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Sociology of the Family

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Aging and Family Structures



Aging Families

The affects of aging on the family structure are complex and vary throughout many aspects. There are different stages in which people pass through life according to society. Within the family, human development stages follow a social and cultural script. These stages are accompanied by different types of interactions and roles that characterize the cycle. The periods not only vary culturally and individually, but also have tended to vary over time. With the changes that have occurred over time, people are living longer and this had redefined the way families interact. Simple changes in mortality have major affects on family life. There are stronger bonds between parents and children, longer time span for marriages and parenting, becoming a grandparent has become an expected event, and there are more grandparents that children already know. The declining mortality rate also has declines the number of orphans in orphanages. It is now possible for people to grow into adulthood without experiencing a death in the family. Where death was one an expected event, it is now a devastating catastrophe that could have life-long effects. There are also declining fertility rates, so there are less children being born into the family. The combination of longer lives and fewer deaths has

created a lengthening empty- nest stage in the family. Children are staying home longer with a prolonged adolescence. The falling mortality rates can also be linked to a rising in divorce rates. The more time couples have to spend together, the more likely the chances for friction. With children staying home longer, it creates an unwelcome stress on the marriage.

The idea of childhood is a recent thought, comparatively. In earlier times, childhood was something very different. Children were not thought of as having a special nature that required special treatment, as they are today. Very early, about age five to seven, children were sent off to work. Childhood was more or less discovered with the emergence of, privateness, domestication, and social institutions such as school and childcare. Now children stay at home, at least until they reach eighteen. Childhood is a more social invention that blossomed from the new ideas about children (little angels), child-rearing practices, and the new prolonged life of children.

Children go through a transition stage called puberty or adolescence. This is not only a shift in a child's physical structure, but also social structure. They have new responsibilities and are now part of the sexual and social market. Educational and economic systems (work) aided to set the age for adolescence and criteria for adolescence. This is a highly emotional time for young people and they are confused about where they fit in, maybe somewhere in the middle, but that is a confusing place to be. It does not help when society tends to blame the youth for crime and societal problems. Adulthood seems to be being reached at later and later times. With young adults increasing attendance at secondary school and universities, the usual determinate

of adulthood, forty- hour workweek, marriage, and children, are being postponed longer and longer.

Once children have finally reached this epoch of adulthood and are well set in their new lives with their newly constructed families, an event called a mid-life crisis comes into play. This is usually around ages thirty-five to forty. People come to loose their idealized self that they had dreamed themselves to be once they gain a clear picture of what they will be doing for the rest of their lives. This sometimes causes depression due to the fewer options for the future.

The empty-nest syndrome was once thought to bring ultimate sadness with the loss of roles for women, but on the contrary, women have a relief of stress and there is a reported new awakening for marriages. Marriages are happier. Another event that occurs after the children leave home is becoming a grandparent.

Older people have different standards for living than earlier times when death occurred much earlier. There are certain changes that made this new standard possible, such as declined mortality, declined fertility, and better health care, increased transportation, increased communication, the variable workday, retirement, Social Security, and the new standards for living have all transformed grandparenthood. Many more people are living long enough to become health grandparents and enjoy their new families. They have easier access to their larger families through improved communication. They have more time to spend with their grandchildren with retirement options and more money to spend on them. They are much less likely to be raising their own children.

I believe that there are many factors that lead to the now accepted transitions within family structure. That maybe the lines that are drawn in the ages cannot be applied to every family or individual. The structural cycles may be a bit more hazy than described. With society in a now seemingly state of change, the family structure also seems to be in a state of flux, which could attribute to the confusion and seemingly heightened rebellion. The cycle might be better grasped if they weren't rigidly defined and maybe better understood by individuals to lesson some of the psychological blows. It will be interesting to watch the upcoming changes, hopefully within my lifetime.