

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.

Kimmel slides out of his social constructionist stance by arguing that some family 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. 172)

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