INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES ON FAMILY ISSUES

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May 2005

For whom and why online?

I am writing a series of online articles for university and college students, policy makers, media people, and the educated public--**American and Canadian.** Research books and university-level textbooks are often difficult to access or very expensive to buy. One can be thankful for the many nonprofit organizations, including the U.S. Bureau of the Census and Statistics Canada, which provide free online information that can be quickly accessed and is reliable.

I first published online in 1998 for the Vanier Institute of the Family when they invited me to write a paper on divorce, which I recently updated and expanded. The Institute informed me that this article receives thousands of "hits." This led me to realize that the online format was far more useful to media people, for instance, who write for the newsprint or mount radio or television programming than are regular scholarly publications. The reason is simple: the material can be accessed right at their desk or from home and is relatively free of "jargon."

It occurred to me only recently that online publishing would also be useful for students and I am using the same **stringent standards** of scholarly research for my online writings as I do when I publish in books and scholarly journals. Thus, I hope that American and Canadian **college and university instructors** who are looking for additional readings for their students on family issues or on the family topics herein covered will find these online articles useful. Instructors can add some of these online articles to a regular textbook presenting different perspectives and information.

Another advantage lies in the fact that my articles are specifically designed to be equally relevant to a Canadian and an American readership. I am Canadian but have published a great deal in the U.S. I am therefore familiar with the issues of both countries and have amalgamated them. This amalgamation, then, offers a **comparative perspective** in the sense that the statistics, policies, and attitudes regarding the family are not identical across the shared border. This is so because the two countries are quite different politically, culturally, and in terms of the demographic composition of their respective populations.

Online publishing carries a somewhat **subversive** advantage and I am sure that most sociology, family studies, and psychology scholars will sympathize: online publishing allows to escape from the power of big

corporations, that is, large publishing houses which have merged into conglomerates. These conglomerates'publishing decisions are too often driven by market-oriented forces. Their marketing resources largely focus on texts that are used for very large classes to the detriment of more advanced material. (However, I want to exclude smaller presses and university presses from this generalization. As well, this phenomenon is still less obvious in Canada than it is in the U.S.)

In order to increase their student appeal, textbooks have to follow a format, cover certain topics, emphasize certain theories, and omit others. In the long run, this formatting may stand in the way of examining issues from a multiplicity of perspectives. Intellectual restrictions of whatever ilks are a problem in terms of the development of an intellectually honest and multifaceted science of the family. Thus, although the internet opens the door to abuse and misinformation (i.e., child pornography, faulty health information), it also allows for the **democratization** and the dissemination of knowledge outside the control of the publishing industry and its corporate owners--even though I have recently been successful at having a textbook published in Canada that includes topics and even theories that are left out in other family textbooks (Ambert, 2005a).

What are family issues?

This set of online articles focuses on family issues rather than on the topic of the family in general, which I cover in my textbook (Ambert, 2005a). Although the words "the family" are utilized, there are actually many types of families, as is illustrated throughout the current and forthcoming articles. The words "the family" refer to the institution itself as it is understood in North America and, for that matter, in the rest of the world. As an **institution**, the family (under its many forms or structures) is a recognized area of social life that is organized along a system of widely accepted norms that regulate behaviors.

The elements of organization and norms contribute to the predictability of life. For instance, people know what to expect of parents and parents more or less know what is expected of them. At the very least, there is a reasonably widespread acceptance of certain beliefs on how parents and children should behave toward one another. Family members also know that they can expect to have privacy from the rest of society (family boundaries)--unless they break the rules accepted in that society in terms of family life. Here, one can think of spousal violence, child neglect and abuse, incest, and the maltreatment of seniors.

Over time, each society evolves a set of rules or norms that dictates the behaviors of family members toward each other and toward other institutions--whether educational, religious, economic, legal, or political. When a society is small and cohesive, there is a great deal of **consensus** on values, norms, and behaviors. Life scripts do not change much over the generations and the level of continuity is high. An

institution such as the family can benefit from stability. However, a high level of stability can also contribute to the entrenchment of situations such as the subordination of women or the rejection of alternative types of families.

In Canada and the U.S., which are large societies with diverse populations, there is less consensus about family norms and behaviors as well as less stability than in the past. **Change** has become part of the institution of the family as it has in nearly all other societies. **Issues** arise when change takes place and there is a lack of consensus about these changes. For instance, same-sex marriage is currently an issue because there is a lack of agreement in this respect--even among gays themselves. In fact, people of a same religion and political party do not even agree on this topic (Ambert, 2005b).

When is a family issue also a social problem?

Social issues can also include problems, as in "social problems," although not all family issues are problems. Again, to return to the example of same-sex marriage, this is certainly an issue but it does not constitute a social problem in the sense that laws are not broken, children are not being neglected, seniors are not maltreated, it does not create poverty, and, depending on whom one speaks to, it does not necessarily threaten the moral order of society; it may, in fact, help it (Ambert, 2005b).

To take another example, one-parent families created when a woman gives birth without a live-in partner are an issue in the sense that they go against the norms of what many people, including scholars, consider an ideal environment within which to raise children. They are also an issue because they go against the morality of those who believe that sexuality and reproduction outside marriage are immoral or, at the very least, inadvisable. Furthermore, many one-parent families--albeit not the majority--also constitute a social problem because a large proportion are poor and, as a result, experience many difficulties. Parents may live through numerous stressors and their children are deprived of opportunities. As a result, these children too often suffer from emotional and behavioral problems and become socially costly both during their youth and adulthood (Ambert, 2002, 2005c).

Thus, all the topics included in this series fall under the rubric of family issues, that is, topics about which there is a lack of consensus and which raise concerns pertaining to established family values. Some of these topics also fall under the rubric of family or social problems when they potentially represent or actually constitute a threat to the well-being of family members and even society. They consequently require that other social institutions step in to help or remedy the situation, whether the welfare system, the health care system, child protection agencies, (there is no such a thing yet as parent protection agencies!), the police, and penal institutions.

Bibliography

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