The Gendered Family (Kimmel, chapter 6)

Kimmel argues that the American family isn’t in decline, but is a resilient institution that adapts to changing circumstances. Many Americans have a “misplaced nostalgia” for the 1950, which was an exceptional period for the family.

In the early American family there wasn’t a sharp divide between men’s and women’s spheres. The “two spheres” concept, a corresponding decline in women’s status, and an increase in the family’s symbolic importance, arose in the 19th Century.

This new family form was in “perpetual crisis,” but post-WWII economic conditions stabilized it. However, many men and women weren’t satisfied with this “natural” family form.

“The family of the 1970s and early 1980s was actually stronger and more resilient because of its increasing diversity of form…. But since the early 1980s, the family has indeed been in trouble, partly because of the dramatic withdrawal of public supports.” (p. 125)

“The traditional family, a normative ideal when it was invented, has never been the reality for all American families. And it is even less so today. It represents the last outpost of traditional gender relations—gender differences created through gender inequality—that are being challenged in every observable arena. Families are gendered institutions; they reproduce gender differences and gender inequalities among adults and children alike.” (p. 127)

Jesse Bernard claimed that “his’ and “her” marriages are distinct types and marriage benefits men more than women.

Parents socialize children using gender-specific ideas about children’s needs and treat boys and girls differently beginning at birth.

Women do far more housework than men, even in two-career families. Men’s participation in childcare has increased. However, few men are willing to sacrifice career ambitions to spend more time with their children. Both mothers and fathers are spending more time with their children but the total amount of housework has gone down.