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Pluralization of Forms of Living (1995)

Since the 1960s, the federal government has presented regular reports on the status of the family in Germany. The fifth report offers an overview of household and family structures in unified Germany. The report takes stock of differences and commonalities in the development of family structures in East and West.

IV. Changing Family Models

1. Introduction

Over the past ten years there has been a *de facto* quantitative increase in different family models in the Federal Republic of Germany. But if one looks not at the last ten, but rather at the last forty years, then the statistical trend is not as linear as is often assumed but appears wavelike instead.

The period after the Second World War was characterized by a particularly high regard for the family, since it promised orientation and stability after the collapse of Nazism and the hardship of the immediate postwar years. Nevertheless, even on a statistical level, the repercussions of war and the immediate postwar period could be seen until 1950, for example, in the high number of divorces, single mothers, step families, and in the high rate of extramarital cohabitation. Not until the period from early 1950 to the early or mid-1960s was there – statistically speaking – an especially family-oriented phase. It was characterized by an increase in marriages, birth surpluses, a rise in families with three children, a preponderance of households with three or more members, and, finally, very low divorce rates. The “middle-class family model” of the traditional marriage with a stay-at-home wife enjoyed unprecedented popularity at that time.

In the 1960s, however, there was a cultural liberalization of gender relations, which, in conjunction with the availability of more effective and user-friendly contraceptives and the growing demands of younger women for equal rights, triggered sweeping behavioral changes among the younger generations. Starting in the mid-1960s, this shift in the trend could also be observed statistically. The marriage trend abated, the number of two-generation families with one or two children increased, as did divorce figures and the percentage of single mothers.

The Dominance of the Traditional Family Model

Despite the numerical increase in other family models (one-parent families, step families, etc), the traditional two-parent family (with a formal marriage ceremony) continues to be the dominant family model in our society, quantitatively speaking (accounting for 83 percent of all families, according to data from the 1992 Statistical Yearbook). Subjective appreciation for this family model in no way waned (compare, for example, Köcher 1985; Schumacher 1988; Kaufmann 1990; Schneewind et al. 1992). On the basis of empirical studies, at least for the Federal Republic of Germany, we can say that, in the case of childless marriages (Nave-Herz 1988a), one-parent families (Napp-Peters 1985; Nave-Herz/Krüger 1992), and so-called singles (Krüger 1990), most did not choose their present living form as a conscious alternative to the traditional two-parent family, and that these cases should mostly be considered “failed two-parent families.”

The thesis regarding the increased plurality of family models also derives – without specifically emphasizing this fact – from an adult perspective, since it is based on the observation of institutions and households. If one takes children as the basic population set, as is possible using the data from family surveys conducted by the German Youth Institute [*Deutsche Jugendinstitut* or DJI], then [one sees that] 87.5 percent of all children under eighteen live with both of their biological parents (according to data in Nauck 1992, p. 151, Table 1; compare also Nauck 1991, p. 397 ff.).

The situation is somewhat different in the new federal states. Due to higher numbers of divorces and extramarital births, a larger percentage of children do not grow up with both of their biological parents. Nevertheless, almost 82 percent of children under eighteen in the new federal states also live with their biological parents (according to data in Nauck 1992, p. 151, Table 1; compare also Keiser 1992, p. 163).

In conclusion, it can be seen that the two-parent family continues to be the “normative model” and still has top priority in subjective assessments as well. All other family models assume minor or marginal status, although one should not infer that they are therefore insignificant with regard to family policy. The following chapters of this report will repeatedly emphasize the occasionally very difficult social situation of single parents.

Plurality of Family Models

There have been even greater quantitative shifts in the relationship of the [traditional two-parent] family to other family models (that is, at the “household” level) than between individual family models. The increase in one-person households, childless marriages, extramarital cohabitation without children, etc., means that only about one-third of all households in the Federal Republic of Germany are family households in the sense of the parent-child nuclear family.

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Source: *Familien und Familienpolitik im geeinten Deutschland* [*Families and Family Policy in United Germany*] (5th Report on the Family). Bonn, 1995, pp. 70 ff.

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