Introduction

Families come in all shapes and sizes and each one is just as valid and just as much of a family as the next. Family models are constantly changing and evolving but that does not mean that there is one model that is better than another. Unfortunately, society believes that the nuclear family is the most successful family type and often blames other social problems on the fact that too many of America’s families do not follow the nuclear family model. However, families of all kinds have an equal amount of problems and successes, which depend on the people involved, not the family type itself. Society focuses on what we think the problems are with non-nuclear family forms but often times does not recognize that these perceptions are wrong and that these families have many positive aspects to them. This research paper will examine the history behind the idea of the “traditional” American family and will closely examine three different family types (divorced, blended, and homosexual-parent) in order to prove that non-nuclear families can also be successful.

The 1950s American Family Myth and the Nuclear Family

The 1950s were a wonderful time for families. Having a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and two-point-five children seemed to be every American’s dream and their future reality, the 1950s family was perfect, right? Wrong. The 1950s family that many American’s picture when they think of the “traditional family” never truly existed, at least not in the ways we think it did. The reality is that the image society has believed in for the last sixty years was one that was created based on aspects of family life from multiple time-periods. That is not to say that families were awful in the 1950s, they just were not exactly the way people seem to remember them.
The 1950s were a wonderful time to be starting or raising a family because of many different factors. The country was booming economically, the housing market was thriving, people were making more money, divorce rates were low, and people were having babies at an alarming rate (Coontz, 2000). The middle-class was developed and people wanted to be a part of it. Domestic and gender roles were more strictly enforced and became signs that you belonged to a middle-class family. However, even with all of the success the 1950s gave to families, they were not perfect.

The “traditional 1950s family” most people think of is actually a combination of family forms, one from the mid-nineteenth century and the other from the 1920s. The mid-1800s family was one where the mother-child bond took greater importance than that of the wife-husband relationship, while in the 1920s, women were supposed to focus on their relationships with their husbands. The reason why we see the 1950s as the “traditional family” is because women during this time were put under tremendous amounts of pressure to be there for their husbands and for their children. In other words, they were trying to fully be two very different types of women at one time. Author Stephanie Coontz describes it as,

The hybrid idea that a woman can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it (Coontz, 9).

Because so many women were trying to live up to this ideal and hiding the fact that it was not easy, society believed that it was possible and was the best family form.

The 1950s family that society believes in was called a nuclear family. A nuclear family is academically defined as “The basic family building block, consisting of a mother, father, and at least one child” (Strong, 583). Many academics will also add the
word married to this definition. In the nuclear family, the mother is expected to stay home with the children while the father goes to work to make a living. The nuclear family is seen as flawless and very successful. Unfortunately, no matter how much we want to believe the 1950s family was ideal and perfect, it was not because it never actually existed in the way we think it did. The family American’s picture when they think 1950s is “an ahistorical amalgam of structures, values, and behaviors that never coexisted in the same time and place” (Coontz, 9). Even though the 1950s family was not exactly what we think it was, the concept of a nuclear family (one where children are raised in a home with married parents) is still a valid family form.

The Divorced Family

The first type of family we will examine is the divorced family. The concept and act of divorcing one’s spouse has gone through tremendous change over the years especially in 1969 through the Family Law Act, when California became the first state to accept “irreconcilable differences” as a reason for divorce under the heading “No-Fault Divorce” (Clarke-Stewart, 10). Today, the divorce rate in the United States is approximately 50% (Clarke-Stewart, 15) and approximately 70% of those divorced adults will remarry (Coontz, 15). Society has believed for some time that divorce is extremely negative and only hurts the children involved. However, divorce does not have to be all negative, it can have positive and beneficial effects as well.

Before we can discuss the effects of divorce, we must look at why couples get divorced in the first place. Reasons for a couple getting divorced can often times not be narrowed down to one in particular, generally it happens because of a combination of events. One sociological theory about divorce is that,
In other words, people today see marriage as a very different institution than they did in the past, the biggest difference being that people no longer see marriage as a lifelong commitment.

When a couple divorces there are many different outcomes that can come to be. One of the biggest and most important is the effect divorce has on children. Each year approximately one-million children will experience the divorce of their parents (Clarke-Stewart, 106). In the beginning stages and sometimes for great lengths of time after that, children can be negatively affected by this change in their family. Extensive research indicates that children of divorced parents have

...more behavioral, emotional, health, and academic problems...are more likely to have conduct problems and show signs of psychological maladjustment; they have lower academic achievement, more social difficulties, and poorer self-esteem (Clarke-Stewart, 107).

However, the differences in these areas compared to children whose parents are still married are not large and can fade overtime. Behavior problems have been shown to return to pre-divorce levels approximately two-years post-divorce and as low as one-tenth of adults whose parents divorced in their childhood show continued divorce-related problems (Clarke-Stewart, 130).

There are a variety of factors when it comes to what causes these problems in children after they experience the divorce of their parents. Research is conflicting on whether or not a child’s sex or age at the time of divorce has any significant impact on their reaction but there are plenty of other factors to look at. Three of the most common
are: not enough notice beforehand, poor explanations, and the belief that it is their fault.

Research has shown that “…half of the children were told within a week of the separation (one-fifth, on the day of the separation)…as many as one-fifth of the children were not even told about the marital breakup” (Clarke-Stewart, 132). Because of the lack of notice, too many children are not mentally or emotionally prepared and end up in a state of shock. On top of that, many children do not receive adequate explanations for this change and are not told what will happen next or given a positive outlook for their futures. A fifth of all children will end up believing that their parent’s divorce is somehow their own fault (Clarke-Stewart, 133). A few other reasons children develop problems after divorce is the likelihood of their family having less money and possibly being forced to move into a new home where they may have no community ties or support. Society has put an extremely negative stereotype onto children of divorced parents, which does nothing to help these children. This ends up causing a cycle of children being so afraid to be like the stereotype that they unknowingly become it because of the way they rebel and act out. However, there are ways parents can avoid or lessen these problems if they make the decision to get divorced.

Children do not have to experience a painful divorce if their parents are aware of the effects a negative divorce can have and take the necessary steps to prevent it. Research has shown that a lot depends on the nature of the individual child, that a happy child will generally adjust better to a divorce than a child with prior mental health or behavioral concerns. However, if the parents are emotionally healthy throughout and after the divorce and show that to their children, the children are more likely to be emotionally healthy as well. Some children even learn to develop better problem solving
skills than their peers because of what they have witnessed in the divorce (Clarke-Stewart, 156). Some other important factors are the ability for the parents to keep a routine, practice consistent discipline techniques, and let their children have quality contact with both parents. All-in-all, divorce can be extremely negative on a child but it does not have to be. If parents take the right steps, many of these issues can be avoided and children can lead very normal lives. Children with divorced parents are the majority but that does not have to be a bad thing, and for many children, it is not.

**The Blended Family**

The blended family is our second family type to be observed. The blended family is one that has started to become the focus of many more studies in the last couple of decades especially when the family is formed after a divorce. In the past, these types of families were not studied as much and were classified as a type of nuclear family. Research today shows that they are much different but, with some hard work and determination, can be as successful as the nuclear family.

A blended family consists of two adults, the children they have from previous marriages or relationships, and the children they may have together. Blended families are very common in today’s society, as we have said before, approximately 70% of divorced adults will remarry (Coontz, 15), however 60% of the blended families that are formed will end up in divorce (Bray, 3). These divorces are more likely to happen in the first two years of the marriage because of the tremendous amount of change and stress a new marriage can put on the members of the new family (Bray, 11). Many new blended families believe that this new family will work much like their previous nuclear family but that is not the case. Studies have shown that in first time marriages the
satisfaction felt by both parties starts off extremely high and then lessons after the honeymoon period is over compared to blended families where the initial satisfaction starts off at a medium level and then rises over time. It is when families expect everything to be wonderful from the start that they get into trouble.

Doctor James H. Bray and John Kelly have identified three different types of blended families and four important tasks the family must complete in order to survive. The three types of blended families are the Neotraditional family, the Romantic family, and the Matriarchal family. The four tasks a new blended family must take into careful consideration are the formation of the step-parent and step-child roles, being able to separate the new marriage from the first, coping and managing with change, and understanding the roles of the nonresidential parent and former spouses. The choices and paths the parents choose when it comes to these four tasks determine which of the three types of blended family categories they fall into.

The classification of the blended family into three distinct types can also help predict whether or not the family will survive past the first few years. A Neotraditional blended family eventually ends up looking very much like the traditional nuclear family model that was described earlier and it is the type of blended family most likely to succeed. The spouses reported very high levels of marital satisfaction and the children have a lower level of behavioral problems than did children in other forms of blended families (Bray, 16). The second form, the Romantic blended family, is the type most likely to dissolve. Romantic families want to have the lives of the Neotraditional families but they want it without the hard work involved, they expect the positive results immediately instead of letting them develop over time through hard work. Lastly, the
Matriarchal blended family makes up about 25% of all blended families (Bray, 17). The Matriarchal family is, as the name suggests, a family that is headed by a woman with a “...high degree of domestic competence, and a strong desire to be the family leader” (Bray, 17). Matriarchal blended families have been shown to be very successful if the husband has similar values.

Blended families can have extremely different outcomes, it all depends on the people involved. If the marriage does not last, it can have detrimental effects on the child. Bray and Kelly say that “When a second family and a second marriage dissolve, the children internalize the lessons that marriage is not permanent, that a home is never stable, and that you cannot trust the people you love” (Bray, 3). This is a possible outcome when the children form strong attachments to the new parent and the new family. However, if the marriage was disastrous, a divorce can be a welcome fresh start and can even create a stronger bond between the blood-relatives. One the other hand, if the marriage is able to work and get through the initial trials and tribulations, the results can be extremely beneficial, especially for the children. Having this new family support system can help a child recover from a past divorce and can be just as beneficial to the child as living in a traditional nuclear family. Bray and Kelly say that,

A strong, stable stepfamily...can imbue values, affirm limits and boundaries, and provide a structure in which rules for living a moral and productive life are made, transmitted, tested, rebelled against, and ultimately affirmed (Bray, 12).

When the two adults enter their new relationship with a common and well-thought out goal, a blended family can be a wonderful and highly beneficial family form for every member.
The Homosexual-Parent Family

The final family we will be profiling is the homosexual-parent family. Gay men and lesbian women have had more than their fair share of obstacles and problems over the years and one that is in the forefront today is their decisions to have families. It is estimated that currently more than one in five same sex couples are raising children which means more than a quarter of a million children have gay or lesbian parents (Gates, in Coontz 394, 2008). And even more of these couples desire to have children but haven’t been able to do so due to a variety of reasons. Society tends to think that children being raised by gay or lesbian parents are at a disadvantage but statistics prove otherwise. The homosexual-parent family is one that is extremely misunderstood.

The first misconception that society has is the belief that successful homosexual-parent families are white and upper class but the reality is that there are more non-white gay and lesbian parents than there are white. Gary Gates says,

African-American and Latina women in same-sex couples are more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to be raising a child. And gay African-American men and Latinos are three times as likely to be raising children as are gay white men. Consistent with this finding...more than half of the children of same-sex couples are non-white (Gates, in Coontz 395, 2008).

Same sex couples are also not as wealthy as people seem to believe. They make between 10 and 20 percent less money than do married heterosexual couples of their same race (Gates, in Coontz 396, 2008).

Society also has some major misconceptions when it comes to the development of the children being raised in this type of family. The most common is the belief that children raised by homosexual parents will end up being homosexual when they get older. This has been proven to not be true, in fact children of gay or lesbian parents are
just as likely to be homosexual as any other child (Slater, 1999). Another concern is that these children will be confused when it comes to their own gender-identity and won’t know how to show appropriate sex-role behavior. Again, these claims have been proven multiple times to not be true (Slater, 1999). The concern that many find to be the most interesting is that many people believe that homosexual parents are more likely to molest their children and other people’s children. Once again, there is no evidence to support this claim either. Author Suzanne Slater confirms these studies when she writes that,

Studies comparing children raised by lesbian and heterosexual mothers repeatedly find little or no distinction in the children’s gender identity, sex role socialization, or personal sexual orientation. Overwhelmingly, the research indicates that lesbian parenting closely resembles the child-rearing practices of heterosexual families. (Slater, 92).

In fact, “The major difference in children raised by a heterosexual couple and children raised by a homosexual couple is that the children with gay or lesbian parents are much more tolerant of differences” (Professor Hirst, 11/30/11). Homosexual-parent families are very common and do just as well of a job raising their children as heterosexual parents do. Society needs to recognize the statistics and fully start accepting this beautiful type of family.

**Conclusion**

A family is a family. Some individual families are more successful than others but one family type is not better than any other. The “traditional family” that American society puts on such a pedestal never existed when we thought it did and still does not exist today. The nuclear family in which we try to live up to unreal yet traditional expectations is the minority in today’s world. More than half of all marriages end in
divorce and many more create new families after their divorces. Homosexual-parent families can also be extremely successful. The key to success in all of these families is the people themselves. The structure of the family is not as important as the people inside because as we have seen, all of these family forms have proven to be successful through hard work and commitment.
Works Cited


