**family/家(Jiā)**

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| European Perspective | Ute Klammer | 08 Apr 2022 |

**1. Introduction**

The family has played a central role throughout European cultural history. But what was understood by the term family has varied greatly over time.

According to today’s European understanding, a family is primarily the two-generation nuclear family – i.e., father, mother, children – but even this concept is changing. More or less on an equal footing are other forms of family: single parents, patchwork families, or same-sex partnerships and “rainbow families”. At other times, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and so on were also part of the nuclear family. Different degrees of kinship of either maternal or paternal origin played a role in the definition. In Europe, an economic unit was also often understood as a family – for example, all the people who worked and lived on a farm.

Also fundamental to the understanding of family is the importance of marriage as a legal alliance between two parties. It was subject to historical change in Europe, as was the role and position of the various family members.

**2. Definitions: Family and kinship**

From a micro perspective, each individual family represents a social group; from a macro perspective, the family can be characterised as an institution within society. Sociological definitions of the concept of family usually refer to both aspects. Thus, according to family sociologist Nave-Herz (2004, p. 30), families are characterised by:

1. their biological-social dual nature, i.e., the assumption of the reproductive and socialisation function in addition to other social functions

2. generational differentiation (e.g., grandparents/parents/children)

3. a specific relationship of cooperation and solidarity.

Historically, at least five forms of household families can be distinguished in Europe (Mitterauer 1990, p. 92f.):

1. the two-generation family or nuclear family

2. the multi-generational family or descent family (as a household in which more than two generations live together)

3. the extended family household, in which other relatives live alongside the nuclear family

4. the polynuclear or multiple family household as a household in which several nuclear families live together

5. the “whole house” as a household in which unrelated persons (such as maids, farmhands) live alongside a nuclear family.

In the 20th century, the nuclear family gained particular importance, which is why it is discussed in more detail here.

A nuclear family, elementary family or conjugal family is a family group consisting of parents and their children (one or more), typically living in one home residence. It is in contrast to a single-parent family, the larger extended family, or a family with more than two parents. Nuclear families typically centre on a married couple which may have any number of children, though with some differences in definition. Some definitions allow only biological children that are full-blood siblings and consider adopted or half and step siblings a part of the immediate family, but others allow for a stepparent and any mix of dependent children, including stepchildren and adopted children. Some sociologists and anthropologists consider the nuclear family as the most basic form of social organization, while others consider the extended family structure to be the most common family structure in most cultures and at most times (Wikipedia, n.d.). The nuclear family became the most common form of family structure in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

In the German micro-census, the most important database of the Federal Statistical Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, “family” today includes all parent-child relationships, i.e., married couples, non-marital (mixed-sex) and same-sex partnerships as well as single parents with children within the household. In addition to biological children, stepchildren, foster children, and adopted children are also included without age limits. Thus, a family always consists of two generations: Parents and children living in the household. Children who still live with their parents in the same household but who already have their own children as well as children who live with a partner in a cohabiting relationship are not counted as part of the family of origin in the micro-census but are statistically counted as a separate family or living arrangement (StBa, n.d.).

In modern western societies, descent and kinship are established through both male and female ancestors. This is called cognatic descent (or: non-unilinear descent, bilinear descent). Male and female ancestors are now considered equally significant.

**3. History of the family in Europe**

In ancient Greece and Rome, the oikos (Greece) and the familia (Rome) included spouses, children, and slaves. The family had important responsibilities in jurisdiction, economy, and education, which were carried out by the male head of the family, who as “pater familias” had unlimited rights and power over the family members.

Among the Germanic peoples, the clan was at the forefront of family life, i.e., a social group of related people that had a head. Marriage presupposed origin from a roughly equal economic and social class. It was mainly an economic alliance, concluded for the preservation of power and the increase of the clan’s property.

This basic requirement was only slowly softened by the spread of Christianity. A reorientation of moral-ethical evaluation changed the status of marriage and clan. Monogamy and fidelity were demanded of Christian spouses. Economic or status reasons as motives for marriage were considered secondary.

A marriage according to Christian understanding was not to be based on the purchase of a wife, but on the consensus of the partners. The Christian Church required that both spouses were of the same faith and that the woman entered the marriage as a virgin. It pronounced an incest taboo in order to break the power of the large family clans.

Polygamy (multiple marriages) was common in pre-Christian clan structures to ensure offspring and thus the existence of the clan. Among Christians, on the other hand, it was forbidden and existed only in secret in the late Middle Ages. The previously common legal equality of marital and non-marital children or even of cohabitants was abolished with the spread of Christian values.

The increasing division of labour between trade and crafts in the cities, and later also in the countryside, gave rise to a new type of family based on the Christian worldview, that of the “household family”. It is formed by an economic unit, such as a craft business, a cloth shop or a farm. In his house, the father of the family was in charge – his word had the force of law within his household. The household family included not only blood relatives, but also servants and maids who worked for the family business. The head of the household represented the family to the outside world, he held public office and made decisions.

Women’s responsibilities were directed inwards: organising the household, bringing up the children, but also helping in the family business. Medieval housewives gave birth to many children, but only a few reached adulthood. Marriages of inclination or love only came about if they fitted into the household community and contributed to its existence. Houses had a special legal status exercised by the head of the household – a house unit was not designated by a family name but by a house name, which also marked the house from the outside in many villages. This form of household family shaped all further family images in the next centuries. Essential characteristics such as the dominant role of the father, the manageable order and size of the household, the role and task of the wife, or the mutual economic dependence can be found again in the modern forms of the middle-class and working-class family.

In the German Nazi state (1933 - 1945), a very special ideological significance was attributed to the family in the service of the racial doctrine propagated by the Nazis. In order to strengthen the German people, women and men should marry as early as possible and produce many offspring. However, starting a family was not intended for the purpose of achieving private happiness, but was seen as a national duty. Only marriages in which the races did not mix were desirable. Women were not supposed to work, but to become mothers. The ideal was the peasant extended family, in which the Germanic heritage of the clan was visible. Embedded in the “blood and soil” mysticism, the National Socialist ideologists saw a natural order in the hierarchy of the sexes, in the authority of the head of the family. The bourgeois family, which had established itself in the 19th century as a typical urban family, was too private for the Nazis and thus suspect. According to the ideology of the state, the family was to serve the rearing of children, and political and social shaping itself was to be reserved for the state and its institutions.

After the Second World War, many families in Germany were destroyed. Most women worked, but primarily because there was a lack of male labour. When these were again sufficiently available, women were again forced out of working life, also by family policy measures. The West German image of the family in the 1950s conjured up an idyll, limited to the two-generation nuclear family in its own little house. The father was the head and breadwinner, the mother brought up the children and ran the household. This model continued to shape West Germany and other continental welfare states in the decades that followed, whereas Scandinavian countries developed more individualistic forms of family life. In the socialist state of the GDR, women were fully integrated into the labour market, although men did not take over the household and family work at home.

In Germany, “marriage and family” are protected to this day by the Constitutional Law, which came into force in 1949. The following decisive statements are found in Article 6 of the Constitution:

(1) Marriage and family are under the special protection of the state order.

(2) The care and upbringing of children is the natural right of parents and their primary duty. The state community shall watch over their activities.

(3) Children may only be separated from the family against the will of the parents on the basis of a law if the parents fail or if the children threaten to become neglected for other reasons.

(4) Every mother shall be entitled to the protection and care of the community.

(5) Children born out of wedlock shall be provided by legislation with the same conditions for their physical and psychological development and their position in society as are provided for children born in wedlock.

Many social benefits are still – in contrast to e.g., the Scandinavian countries – linked to the form of a life of marriage. Gender and equality research, but also family research, criticises the adherence to the traditional image of the bourgeois nuclear family, as this results in incentives for an asymmetrical division of labour (man as the gainfully employed family breadwinner, woman as the non-earner or additional earner with predominant responsibility for household and family). There is also criticism that the law has not kept pace with the actual development of family forms. Admittedly, it is now possible for same-sex couples to marry and the number of same-sex couples with children has increased. However, single parents in particular – mostly mothers – often face particular difficulties and are among the population groups with the highest risk of poverty.

**4. Recent changes in family histories and lifestyles**

Since the mid-1960s, family life and living arrangements have undergone major changes in Europe. The change extends to numerous aspects and areas of family life. It is expressed both in demographic developments and in the dynamics of couple relationships and family life courses. In practically all European societies, marriage rates have declined, and divorce rates have risen in recent decades. At the same time, single life and non-marital cohabitation have increased as forms of life in many countries. In addition, the birth rate has fallen, and marriage has become less important as an institutional framework for starting a family and raising children. Finally, these changes have been accompanied by a significant increase in the age at which people marry and start a family.

However, the change in marriage and fertility behaviour as well as in family forms has by no means been uniform and proceeded at a similar pace in the European countries. It was registered earliest, in the second half of the 1960s, in the Northern European countries and began a few years later in Central and Western Europe. In the southern European countries, the change in birth and family dynamics began later and is still less extensive today. In the former socialist Central and Eastern European countries, significant family demographic upheavals occurred in the years following the collapse of the communist regimes.

The change in birth patterns and lifestyles is often regarded in demographic research as “Europe’s second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe 1992). It is understood as the consequence of a cultural upheaval that has caused a comprehensive change in marriage and birth behaviour. The thesis of the second demographic transition has had a lasting impact on research on recent changes in the family, life forms, and fertility behaviour and today stands for the most important and influential concept in the analysis of family demographic change in Europe (Huinink/Konietzka 2007, p. 113). However, some authors point to differences in the extent and dynamics of family change between European countries due to different cultural traditions and institutional frameworks of the countries (Kaufmann et al. 2002, among others).

Today, more than ever before, the family in Europe is an emotional unit based on voluntary partnership. The idea of the economic unit and dependence on a provider are subordinate. Offspring also play a different role: children are important for the emotional well-being, not to ensure the material continuity of a family. Family constellations have also changed: Marriage is not a necessary basis. The number and proportion of single parents has increased significantly in recent decades. Separations are giving rise to step or patchwork families, residential and house communities – also with older members belonging to the grandparent generation. In Germany, the “strong male breadwinner model” has statistically predominantly been replaced by a “weak breadwinner model”, in which the man is still the main breadwinner of the family, but the woman works at least part-time. However, families in which the woman generates the majority of the family income are still clearly in the minority; in Germany, only about one in 10 couple families has a female family breadwinner (Klammer/Klenner 2022).

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