

Preliminary Draft¹

**John Millar and Other Scholars of the 1700s and 1800s Using the
Developmental Paradigm, Reading History Sideways, and International
Cross-Sectional Data to Reach Conclusions about Changes in Family
Relationships and Processes**

by

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John Millar and Other Scholars of the 1700s and 1800s Using the Developmental Paradigm, Reading History Sideways, and International Cross-Sectional Data to Reach Conclusions about Changes in Family Relationships and Processes

I argue elsewhere (Thornton 2005a) that many scholars of the 1700s and 1800s believed that family life in the Northwest European past had been very different from what it was during their lifetimes. This suggested a great transition in family life sometime before the 1700s or 1800s. Among the important changes that were believed to have occurred were transitions from extended to nuclear families, from young and universal marriage to older marriage and extensive celibacy, from extensive family solidarity to individualism, from arranged marriage to love matches, and from high to low parental authority. As I document elsewhere (Thornton 2005a), these beliefs were over-turned in the last half of the 1900s, with a new wave of historical research.

In other papers I have documented in detail how several scholars of the 1700s were instrumental in creating myths about large and complex households and young and universal marriage in the Northwest European past. These papers highlighted the influential work of Frederick Le Play, Robert Malthus, and Edward Westermarck in the formulation of these beliefs (Thornton 2005d, 2005b, 2005c). I argue that these false beliefs about extended families and young and universal marriage in the Northwest European past, were created by these scholars reading history sideways, whereby they turned international cross – sectional data into developmental trajectories of change. That is, they concluded that the extended families and young and universal marriages of Russia, China, and elsewhere had once existed in the Northwest European past (also, see Thornton 2005a).

In this paper I show how scholars of the 1700s and 1800s formulated ideas about several other important family transitions: movement from society stressing family commitments to

emphasizing individual rights; a change from strong parental authority toward the individual autonomy of children; a flowering of sentiment among parents and children; a shift from arranged marriages to love matches; and a burst of sentiment in relationships between wives and husbands. I show in this paper how the intellectual roots of these questions can be traced back into the 1700s and 1800s. Family scholars of that era were intensely interested in these issues and formulated numerous propositions about them. Like the scholars believing in a great transformation of living arrangements and marriage timing and prevalence, these scholars of family sentiment and process were strongly influenced by their use of comparative international data to make conclusions about historical change, a method that I call reading history sideways (Thornton 2005a). These scholars observed many remarkable differences in family relationships between their own Western cultures and societies outside the West. These substantial and real cross-cultural differences in family relationships were also probably exaggerated by the inability of Western observers to interpret correctly the family patterns of other cultures. These Western scholars believed that they could use data from societies outside the West to proxy for the Western historical past. Consequently, the differences between family relationships in Western and non-Western societies--both the real ones and those misperceived through cultural insensitivity--were believed to also represent social change that had occurred in the West. Using the social developmental paradigm and the practice of reading history sideways, these scholars produced very clear and consistent descriptions of trends away from community and kinship embeddedness and toward individualism, autonomy, and affection in family life. These ideas survived intact into the second half of the 1900s. I begin with the pathbreaking work of John Millar and then discuss the work of several contemporary and subsequent scholars.

The Pathbreaking Work of John Millar

One eighteenth century scholar who found the cross-cultural diversity of family life particularly interesting was John Millar who lived in Scotland from 1735 to 1801.² He published his first book in 1771 and then eight years later in 1779 revised, expanded, and retitled it as The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks. The subtitle provides useful clarification of the nature and purpose of the book: 'or An Inquiry into the Circumstances which Give Rise to Influence and Authority in the different Members of Society' (Lehmann, 1979/1960).

Approximately one-half of The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks was devoted to an examination of the relationships between husbands and wives and between parents and children. As such, it is one of the first major social science treatments of family life. It is also one of the most important works in all the history of family studies since many of its ideas have persisted in the literature for centuries.

Millar was an advocate of the developmental paradigm, and he explicitly used the comparative method - - what I call reading history sideways - - for studying history. In his introduction he made it clear that he was writing about the natural progress of human societies across various developmental stages.

He said:

“There is thus, in human society, a natural progress from ignorance to knowledge, and from rude, to civilized manners, the several stages of which are usually accompanied with peculiar laws and customs. Various accidental causes, indeed, have contributed to accelerate, or to retard this advancement in different countries” (1979/1771:176-177).

His use of the comparative method was also straightforward. When he described societies in relatively early stages of evolutionary development, he used data from countries outside of Europe. As he shifted his focus across the societal life cycle to more developmentally

² Millar was elected to be chair of Civil Law at the College of Glasgow in 1761 where he was to become an important contributor to the Scottish Enlightenment.

advanced circumstances, he also moved geographically to Western Europe. Millar explained the reasons for his use of reading history sideways methodology as follows:

“... the reader, who is conversant in history, will readily perceive the difficulty of obtaining proper materials for speculations of this nature. Historians of reputation have commonly overlooked the transactions of early ages, as not deserving to be remembered; and even in the history of later and more cultivated periods, they have been more solicitous to give an exact account of battles, and public negotiations, than of the interior police and government of a country. Our information, therefore, with regard to the state of mankind in the rude parts of the world, is chiefly derived from the relations of travelers” (Millar 1979/1771: 180-181).

Chapter 1 in Millar's book is entitled “Of the rank and condition of women in different ages”; Section 1 of that chapter is entitled “The effects of poverty and barbarism, with respect to the condition of women”. As the two titles indicate, Millar strongly believed that the relationships between the sexes varied greatly across different countries and different ages and that the social and economic environment, including material resources and education, were important determinants of those relationships. Millar was so impressed by the cross-cultural differences in the customs governing relationships between women and men that he began his book saying that “Of all our passions, it should seem that those which unite the sexes are most easily affected by the peculiar circumstances in which we are placed, and most liable to be influenced by the power of habit and education. Upon this account they exhibit the most wonderful variety of appearances, and, in different ages and countries, have produced the greatest diversity of manners and customs” (Millar, 1979/1771: 183).

Millar interpreted the cross-cultural data he had as suggesting that there was little sentiment and affection in the relationships between women and men in early stages of societal development. He believed that the difficulties of procuring a living were so difficult in such

societies that there was no time or energy for developing close male-female relationships. He said that:

The state of mankind in the rudest period of society, is extremely unfavourable to the improvement of these passions. A savage who earns his food by hunting and fishing, or by gathering the spontaneous fruits of the earth, is incapable of attaining any considerable refinement in his pleasures. He finds so much difficulty, and is exposed to so many hardships in procuring mere necessaries, that he has no leisure or encouragement to aim at the luxuries and conveniences of life. His wants are few, in proportion to the narrowness of his circumstances. With him, the great object is to be able to satisfy his hunger, and, after the utmost exertions of labour and activity, to enjoy the relief of idleness and repose. He has no time for cultivating a correspondence with the other sex, nor for attending to those enjoyments which result from it; and his desires being neither cherished by affluence, nor inflamed by indulgence, are allowed to remain in that moderate state which renders them barely sufficient for the continuation of the species (Millar, 1979/1771: 183).

Millar also believed that there was little opportunity for individuals in “the most rude and barbarous ages” to acquire wealth so that there were few differences in rank among individuals. With little social stratification, Millar believed that there would be few barriers inhibiting social interactions between the sexes. For this reason Millar believed that when men and women were “impelled by natural instinct”, they would “give way to their mutual desires without hesitation or reluctance. They are unacquainted with those refinements which create a strong preference of particular objects, and with those artificial rules of decency and decorum which might lay a restraint upon their conduct” (Millar 1979/1771: 184).

Millar apparently believed that it was impossible for men and women to value their relationships when they could occur with so little effort. This perceived causal relationship provided Millar another reason to believe:

The passions of sex [would not] rise to any considerable height in the breast of a savage. He must have little regard for pleasures which he can purchase at so easy a rate. He meets with no difficulties nor disappointments to enhance the value of his enjoyment, or to rouse and animate him in the pursuit of it. He arrives at the end of his wishes, before they have sufficiently occupied his thoughts, or engaged him in those delightful anticipations of happiness which the imagination is apt to display in the most flattering colours. He is a stranger to that long continued solicitude, those alternate hopes and fears, which agitate and torment the lover, and which, by awakening the sensibility, while they relax the vigour of his mind, render his prevailing inclinations more irresistible (1979/1771: 184).

While Millar believed that “some sort of marriage, or permanent union between persons of different sexes, has been almost universally established,” he thought that the nature and motivation for marriage varied markedly across societies and across time. In early ages he believed the motivation for marriage had little to do with passions between the sexes but to the care of children who resulted from the easy sexual relations that occurred. Millar believed that when a child was conceived in such relationships, the natural affection of the parents for the child would cause them to make some provision for the child's maintenance. Millar concluded that it was “for this purpose, [the parents] are led to take up their residence together, that they may act in concert with each other, and unite their efforts in the preservation and care of their offspring” (1979/1771:184-185).

Millar also argued that there were other important social and demographic forces that would operate to ensure the continuation of an alliance formed to rear the child that precipitated it. One of these forces was the continued fertility of the couple. As the couple reared their first child and continued to have sexual relations, other children would be conceived and born. The rearing of these children would further prolong the couple's

relationship. A second factor that would motivate the continuation of a marriage relationship beyond the time necessary for rearing children was concern about old age security. By continuation of the relationships with children and spouse a person could “enjoy a degree of ease, respect, and security, of which they would otherwise be deprived, and have reason, in their old age, to expect the assistance and protection of their posterity, under all those diseases and infirmities by which they are rendered incapable of providing for themselves” (1979/1771: 185).

The widespread practice in many non-Western societies of having marriage arranged by parents without the active involvement of the young people apparently made a strong impression on Millar. This practice was interpreted by Millar as meaning that young people in such situations didn't even care who they married. In this kind of society, Millar argued, a man “discovers no preference of any particular woman, but leaves it to his parents, or other relations, to make choice of a person whom it is thought proper that he should marry: He is not even at the trouble of paying her a visit, but allows them to begin and finish the bargain, without concerning himself at all in the matter: If his proposals are rejected, he hears it without the least disturbance; or if he meets with a favourable reception, he is equally unmoved; and the marriage is completed, on both sides, with the most perfect indifference” (1979/1771: 187).

Millar interpreted the lack of involvement of young people in their marital arrangements as indicating “extreme insensibility”. With such an apparent lack of sensitivity for women and marriage in such societies, it was very easy for Millar to believe that men there “should entertain very gross ideas concerning those female virtues which, in a polished nation, are supposed to constitute the honour and dignity of the sex”

(1979/1771: 187). The behaviors interpreted by Millar as being gross included what he believed to be the lack of premarital sexual purity, the infidelity of married women, the possession of wives in common, the practice of lending a wife to one's friend, and the lack of modesty in dress. Millar drew examples of such issues from numerous societies around the world. In many instances, of course, Millar's interpretation of customs in other parts of the world were biased by his own inability to perceive and understand the meaning and significance of those customs.

Millar also believed that the physical differences between the sexes resulted in an important division of labor between them. He argued that societies in the infancies of their life cycles experienced considerable conflict with their neighbors and relied upon hunting for much of their food. Consequently, skills in battle and hunting were held in high esteem by such societies. Millar believed that men had more strength and courage which resulted in them performing these strenuous, difficult, and high status activities. Women on the other hand, according to Millar, were assigned humbler and inferior activities of the household--activities which, according to him, required little skill and were “naturally regarded as mean and servile, and unworthy to engage the attention of persons who command respect by their military accomplishments” (1979/1771: 193).

Millar believed that the lack of affection in marriage and the superior strength of men had dramatic implications for the “condition of the women in the ages most remote from improvement.” He argued that:

Having little attention paid them, either upon account of those pleasures to which they are subservient, or of those occupations which they are qualified to exercise, they are degraded below the other sex, and reduced under that authority which the strong acquire over the weak: an authority, which, in early periods, is subject to no limitation from the government,

and is therefore exerted with a degree of harshness and severity suited to the dispositions of the people.

We accordingly find that, in those periods, the women of a family are usually treated as the servants or slaves of the men. Nothing can exceed the dependance and subjection in which they are kept, or the toil and drudgery which they are obliged to undergo...The husband, when he is not engaged in some warlike exercise, indulges himself in idleness, and devolves upon his wife the whole burden of his domestic affairs. He disdains to assist her in these employments: she sleeps in a different bed, and is seldom permitted to have any conversation or correspondence with him (Millar, 1979/1771:193).

Millar used examples from several non-European populations to support his interpretation. One of his most important observations was that in many places in America, Africa, and Asia, there was a payment of money from the husband's to the wife's family at the time of marriage. Millar interpreted this pattern as suggesting that women were being bought and sold. Given his own cultural heritage, it was easy for him to conclude that in such societies women were no better than slaves.

Millar recognized that he was presenting a “mortifying picture” of “the barbarous treatment of the female sex in early times, and the rude state of those passions which may be considered as the origin of society”. But he argued that:

This rudeness and barbarism, so universally discovered in the early inhabitants of the world, is not unsuitable to the mean condition in which they are placed, and to the numberless hardships and difficulties which they are obliged to encounter. When men are in danger of perishing for hunger; when they are exerting their utmost efforts to procure the bare necessities of life; when they are unable to shelter themselves from beasts of prey, or from enemies of their own kind, no less ferocious; their constitution would surely be ill adapted to their circumstances, were they endowed with a refined taste of pleasure, and capable of feeling the delicate distresses and enjoyments of love, accompanied with all those elegant sentiments, which, in a civilized and enlightened age, are naturally derived from that passion. Dispositions of this nature would be altogether misplaced in the breast of a savage: They

would even be exceedingly hurtful, by turning his attention from real wants, to the pursuit of imaginary, and what, in his situation, must be accounted fantastical gratifications (1979/1771: 197-198).

Millar's causal framework for explaining the “mortifying picture” of the relationships between the genders in “a simple and barbarous age” also provided a model for explaining how the position of women would improve as their societies matured across the life cycle. He wrote that “their condition is naturally improved by every circumstance which tends to create more attention to the pleasures of sex, and to increase the value of those occupations that are suited to the female character; by the cultivation of the arts of life; by the advancement of opulence; and by the gradual refinement of taste and manners” (1979/1771:203).

Furthermore, Millar believed that the history of civilization was characterized by advances. The clear result of this advancement of civilization, according to him, was that unmarried men and women had more freedom to converse with each other and met less opposition as they indulged their inclinations. In this view society also came to place more value on women and their contributions to the human experience. This allowed more esteem, affection, and sharing of joys and misfortunes within the husband-wife relationship.

Millar even worried that the “free intercourse of the sexes” in Western societies had been carried too far. He opined that the “love of pleasure, when carried to excess, is apt to weaken and destroy those passions which it endeavours to gratify, and to pervert those appetites which nature has bestowed upon mankind for the most beneficial purposes”. The result, he worried, would be the subservience of human beings to the “purposes of animal enjoyment” (1979/1771: 225). Thus, for Millar, the history of the

societal life cycle revealed development from a situation with little love, affection, sexual gratification, and respect in the relationships between women and men to circumstances where emotion and sexual indulgence threatened to run out of control.

In Chapter 2 of his book, Millar turned to his second major axis of family organization--intergenerational relations--and focused his attention on “the jurisdiction and authority of a father over his children”. In describing parent-child relationships during the earliest periods of social evolution, Millar relied on data from ancient Greece and Rome, the Bible, the Tartars, Arabia, China, Russia, South America, and Africa. Millar reported that age in these societies was venerated and that young people appreciated the wisdom of the old and were anxious to follow their advice. He observed that fathers in such settings have absolute authority over their children, and the submission of children to parental authority extends well into adulthood.

Millar reported that community customs in societies at this early life cycle stage supported the absolute authority of fathers. These people also believed that the authority of parents had the blessings of heaven. Thus, Millar perceived that rebelling against the wishes of the father in such societies would be equivalent to displaying a lack of piety to Deity.

Millar also discussed what he interpreted as a lack of natural fondness between parents and children in such societies. He perceived that there was often anger displayed between fathers and children. According to Millar, parents sometimes left their children to die from exposure, and he even reported parents selling their children into slavery. He believed that such lack of parental affection was at least partially a result of the misery and suffering in society.

Millar believed that the advancement of civilization was accompanied by decreases in parental authority and increases in intergenerational affection. One factor in the decline of parental authority, according to Millar, was the expansion of governmental power, which decreased the absolute authority of the father. Millar also believed that advances in affluence, security, and refinement caused fathers to use their power with more moderation. These factors were also believed to cause an increase in sentiment between the generations and a softening of paternal temper.

Millar also offered a particularly sophisticated theory linking changes in economic organization to parental authority--a theory that has persisted for more than two centuries. He argued that:

The progress of arts and manufactures will contribute to undermine and weaken [the father's] power, and even to raise the members of his family to a state of freedom and independence.

In those rude and simple periods when men are chiefly employed in hunting and fishing, in pasturing cattle, or in cultivating the ground, the children are commonly brought up in the house of their father; and continuing in his family as long as he lives, they have no occasion to acquire any separate property, but depend entirely for subsistence upon that hereditary estate, of which he is the sole disposer and manager. Their situation, however, in this, as well as in many other respects, is greatly altered by the introduction of commerce and manufactures. In a commercial country, a great part of the inhabitants are employed in such a manner as tends to disperse the members of a family, and often requires that they should live at a distance from one another.

The children, at an early period of life, are obliged to leave their home, in order to be instructed in those trades and professions by which it is proposed they should earn a livelihood, and afterwards to settle in those parts of the country which they find convenient for prosecuting their several employments. By this alteration of circumstances they are emancipated from their father's authority. They are put in a condition to procure a maintenance without having recourse to his bounty, and by their own labour and industry are frequently

possessed of opulent fortunes. As they live in separate families of their own, of which they have the entire direction, and are placed at such a distance from their father, that he has no longer an opportunity of observing and controlling their behavior, it is natural to suppose that their former habits will be gradually laid aside and forgotten.

When we examine the laws and customs of polished nations, they appear to coincide with the foregoing remarks, and leave no room to doubt that, in most countries, the paternal jurisdiction has been reduced within narrower bounds, in proportion to the ordinary improvements of society (Millar, 1979/1771:239).

Millar suggested that individual autonomy was the greatest in the European nations that were the most advanced in manufactures and commerce. The children in such societies, according to Millar, were not subjected any more to their fathers than seemed useful for their own advantage. When they reached the age of adulthood, they had access to any property that they may have obtained on their own. In some cases Millar reported that they were even able to acquire part of the family estate while the father was still alive.

Millar even opined that the independence of children may have been carried too far in the commercial age of society. He worried that parents in more developmentally advanced societies might not have the authority to "...direct the education of their children, to restrain the irregularities of youth, and to instil those principles which will render them useful members of society" (page 243).

William Robertson and Robert Malthus

Millar's views about the change of intergenerational relations and the modification of male-female relationships across societal development were echoed in the writings of other late eighteenth century scholars. For example, in The History of America written in 1783, William Robertson reported that the conditions of American

Indian women were generally humiliating and miserable. Robertson believed these women were often fatigued by hard work and were regularly reminded of their inferiority. He was also convinced that civilization generally improved the lot of women (1783, Vol. II: 88-96). Robertson also believed that the conditions of the American Indians often caused the strong emotions of parental tenderness towards their children to be inhibited.³

Particularly noteworthy for Robertson was the ways in which American Indians arranged their marriages. He reported that there was often a payment from the man to the woman's family at the time of marriage. Like Millar, he interpreted these payments as the man purchasing the woman and believed that the resulting husband-wife relationship was equivalent to that of a master and slave. He contrasted this apparently affectionless arrangement to courtship situations where the man tried to win the heart of the woman through tenderness and affection. While he was not explicit in his comparison group here, he was probably referring to courtship in Scotland.⁴

Several of the themes developed by Millar and Robertson appeared in Malthus' discussion of family life in societies he labeled as less civilized, which is not surprising since Malthus relied heavily on Robertson for his material about American Indians (for more information about Malthus, see Thornton 2005a, 2005b). Citing Robertson and others, Malthus noted that American Indian women had low fertility which was “...attributed by some to a want of ardour in the men towards their women” (Malthus

³ Robertson was the Principal of the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and a contemporary of Millar.

⁴ Another Scottish contemporary of Millar was Adam Ferguson. Although Ferguson devoted little of his book to the description of family relations, his brief comments about such matters were not consistent with the conclusions of Millar and Robertson. For example, Ferguson said that in former times mankind was “kind, affectionate, and gentle, in their domestic society.” He also warned that it was easy “to exaggerate the misery of barbarous times, by an imagination of what we ourselves should suffer in a situation to which we are not accustomed” (Ferguson, 1980/1767:101-106).

1986/1803: 29). Malthus believed that such circumstances also applied to all nations faced with extreme danger and hardship.

Malthus also believed that the privations and suffering associated with life at the earliest stages of social development tended to “harden the heart, and narrow all the sources of sympathy”. Malthus contrasted this situation with life in more developed societies where, according to him, people are taught to feel for their neighbours and to expand their social affections (Malthus 1986/1803: 59).

As we will see in the rest of this paper, the ideas of Millar, Robertson, and Malthus played pivotal roles in the formulation of descriptions and theories of family change. Their ideas about changes in family authority, the role of sentiment in family relationships, and the arrangement of marriage have long persisted in the scholarly family literature.

Frederick Le Play on Family Authority

Frederick Le Play is best known for his documentation of the supposed transition from extended to nuclear families in Northwest Europe (Thornton 2005a, 2005d). At the same time, issues of individualism and family authority played a role in his writings about family typologies and family change (Silver, 1982:97-114). Le Play believed that parental authority declined with societal development. He reported that in addition to the nomads and peasants of Eastern Europe having family-based societies with large extended families, they also emphasized the family collective and parental authority. He suggested that the nomads “...live in a communal system under the absolute authority of the head of the family.” The independence of individual family members was restricted, according to Le Play, by both economic and normative pressures (1982/1872: 259-260).

Moving to Northwestern Europe, where the societies were less family-based and families were unstable, Le Play found family structures that were not only basically nuclear but also with less concentration of authority in the family head. He indicated that this decline of parental authority corresponded to a rise of individual freedom and rights. He reported that when a child left the parental family in adulthood in this system, he had “...complete control over the product of his labor...” (1982/1872: 259-262; 1982/1855: 263-266).

Le Play also argued that in this Northwestern European system the “family circle” was diminished with less commitment to the family collective. He said that as children in this system reached adulthood, they became “...completely devoid of any obligation toward their parents and relatives...[being] no longer responsible for the needs of ... relatives.” In such situations, Le Play complained, men “...are capable of forgetting all the feelings which preserve the family” (1982/1872; 1982/1855:259-266).

Le Play noted that the stem family was intermediate between the patriarchal and unstable family, striking “...a just balance between paternal authority and the freedom of the children” (Le Play, 1982/1872:260-261). Le Play favored the stem family for industrial society because it provided a source of social stability and commitment unavailable in the unstable family, while at the same time providing the necessary freedom for innovation and mobility.

Le Play also came to the conclusion that declines in parental authority in Northwest Europe had led to an increase in affection within families. With less authority in the family, Le Play believed that parents had to be more affectionate in order to influence their children. Le Play also expressed doubt that this strategy would be as

effective as the older more authoritarian approaches in guiding children (Le Play, 1982/1855: 273).

The Transformation of the Unit of Society

In 1861, just six years after Le Play's publication in France of The Workers of Europe, Henry Sumner Maine published his book Ancient Society across the English Channel. A major thesis of Maine's volume was the transformation of society from a collective of families to an aggregate of individuals. Although Maine wrote about ancient society more generally, he utilized the Hebrews, Rome, India, and Slavic populations as his examples of ancient society. Anchoring down the other end of the developmental scale was Western Europe, separated from ancient society, therefore, by miles as well as by years.

An important observation for Maine was “...that society in primitive times was not what it is assumed to be at present, a collection of individuals. In fact, it was an aggregation of families. The contrast may be most forcibly expressed by saying that the unit of an ancient society was the Family, of a modern society the Individual” (Maine, 1888/1861:121).

Maine saw this shift from the family to the individual as a uniform feature of development in progressive societies. He wrote that the course of history “has been distinguished by the gradual dissolution of family dependency and the growth of individual obligation in its place. The individual is steadily substituted for the Family, as the unit of which civil laws take account...Starting, as from one terminus of history, from a condition of society in which all the relations of Persons are summed up in the relations of Family, we seem to have steadily moved towards a phase of social order in which all

these relations arise from the free agreement of individuals. In Western Europe the progress achieved in this direction has been considerable” (p. 163).

Maine believed that this transformation of the unit of society had been accompanied by dramatic decline in family authority. He observed that ancient families were “...organized on the patriarchal model...[in which] the eldest male parent...is absolutely supreme in his household. His dominion extends to life and death, and is as unqualified over his children and their houses as over his slaves...The flocks and herds of the children are the flocks and herds of the father...” (p. 119). These patriarchs were to be obeyed and esteemed as sources of superior strength and wisdom (p. 131).

Writing in 1887, Charles Franklin Thwing and Carrie F. Butler Thwing accepted and elaborated the ideas of Maine. They argued that Christianity in general and the Protestant Reformation more specifically had given a “lasting impulse to the growth of individualism”, which was reinforced in the United States by democracy. They talked about the “shrinkage of the family as a social and legal unit. The mutual rights and duties of its members have been lessened. The home, as a home, has less influence over husband, wife, and children.” Finally, they concluded “the individual has come to be regarded as the ...centre of social and legal order...[and] the family, as an institution of prime importance, has passed away”. They believed that this emphasis on individualism was excessive and was a threat to family and community (Thwing and Thwing, 1887:104-109).

Early in the 1900s Helen Bosanquet (1915/1906) elaborated the theme of declining parental authority. She argued that the father in the patriarchal family had supreme authority and that the main difference between the modern and patriarchal

family was the degree of authority of the family head. She mentioned several important areas of the limitation of the father's power in modern families:

1. The freedom of the sons to start independent households during the lifetime of the father.
2. The freedom of the children to acquire independent property.
3. The freedom of the children to order their own lives on attaining majority.
4. The freedom of the children to marry as they choose.
5. The right of children under age to protection from the State against the father" (Bosanquet, 1915/1906: 11).

Lubbock and Morgan on the Evolution of Sentiment

About a decade after the appearance of Maine's volume on ancient law, John Lubbock wrote The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man. Lubbock returned to the issue of love and affection in primitive society and reached conclusions similar to those formulated by Millar and Robertson in Scotland a century earlier.

Lubbock began his chapter on marriage and relationships by observing that:

Nothing, perhaps, gives a more instructive insight into the true condition of savages than their ideas on the subject of relationship and marriage; nor can the great advantages of civilisation be more conclusively proved than by the improvement which it has already effected in the relation between the two sexes.

Marriage, and the relationship of a child to its father and mother, seem to us so natural and obvious, that we are apt to look on them as aboriginal and general to the human race. This, however, is very far from being the case. The lowest races have no institution of marriage; true love is almost unknown among them; and marriage, in its lowest phases, is by no means a matter of affection and companionship (Lubbock, 1889/1870:69).

Following this vigorous announcement of his conclusion, Lubbock provided the reader with numerous examples of relationships from various parts of the world that he believed supported his position. He noted marriage customs that he interpreted as

indicating a lack of husband-wife companionship and affection. He mentioned several societies where he believed there was no love in marriage and reported one society where there was apparently no verb to express the concept “to love.” The similarity between marriage and slavery was also mentioned (Lubbock, 1889/1870:69-103).

Lewis Henry Morgan also used a developmental framework that centered on family change. Morgan described his reading history sideways method as follows:

The latest investigations respecting the early condition of the human race, are tending to the conclusion that mankind commenced their career at the bottom of the scale and worked through the slow accumulations of experimental knowledge.

As it is undeniable that portions of the human family have existed in a state of savagery, other portions in a state of barbarism, and still other portions in a state of civilization, it seems equally so that these three distinct conditions are connected with each other in a natural as well as necessary sequence of progress

It may be further observed that the domestic institutions of the barbarous, and even of the savage ancestors of mankind, are still exemplified in portions of the human family with such completeness that, with the exception of the strictly primitive period, the several stages of this progress are tolerably well preserved

Each of these periods has a distinct culture and exhibits a mode of life more or less special and peculiar to itself. This specialization of ethnical periods renders it possible to treat a particular society according to its condition of relative advancement, and to make it a subject of independent study and discussion. It does not affect the main result that different tribes and nations on the same continent, and even of the same linguistic family, are in different conditions at the same time, since for our purpose the condition of each is the material fact, the time being immaterial

Consequently, the Aryan nations will find the type of the condition of their remote ancestors, when in savagery, in that of the Australians and Polynesians; when in the Lower Status of barbarism in that of the partially Village Indians of America; and when in the Middle Status in that of the Village Indians, with which their own experience in the Upper Status directly connects (Morgan, 1985/1877:3-17).

Morgan's ideas about the evolution of love and sentiment paralleled those of Lubbock. He wrote that “...the passion of love was unknown among the barbarians.

They are below the sentiment, which is the offspring of civilization and super-added refinement...Marriage, therefore, was not grounded upon sentiment, but upon necessity and duty” (Morgan, 1985/1877: 477). He also believed that in this stage of societal development the wife was under the authority of the husband. Morgan cited several societies outside of Western Europe to substantiate his conclusions.

Morgan's ideas about the transformation of the basic unit of society paralleled those of Maine. He suggested that social organization in ancient society was based on small units such as tribes, clans, and family. He believed that this kind of social organization is “...one of the oldest and most widely prevalent institutions of mankind...[being] the nearly universal plan of government of ancient society, Asiatic, European, African, American and Australian” (Morgan, 1985/1877:62-63). In this societal type, according to Morgan personal security depended upon kinship units and relationships were of a personal nature.

Morgan contrasted this family-organized society with the fundamentally different social organization of modern society based on territory or property. In this social structure, according to Morgan, the state became important for the protection of individuals and their property. Like Millar a century earlier, Morgan believed this caused a “...corresponding abatement of the strength of the bond of kin” (Morgan 1985/1877:62-78).⁵

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels

⁵ Morgan's developmental scheme also claimed other important changes, including the inheritance of property and the way of tracing descent, which will not be discussed here.

Morgan's theoretical and empirical research had a very important effect on thinking about family change in the 1800s. Included in the many people influenced by Morgan were Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. In fact, the title page of Engels' own influential book, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (1971/1884), indicated explicitly that the latter work was written “in light of the researches of Lewis H. Morgan.” The conclusions of Marx and Engels on the evolution of family composition, authority, and sentiment were very similar to those of other scholars in the 1800s.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels also discussed the changing organization of Western societies, emphasizing particularly the changing mode of production. They argued that whereas Western societies in the past had organized economic production in family units, that over time production had become increasingly concentrated in bureaucratic economic enterprises (Marx and Engels, 1965/1848; Engels, 1971/1884).

Engels adopted the then-accepted idea of the progression of society from promiscuity to group marriage, to female-centered marriage, and finally to the patriarchal family. He wrote that “with the patriarchal family, we enter the field of written history...” Then like many others, including Le Play, Engels turned to Eastern Europe for his primary examples of patriarchal families. He said that we have “proof that the patriarchal household community, as we still find it today among the Serbs and the Bulgars under the name of zadruga or bratstvo, and in a modified form among the Oriental peoples, formed the transitional stage between the matriarchal family deriving from group marriage and the single family of the modern world” (Engels, 1971/1884: 51-52).

Engels described the zadruga as a family community consisting of several generations of people. An important feature of this patriarchal-family system, according

to Engels, was the “supreme” authority of the head of the house (p. 52). Engels contrasted this high degree of authority with the lower authority levels characteristic of modern families.

The evolution of love, romance, and freedom was also a central element of Engel's thought (pages 54-74). He adopted Morgan's position that in the earlier stages of societal development marriage was primarily an arrangement of convenience (page 57). “Throughout the whole of antiquity”, he wrote, “marriages were arranged by the parents, and the partners calmly accepted their choice. What little love there was between husband and wife in antiquity is not so much subjective inclination as objective duty, not the cause of the marriage, but its corollary” (page 68).

Engels contrasted this situation with his view of modern systems of marriage, where he noted the existence of both freedom and equality. Individual women and men, he argued, had to be able to enter marriage freely of their own accord. Affection and sentiment, according to Engels, also became more important in the marriage decision, while love and sex grew to be more central to the relationships between husbands and wives. In fact, Engels suggested that love marriage had become a human right. Engels also opined that with the evolution towards marriage based on love that marriages would become more fragile and marital dissolution more frequent.

Emile Durkheim and Functionalism

The increasing specialization of society and the expansion of the division of labor was central to the work of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim made heavy use of the biological metaphor comparing human societies to biological organisms. Like many other nineteenth century scholars, Durkheim used the social development paradigm and the

idea that societies have developmental trajectories (Bellah 1965: Nisbet 1974). He believed that specialization and increased division of labor were part of the long-term development process of human societies. A central component of this increasing division of labor for Durkheim was the transformation of the family.

Furthermore, Durkheim embedded his study of the division of labor within a structural-functional perspective (Nisbet 1974). In the functionalist framework we encounter the comparison of societies with biological organisms. In this metaphor social institutions are compared to biological organisms. Just as organs are the biological structures that fulfill functions for biological organisms, social institutions were seen as performing functions for society. Durkheim believed that the central feature of both social and biological evolution was the increasing specialization of both structure and function in biological organisms and human societies.

On the biological side, Durkheim reported that the “lower animals” were very homogeneous in their composition. By that, he meant that there was uniformity of both structure and function throughout the bodies of the lower organisms. Even though these organisms may have parts, their parts were all very similar in structure and carried out the same operation. These body parts were, according to Durkheim, not integrated together organically but were joined together mechanically, being “...arranged either in irregular masses or in a linear series” (1984/1893:139).

Durkheim argued that this type of mechanical organization disappears as we advance up the scale of biological evolution. The key feature of biological evolution, according to Durkheim, is the increasing division of labor among the segments of the individual organisms. This happens, Durkheim suggested, because each of the segments

or parts of the organism becomes more and more specialized. As a result of this evolution towards differentiation, biological organisms are increasingly composed of very specialized organs functioning in different ways. The differentiated functions of these specialized structures are then integrated organically for the well-being of each of the organs individually and for the organism as a whole (Durkheim, 1984/1893:139-141).

According to Durkheim, social evolution is very similar to its biological cousin. Just as the earliest biological organisms were composed of undifferentiated parts, so were the earliest societies composed of “...an absolutely homogeneous mass whose parts would not be distinguishable from one another... [This] mass would be devoid of any definite form or articulation. This would be the real social protoplasm, the germ from which all social types would have emerged” (Durkheim, 1984/1893:126). Furthermore, Durkheim argued that these societies are integrated together mechanically rather than organically. He said that these are segmentary societies because they consist of different parts or segments joined together in this undifferentiated or linear way.⁶

One crucial characteristic of this kind of social organization is that the undifferentiated parts in such segmentary societies are kinship units. That is, “early societies” were seen as being composed of kinship units that are very similar to each other and that are linked together mechanically rather than organically. Durkheim wrote that the “elementary aggregate” is “a family in the sense that all the members who go to make it up consider themselves kin to one another, and indeed it is true that for the most part they share a blood relationship. The affinities produced by sharing a blood kinship

⁶ Durkheim recognized that this kind of society was just an ideal type and has never been observed. Nevertheless, he argued that it was appropriate to “postulate their existence” because there are “lower societies” that “are formed by a mere replication of aggregates of this kind” (Durkheim, 1984/1893:126-127).

are mainly what keeps them united” (Durkheim, 1984/1893:127). Durkheim also noted that these kinship-based clans are the primary political units since “the clan chiefs are the sole authorities in society” (p. 128). While Durkheim recognized that individual clans may have unique features, the important issue for him was their homogeneous structure and functioning. For Durkheim, this aggregation of undifferentiated family units into a whole was a key feature of the social organization of “lower” societies.

Durkheim also argued that the social homogeneity of structure was associated with uniformity of beliefs and ideas. He suggested that religion “pervades the whole of social life...because social life is made up almost entirely of common beliefs and practices that draw from their unanimous acceptance a very special kind of intensity” (Durkheim, 1984/1893:130).

This kind of uniformity of structure and values was perceived as leading to a family communism where relatives lived and possessed in common (Durkheim, 1984/1893: 130; 1978/1892: 233). Durkheim argued that in this kind of family there is a “special cohesion that swallows up the individual within the group, the part into the whole” (Durkheim, 1984/1893: 130).

On the issue of individualism in these homogeneous societies Durkheim believed that the “individual is not distinct from the group...because the individual consciousness is almost indistinct from the collective consciousness”. In fact, he suggested that so little place is given for the individual personality in such societies because it simply did not exist (Durkheim, 1984/1893:142).

Durkheim argued that these homogeneous societies have evolved greatly across time. The primary driving force in this evolution was the growing “volume and density”

of society, with the population becoming more concentrated and urban. In addition, there was a growth in the amount and speed of communication and transportation. This growth in density was believed to increase competition and the general difficulty of life's struggles.

This heightened competition was believed to lead to specialization and division of labor because of the inherently greater efficiencies associated with specialization. Durkheim suggested that the undifferentiated segments of an earlier time evolved into specialized structures, each with its own particular function for the larger society. The end result of this process was a society composed of very specialized organs or organizations that were strongly integrated because each organization needed the functions performed by the others.

Since the family was the "true social segment" in homogenous societies, this framework suggested that the disappearance of segmentary organization through increasing specialization and division of labor required the family "to transform itself". "Instead of remaining an autonomous society within the large one," Durkheim wrote, "it is drawn increasingly into the system of organs of society. It becomes one of these organs itself, invested with special functions" (Durkheim, 1984/1893:158). Whereas the family of the past was seen by Durkheim as encompassing all of the functions of society, including politics, religion, and economics, the present-day family was seen as a more restricted unit with specialized functions (Bellah, 1965:162-166).

Thus, Durkheim argued that as social evolution and the division of labor proceeds, societal groups are no longer "...formed in terms of any ancestral relationship, but according to the special nature of the social activity to which they devote themselves.

Their natural and necessary environment is no longer that in which they were born, but that of their profession. It is no longer blood relationship...that determines the place of each one, but the functions he fulfills” (Durkheim, 1984/1893:132).

One of the important emergent functions in societies with a high degree of specialization and division of labor is coordination and regulation. A new structure, the state, evolves to take care of this new function, with its scope of action and influence increasing steadily across time. The number of rules and regulations governing society also increases as societies become more specialized and the influence of the state expands.

In this functionalist-evolutionist description the expansion of the social milieu outside the family circle was one of the dominant facts of history. With the growing density of the population and the number of social interactions, the amount of contact with people who were not relatives increased. With the expansion of specialized structures such as the factory and state, each individual was embedded in more and more activities outside the range of the family unit.

These considerations led Durkheim to posit a “law of contraction” with specialized groups increasingly absorbing the “whole of family life”. In fact, he argued, “the family must necessarily contract as the social milieu, with which every individual is in direct relationship, extends further” (Durkheim 1978/1892:232).

Durkheim believed that the increasing importance of specialty organizations and the declining place of the family was an inescapable continuing fact of history. The family was seen as becoming increasingly incapable of fulfilling its economic and moral functions. The law of contraction had, in fact, reduced the functions of the family to such

a great extent that the occupational group and state were replacing the family. Durkheim wrote that the “corporation was heir to the family”. In fact, in exercising a function that had previously been domestic, the corporation “replaced the family”. “Professional duty,” he wrote, “must assume the same role in men’s hearts which domestic duty has hitherto played” (Durkheim 1978/1892:238; 1984/1893: xlv-x lvi).

According to Durkheim, the law of contraction was also apparent in other aspects of family life. Like Le Play before him, Durkheim suggested that the family had contracted in size from the extended paternal family to the conjugal family consisting only of parents and their unmarried children who had not yet reached adulthood.

Durkheim also believed that these evolutionary changes had transformed the internal structure of the family in that “...the old familial communism has been shaken apart to an extent that we have never before encountered” (Durkheim, 1984/1893:230). The circle of extended kin involved in the original family communism became increasingly restricted to the conjugal family. And, even within the conjugal family, the sharing of things in common among family members declined and the degree of family solidarity and commitment receded.

Particularly important in the decline of family solidarity was the emergence of the individual from its total submersion in the collective. Durkheim believed that society increasingly encompassed the individual less tightly and as a result could less efficiently restrain individual action. Individualism and personal autonomy were to increase more and more across time as the influence of the family and its commitments contracted. Furthermore, since the family was playing “a smaller role in life”, Durkheim believed

that it had lost much of its former ability to protect its individual members (Durkheim, 1951/1897:377-378).

For additional discussion about Durkheim's ideas about the functions of the family and the way they had declined in history, see Thornton 2005a (pages 66-67). I also discuss there the validity of Durkheim's idea that the functions of the family had declined, as well as critique the usefulness of the functional approach to family studies (pages 93-95).

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of Durkheim's powerful and insightful analysis on the subsequent history of family scholarship since his formulation of the issues has dominated a century of thinking about family change. Numerous subsequent scholars have utilized his functional framework to discuss the transformation of the family. In fact, some of the most powerful and influential twentieth century statements about family change have followed rather directly from Durkheim's framework, analysis, and language. The classic articles of Ogburn and Tibbitts (1933) and Parsons (1955) provide poignant examples of subsequent major treatments of societal specialization and the changing functions of the family (also see Bosanquet, 1915/1906; Ellwood, 1910; Burgess and Locke, 1953/1945; Sorokin and Zimmerman, 1929; Popenoe, 1988; Mitterauer and Sieder, 1982/1977:85). Many of these discussions not only retained Durkheim's functional approach, but were also explicitly social developmental as well.

Although I have seen no direct reference in the subsequent literature to Durkheim's law of the contraction of the family, numerous subsequent scholars have written within that framework. Many scholars have used the language and framework of family functions to talk about the "declining functions of the family". For example, in

describing the shift of activities from family to nonfamily activities, many scholars have referred to the family as “losing functions”, have suggested that the “functions of the family are disappearing”, or that the “family is becoming function-less”. For example, Ogburn and Tibbitts (1933:661) stated that one of the important conclusions about family change “is the decline of the institutional functions of the family”. Burgess and Locke (1953/1945:470) reported that there has been a “loss of the historical functions of the family—economic, protective, educational, recreational, and religious” and that “...various forces are shearing from the family its institutional significance”. Sorokin and Zimmerman (1929:341) noted that “many functions, which are still preformed by the rural family, have already disappeared in the urban family or are taken over by other family agencies.”

Edward Westermarck on Family Relations and Process

I bring this partial review of scholarship during the 1700s and 1800s concerning trends in family sentiment and authority to a close with a discussion of Westermarck's ideas on these issues. Westermarck's contributions to this subject were particularly important as he refined many of the ideas held by earlier writers⁷. Westermarck's approach to writing history using the reading history sideways approach was described as follows in the methods chapter of his book, The History of Human Marriage.

It is in the firm conviction that the history of human civilization should be made an object of as scientific a treatment as the history of organic nature that I write this book.....

Descriptive historiography has no higher object than that of offering materials to [the science of Sociology]. It can, however, but very inadequately fulfil this task. The written

⁷ As I document elsewhere, Westermarck was also influential in using reading history sideways approaches to conclude that marriage had changed in Northwest Europe from being young and universal to being older with extensive celibacy. (Thornton 2005a, 2005c).

evidences of history do not reach far into antiquity. They give us information about time when the scale of civilization was already comparatively high - - but scarcely anything more. As to the origin and early development of social institutions, they leave us entirely in the dark. The sociologist cannot rest content with this. But the information which historical documents are unable to afford him may be, to a great extent, obtained from ethnography.

The admirable works of Dr. Taylor, Sir John Lubbock, and Mr. Herbert Spencer have already made us familiar with the idea of a history of primitive civilization, based on ethnographical grounds. This new manner of treating history has, since the publication of their writings on the subject, gained adherents day by day. Immeasurable expanses have thus been opened to our knowledge, and many important results have been reached (Westermarck 1894/1891:1-2).

Westermarck had nearly encyclopedic knowledge of the ethnographic accounts of many of the societies of the world, making him particularly well placed to appreciate the extensive cross-cultural diversity. Like many writers before him, Westermarck recognized that young people had very little say in the marriage decision in many societies that he believed to be at the earliest stages of social development. He noted, for example, that many marriages in these societies were totally arranged by the parents. He reported, however, that men often had more say in their marriages than did women, and even women had more say in many such societies than previously thought.

Despite the recognition of arranged marriages in some societies at an early stage of development, Westermarck also believed that there were many societies at early developmental stages where the young people had considerable say in the marital decision. Furthermore, in typical Westermarckian style, he devoted several pages to documenting this phenomenon in many such societies. In fact, while Westermarck was not explicit on this subject, he gave the clear impression that the freedom of mate choice was quite high overall at a very early stage of social evolution (Westermarck

1894/1891:213-225; 1922 Vol.1:278-353; 1971/1908 [Vol. 1]: 597-606). In doing so, Westermarck represented a major departure from most of the previous scholarly work concerning mate selection at the earliest stage of societal development.

Westermarck also broke company with the predominant view that parental authority necessarily declined with advancing civilization. Instead, he believed that as societies developed from early to middle stages of evolution parental authority actually increased (1894/1891:225-235; 1971/1908 [Vol. 1]:606-614). In support of this conclusion he cited extensive information from a number of societies that he believed to represent a middle level of development, including Mexico, Peru, China, Japan, the ancient Arabs and Hebrews, the ancient Romans, the ancient Hindus, Russia, and Poland. In all of these societies Westermarck reported a high level of control of the older generation over the younger. “Indeed,” he noted, “so prevalent has this strengthened authority of the father been among people who have reached a relatively high degree of civilization, that it must be regarded as marking a stage in all human history” (1894/1891: 225)

Nevertheless, Westermarck wrote that this high degree of parental authority at the middle stages of civilization was only transitional as he believed that parental authority declined across later stages of the societal life cycle. For this he cited some religious and legal writings among such groups as the Hebrews, Muslims, Greeks, and Romans. He also believed, however, that parental authority declined more rapidly in some societies than others. In support of this differential change he contrasted the relatively high level of parental authority in France, Germany, and Holland with the lower parental control societies in the United States, Scotland, Ireland, and England (1894/1891:235-239).

Westermarck concluded his discussion of this issue by saying “that children in civilized countries are in no respect the property of their parents; that they are born with certain rights guaranteed to them by society; that the birth of children gives parents no rights over them other than those which conduce to the children's happiness. These ideas, essential as they are to true civilization, are not many centuries old” (1894/1891:239). Thus, while Westermarck had a more sophisticated model of societal development in regard to intergenerational authority and freedom than most of his predecessors, his conclusions about Western Europe were the same as theirs: the immediately preceding centuries had been ones of declining parental authority and expanding autonomy and freedom. As was the usual pattern for his era, Westermarck also reached this conclusion by reading history sideways: from such places as China, Russia, and ancient Rome to Western Europe.

Westermarck also believed that the authority of husbands over wives generally paralleled the curvilinear trend in the authority of parents over children (1971/1908). As with the freedom of children, Westermarck believed that the autonomy of wives declined during the middle period of societal development, but with modern civilization this trend reversed, and the authority of husbands over their wives declined.

Westermarck was more sophisticated and generous than many of his predecessors concerning family sentiment at earlier stages in the societal developmental life cycle (1894/1891, 1922, 1971/1908). He carefully distinguished between intergenerational relations and relations between husbands and wives. On the issue of intergenerational relationships, he believed that both paternal and maternal love were universal (1971/1908). He believed, however, that “In the lower stages of human development

sexual affection is much inferior in intensity to the tender feelings with which parents embrace their children; and among several peoples it seems to be almost unknown” (1894/1891 [Vol. 1]:356-357).

Westermarck also said that it was easy to underestimate the amount of conjugal affection in early societies. “There are”, he wrote, “facts which tend to show that even very rude savages may have conjugal affection; nay, that among certain uncivilized peoples it has reached a remarkably high degree of development” (1894/1891 [Vol. 1]:358). He also suggested that such conjugal affect was probably “as old as marriage itself” (1894/1891 [Vol. 1]:360). Love and affection, according to Westermarck, could also grow and develop after marriage, even if there were no love in the beginning of the marital relationship.

Despite the fact that Westermarck disagreed with his predecessors on some of these important points, his position on the direction of societal development was identical to theirs. Like them, he believed that the “affection accompanying the union of the sexes” has gradually increased. “Thus love has only slowly become the refined feeling it is in the heart of a highly civilized European. In Eastern countries with their ancient civilization there exists even now but little of that tenderness towards the woman which is the principal charm of our own family life” (1894/1891 [Vol. 1]:360). He went on to say how arranged marriages and the sexual segregation of women and men before marriage prevent the development of such affection between husbands and wives.

In fact, when Westermarck expanded The History of Human Marriage to three volumes, he slightly revised his thesis to highlight even more the amount of change there was at the highest levels of societal development. He suggested that with the increased

control of parents over their children at the middle levels of the societal life cycle, conjugal affection may also have been lower at the middle than at the early stages (1922:28). If so, the increase in conjugal affection implied for the periods immediately preceding Westermarck's writing would have been even more marked than generally assumed.

Summary

Thus, by the beginning of the 1900s, Western family scholars had been studying family processes and relationships for well over a century. A wide ranging literature existed concerning such issues as family authority patterns, the quality of sentiments in family relationships, and the role of families and individuals in society. The scholars investigating these issues included some of the most important thinkers of the 1700s and 1800s.

We have also seen that the analyses of these issues were uniformly embedded within a societal developmental framework, often explicitly but sometimes only implicitly. That is, the scholars studying these issues generally viewed social change in developmentalistic terms and were interested in the natural history of family relations. In addition, while some scholars used actual historical information in their analyses, the comparative method for describing history maintained overwhelming hegemony as the methodological tool used in these studies. That is, the great bulk of this research investigated history and social change by reading comparative information sideways rather than by referring to the actual experiences of Western Europeans in the historical past.

Although there were disagreements among the family scholars of the 1700s and 1800s on many issues concerning family change, there was virtual unanimity on some issues. As regards to the developmental trends occurring in Europe immediately prior to their writing, these scholars were in virtual agreement that: there was a shift away from emphasizing the larger family collective to emphasizing the conjugal family; society had changed from stressing family commitments to emphasizing individual rights; society had moved from strong parental authority toward individual autonomy; affection between parents and children had increased; the authority of husbands over wives had declined; the control of parents over the marriages of their children had faded; marriage had shifted to companionship from institution; and the importance of love and affection in marriage had grown.

Many of these themes survived intact into the middle of the 1900s as several influential scholars of the early 1900s came to similar conclusions (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1974/1918, vol. 1:87-106; vol. 2:1166-1170; Calhoun, 1960/1917:14-28; 1960/1919: 157-178; Burgess and Locke, 1953/1945:3-28; Sumner, 1934/1880, Vol. II:88-89; Ellwood, 1910:113-137; Lynd and Lynd, 1929:131-152). For a discussion of the validity of these themes about family change in the Northwest European past, see Thornton 2005a, where it is argued that many of the changes in family life described by scholars of the 1700s and 1800s did not, in fact, happen (see especially Chapter 5).

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