilton, Desrochers, and Devall, 2001). Single parents do raise successful children, often by assuming both male and female role responsibilities, establishing extended care networks, serving as teachers, confidants, and role models for their children, and finding sources of income other than wages (Persaud, Gray, and Hunt, 1999; Tsushima and Gecas, 2001). Much of this activity escaped the attention of researchers, especially the use of informal networks to raise alternative sources of income (Edin and Lein, 1997).

Beyond support behaviors within families, two other strategies stand out as individual and adaptive responses to poverty and inequality. The first uses the family to go outside the family and household, building networks of support to create a social safety net, especially in the absence of adequate welfare support. New studies show that family networks – including related and nonrelated members – often contribute vitally to the educational success of children (Rosier, 2000). The second involves the actual form that families take. For example, with the onset of welfare reform in the US, new research has focused on the role of extended families in supporting the employment of single mothers, showing that those single mothers who live in extended households are more likely to be employed (Cohen, 2002b). One role for extended family members is taking care of children, especially since access to affordable day care is central to maintaining employment for single mothers (Manning and Smock, 1997).

Much of this research is part of a long history of interest in the central role played by family-support networks among African Americans (Stack, 1974). But recent

scholarship emphasizes several limitations to this approach. First, one should not exaggerate the lifesaving capacity of kin networks. In fact, one of the vexing problems of inner-city decline for Black families has been the faltering of their networks – which remain only as strong as their members (Roschelle, 1997). Second, partly because family networks among the poor are so important for survival, reliance on such relationships is not always voluntary or even welcome. Katherine Newman has shown that, in the absence of sufficient earnings, social networks for the working poor preserve "a form of social capital that has all but disappeared in many an American suburb" (1999: 194). But while the middle class might regret the loss of such connections, these networks "remain tight, even oppressive at times, in poor communities."

Conclusion

Families are formed and develop in a social context rife with inequality along many dimensions. We have seen the impact of these inequalities on the formation of families, but also how families are actors in the systems of inequality, transmitting inequalities to subsequent generations, reproducing inequalities within the confines of the family home and the networks of its members, but also resisting the effects of inequality and hardship. Like any major social institution, then, families are thoroughly intertwined with larger, structural forces in the cultural, economic, and political arenas. By examining the dynamics of families, we are able to learn not only some of the ways that inequality works its way into and through our lives, but also how inequality shapes our family environments, and how individual interaction both reflects and contributes to the inequalities we face.

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