Family Problems (Kimmel, chapter 6)

In this section, Kimmel slides out of his social constructionist stance by arguing that some social problems are “constructed” and others are not. However, social constructionists believe all problems are constructed.

From that position, Kimmel is acting here as a claims maker. He is arguing that the way that the problems of day care, teen pregnancy, fatherlessness, divorce, child custody, and gay and lesbian families are framed in a way that contributes to gender inequality.

Day care (and working mothers) is framed as something that is bad for kids. However, Kimmel claims that there is no evidence of this. For him, the problem is that “despite its positive effects, there’s not enough of it, it’s not affordable, and the government and our employees don’t seem to care very much about our children” (p. 140).

Teen pregnancy is framed as “babies having babies.” Kimmel argues that the underlying concern is “women’s sexual agency,” leading to counterproductive solutions like restricting access to birth control and birth control information (despite evidence that this doesn’t reduce sexual behavior). For Kimmel, the problem is lack of access to birth control and men’s sexual irresponsibility. Also, many out-of-wedlock births are to committed cohabiters.

Fatherlessness is framed as leading to many problems for children, but Kimmel believes this claim is overstated. He believes that poverty is an underlying cause of both absent fathers and correlated problems (delinquency, low academic achievement).
Divorce is framed as a problem for children. Again, Kimmel believes this claim is overstated and that levels of family conflict is more important. Divorce is a “necessary safety valve” for high-conflict families. Divorce, like marriage, contains gender inequality since it is more harmful for women than men.

Gay and lesbian families are not problematic for Kimmel since claims about their harm to children are not supported. These families have less gender inequality. The increased fragility of gay male relationships is due to the members being men (not being gay) and because the supports of marriage aren’t available.

Family violence is a real problem for Kimmel, who focuses here on violence against children. Family violence is gendered—males do most of the hitting. Violence against children has widespread support even though it has harmful effects. Children who are victims of violence learn that it is an acceptable way to solve problems and don’t learn non-violent practices.

“Perhaps the most consistent finding to emerge from the literature on divorce, custody, and sexual orientation is that the form of the family—intact, divorced, single parent, lesbian or gay—matters far less for children than its content. A home filled with love and support, where parents spend both quality time and quantity time with their children and with each other is the strongest predictor of future physical, emotional, and psychological health of both the children and their parents” (p. 155).

Kimmel believes families can be strengthened by increasing support for them, e.g., with family friend workplace policies, and decreasing gendered inequality, e.g., re-integrating the spheres.