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BEYOND STANDARD FAMILIES IN ADVANCED COUNTRIES

Marina A. Adler and Karl Lenz

Who is considered family in the 21st century? Among countries and even within countries, there is no clear consensus on this question, but some common changes involving unions, parents, and children in “post-modern” families are evident. Over the past five decades, a dramatic proliferation and diversification of family forms has occurred across advanced countries. Increasing individualization processes and the rise of the women’s and LGBTQA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, asexual, plus) movements opened the door for new relationship forms, new ways of living together, as well as increasing trends of living alone and living without children. The nuclear family consisting of a married, heterosexual couple with joint (biological) children has experienced a sharp decline relative to other forms of “doing family.” Based on the bourgeois family ideal that emerged in the 18th century, the nuclear family was long considered the hegemonic standard, and the only normatively appropriate and aspirational family form. The heteronormative nuclear family dominated not only in public and policy discourses but also in social research, where deviations from this norm were interpreted as deficient and incomplete. However, over time it became increasingly evident that this standard family form does not guarantee a happy family life, the well-being of children, or gender equality. Consequently, as the popularity of the nuclear family waned, more alternative, non-traditional family forms have emerged and increased in significance.

This diversification of what families look like, how families are created and how family is “done” every day has progressed significantly in advanced countries, reflecting what Cherlin (2004) refers to as a de-institutionalization process. The de-institutionalization of marriage involves an increasing instability of couple relationships and a growing acceptance of sexual orientations beyond compulsory heterosexuality. Forming a union without marriage can

take the form of non-marital cohabitation or a living-apart-together relationship (LAT). Relationship biographies have changed, and now it is increasingly rare for people to marry their first partners and stay with them for the rest of their lives. Instead, it is common practice to have a series of relationships, to live in them in different ways over the life course, and to have children with different partners (multi-partner fertility). Hence, a family can include more than one household, family members are linked not only by biological ties, and membership in a family is subjective and fluid and can change over time. Same-sex relationships, marriage, and parenthood have been de-criminalized and are even legally sanctioned in many advanced countries. In addition to these changes in couple relationships, migration processes and resulting ethnic heterogeneity of the population as well as advances in reproductive medicine have created the space for a rapid diversification of family forms (see Harris, 2008, for a review).

The waning popularity of marriage as the only option for union formation, increased cohabitation, changes in divorce and remarriage rates, and the growing acceptance of same-sex unions, medically assisted reproductive methods, adoption, and voluntarily not having children reflect a broadening range of family definitions and practices. Not only has the structural family composition undergone major changes, so have family members' perceptions of who is part of their family, where and how family is done, and what family relationships mean to them (Seltzer, 2019). These processes also have far-reaching consequences for social science research: Household composition and common living arrangements have become inadequate criteria for defining what constitutes a family and for understanding the meanings assigned to being a family by its members. Family diversity can be researched as empirical variations in family composition and through an interpretative or constructionist lens as differences in the understanding of family relationships (Harris, 2008).

And yet, the diverse strategies of reproduction and family formation largely remain unscripted terrain (Nordqvist, 2021), and it appears that there is a cultural lag between alternative pathways to becoming family and the traditional normative understandings of what a family is. The observed trends in family diversity also raise family policy-related questions, such as which types of families are or should be privileged by government support (Cherlin, 2020). It has also to be recognized that the standard heteronormative family tends to remain privileged in the policies and laws of advanced countries. Historically, while a variety of family forms have coexisted with the standard family, depending on social and economic conditions, they have long remained invisible, often stigmatized, and discriminated and have only recently been acknowledged. This family diversity emerges in societies from the social context and social forces that construct families (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000). Consequently, we examine the current state of knowledge regarding the compositional, interpretative, and policy dimensions of family diversity in several advanced countries.

Forms of parenthood

While family formation remains one of the most significant life course events, the timing, constellation, and strategies have diversified. In the 21st century, numerous alternative pathways to parenthood have proliferated, becoming more accepted and legitimized in the policy arena of advanced nations (see Furstenberg et al., 2020). According to Vaskovics (2011), parenthood can be differentiated into biological, genetic, legal, and social parenthood. Biological parenthood refers to fertilization/conception, pregnancy, and birth of an offspring; in everyday language, it is common to speak of “biological” mothers, fathers, and children. The emergence of reproductive medicine (Passet-Wittig & Bujard, 2021) has made it necessary to distinguish biological from genetic parenthood because sperm and/or egg cells can originate from, or be implanted into, a third person. Although there are strictly only two biological parents, these need not always be known, and given further technical advances in reproductive medicine, the number of genetic parents may be unlimited (Eggen, 2020).

Adoption expands the opportunities for family formation beyond biological and genetic relationships to legal relationships. Legal parenthood involves assigning rights and responsibilities to an adult to care for someone, usually a child. In order to legally become a parent, whether through birth or adoption, mothers and fathers have to be legally registered by state authorities. The visibility of pregnancy and birth link biological motherhood directly to legal parenthood. However, child abandonment and child relinquishment illustrate that there are ways to avoid legal biological motherhood. Biological fatherhood is less directly linked to legal fatherhood, and while paternity can reliably be determined, this involves distrust and additional action.

Social parenthood refers to the assumption of parental responsibility and everyday care for a child that relates to the position of father or mother. When a child grows up with both birth parents, social and biological parenthood coincide. However, in adoptive and reconstituted (step) families, parental duties are performed by non-biological caregivers. Social parenthood also reveals that the birth of a child per se does not create a family; families are established only when at least one person accepts the position as parent. A motherhood or fatherhood becomes socially relevant only when it is recognized as such, that is, when it is transformed into a “lived” parenthood. There can be families without biological (and without legal) parenthood, but not families without social parenthood (see Lenz, 2013).

The separation of biological and social parenthood also creates the possibility that a child has more than two (social) parents. After relationship dissolution, in reconstituted families (or stepfamilies or blended families or multiple partner families), the new partners can take on the parental role fully or partially. Thus, in these families, there are typically multiple parents, who often live in multiple locations because the families span more than one household.

Beyond “standard” families

Family forms that diverge from the “traditional family standard” in one or more central characteristics are collectively referred to here as diverse family forms.

1. *One-parent families and cohabiting families*

One-parent families include one parent who is single, married but separated, widowed or divorced, and who lives with one or more children in the same household. Mother-only families are significantly more common than father-only families. One-parent families result from relationship dissolution, either before or after marriage, before or after the birth of a child. The de-institutionalization of marriage has also meant an increase in the number of families in which the parents remain unmarried. These cohabiting families can be lived as a prelude to marriage or constitute a permanent living arrangement.

2. *Reconstituted families (stepfamilies)*

In reconstituted families (e.g., stepfamilies), biological and social parenthood generally diverge in the case of one parent. While until the middle of the 20th century, these families were almost exclusively formed after the death of one parent, today they result mostly from separation or divorce. After relationship dissolution, a new family is formed when one of the two parents enters into a new relationship. This can take the form of a marriage, a non-marital partnership, or a long-distance relationship. If both separated (biological) parents enter new couple relationships, the child has two reconstituted families, one primary and one secondary. The primary stepfamily is where the child lives most of the time, whereas the child lives only sporadically (e.g., on weekends) in the secondary stepfamily. Because children most often remain with their mothers after relationship dissolution, primary stepfamilies tend to be stepfather families. Finally, a distinction is made between simple, composite, and complex reconstituted families. In simple stepfamilies, only one adult brings children of their own into the relationship. In a composite stepfamily, also referred to as a patchwork family, both adults bring in their own children. A complex stepfamily includes, in addition to the stepchild(ren), joint new children of the couple.

The introduction of joint custody arrangements and the increased efforts of separated fathers to engage with their children has created a new living arrangement in which the child/children live in approximately equal parts in both separate parental households. In some cases, the children remain in a household in which each parent alternately co-resides with them. This living arrangement is referred to as the “dual residence arrangement.”

3. *Adoptive and foster families*

Unlike foster care, adoption legally establishes parental rights. Through adoption, the parent gains complete and permanent legal parenthood. It is important to distinguish adoption of a stepchild from a third-party adoption. In the case of stepchild adoption, biological, legal, and social parenthood continue to coincide for one parent but for the other partner, social parenthood is supplemented by legal parenthood. In third-party adoption, both relinquishing parents lose their legal parenthood. There are cross-national differences in how adoptions occur. Recently, the recognition of children's right to information about their own roots has led to more open forms of adoption.

Fostering involves the placement of a child into a household for a limited period of time. The biological parents can retain legal parenthood, provided the child has not been removed from their care. Also, during the foster placement, contacts between the child and the biological parent(s) usually continue. The foster parents have social parenthood status during the time of the placement, but not legal parenthood status.

4. *Families created by medically assisted reproduction (MAR)*

According to Zegers-Hochschild et al. (2017), MAR is the umbrella term for various technologies and interventions to treat infertility. This involves fertility treatments and procedures that use eggs, sperm, or embryos (Sunderam et al., 2022), such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), egg and embryo donation, and surrogacy. Although assisted insemination and hormonal treatments enable an infertile woman to become a mother, they are not considered assisted reproductive technology (ART), and thus, not much data and research are available on them. Third-party reproduction involves the eggs, sperm, or embryos of a donor (i.e., a third person) (Thoma et al., 2014). While homologous insemination uses eggs and sperm of one couple, heterologous insemination involves third persons in the form of sperm or egg donation. A surrogacy may involve oocyte and sperm from a couple; however, in this case, biological motherhood is transferred to another woman. Significant differences exist among countries as to which forms of reproductive medicine are legally permissible.

MAR has made it possible to dissolve the biological reproductive triad (woman, man, and their offspring) (Eggen, 2020; Passet-Wittig & Bujard, 2021). While every child has a biological mother and father, there is a difference between biological and genetic parenthood. The woman from whom the egg or parts of it originate is the genetic mother; the biological mother is the woman in whose uterus the (artificially) fertilized egg matures and who gives birth to the child. The genetic father is the man (or men) whose sperm is used for fertilization, so that biological paternity coincides with genetic paternity. The option of

being a mere sperm donor shows that genetic paternity does not have to involve legal or social parenthood.

5. *Sex and gender minority families (SGM)*

According to Reczek (2020), sex and gender minority (SGM) families include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, intersex, pansexual, multiamorous, and other LGBTQA+ families. Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer (2013, p. 492) add that “sexual minority refers broadly to individuals whose sexual identity/behavior is marginalized by heterosexually prescribed norms.” Due to the weakening of heteronormativity and the gender binary, the legal status and social acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships have improved significantly in some countries. Increasingly, it is also legally and socially accepted for same-sex couples to become parents. SGM families can include biological, step, adopted, or foster children, as well as children resulting from MAR.

6. *Multicultural and migrant families*

Global migration processes also make a significant contribution to the diversity of family forms. While in some countries ethnic heterogeneity has a long history, in others strong migratory movements have only started after the Second World War or have taken on a new quality. While the term immigrant family refers to families residing in a receiving country together, transnational families are those with family members residing in different countries. Although it is common to compare migrant families with non-migrant families, it is generally true that migrant families cannot be regarded as a separate form of family (Baykara-Krumme, 2015). Rather, these families are characterized by enormous heterogeneity. There are considerable differences in the contexts of origin, individual migration experiences, duration of residence, intermarriage patterns, and social and legal status, and in many cases, these differences are greater than among families without migration experiences (van Hook & Glick, 2020).

De-traditionalization of living arrangements and doing family

Not only have family forms diversified, family life in general has become less self-evident (Cherlin, 2020). The options for individual lifestyles have become greater; this has increased the scope for action, but also the constraints on making biographical decisions. At the same time, the contexts of families have become more diverse and demanding. In many cases, working life is accompanied by high demands for flexibility in terms of time and space, which have to be reconciled with family life (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020). The care and educational facilities for children require a high degree of attention and cooperation. Normative expectations of a child-centered family life and responsible parenthood,

linked with the demands of good relationship quality and gender egalitarianism in the relationship, put increasing pressure on parents.

Formerly a social institution with strict cultural norms for the genders and generations, family is now a place of constant negotiation among the family members. The everyday existence and continuity of families can no longer be taken for granted, but must be continuously established in the interactions of family members (Jurczyk & Meysen, 2020). “Doing family” implies reflexive family practices, which “exist in the routine talk about family—family obligations, family duties, family constraints” (Morgan, 1999, p. 29). Organizationally, everyday family life also must be coordinated by continuously clarifying who does what, when, and how.

In addition to overcoming these practical challenges, doing family also extends to the level of meaning-making. It requires identity-supporting efforts to convince people that the family has commonalities and forms a cohesive group. Widmer’s (2021, p. 62) “configurational perspective” assumes that the individual family members “co-construct a feeling of being part of a family ‘we’ or ‘we-ness’ ... Such a ‘we’ is based on the individual members’ feelings of intimacy with other family members, and the mutual commitments they develop over time ...” Hence, various family configurations are considered alternatives to the heteronormative nuclear family. The creation of a sense of “we” and processes of inclusion and exclusion from the family unit are as much a part of doing family as the external presentation as a family (“displaying family”) (Finch, 2007).

While all families are confronted with everyday practical tasks, the construction of commonalities poses a particular challenge for non-traditional family forms. Naples (2001, p. 33) argues that the work of doing family is even more crucial to non-standard families:

Family must be achieved and constructed on a daily basis. ... [Those] who do not fit into the normative heterosexual-family model understand this well. But all of us, regardless of the family form we inherit or create, must work to sustain these relationships.

Thus, Nelson (2006) for example describes how single mothers “perform family” and negotiate the meanings of family identity and family membership within various economic, cultural, and normative constraints while still considering the standard family as the ideal and aspirational family form. Post-divorce families also express a need for legitimation in terms of presenting themselves as a “real” family to the outside world. This need of non-traditional families for recognition and justification reflects the strong normative pressures to conform. Non-traditional family forms are continuously confronted with the standard family as hegemonic norm and have to permanently prove that they are also real families.

The concept of parenthood remains an important basis for doing family in non-traditional family forms (Buschner & Bergold, 2017). While families involving biological relationships can rely on self-evident definitions of who is the

mother or father, non-traditional families require clarifications and definitions of family membership and positions. In addition, while parenting concepts include negotiation processes about the responsibilities and tasks in everyday family life, even in a biological mother–father–child triad, this is not as self-evident as it may seem. The possible strategies of withdrawing from parental roles show that even biological parenthood has to be accepted in order to become social. Furthermore, the discussions on active fatherhood reveal that despite cultural mandates, father engagement can take on very different forms (Adler & Lenz, 2016). For non-traditional families, notions of the standard family create numerous challenges. For example, there are no normative specifications for the position of stepfathers, and thus, the competencies and responsibilities required for dealing with a stepchild are unclear. Should stepfathers assume a conventional parental role or the role of a parental friend? Should they be addressed by their first name or as father? The mother’s new partner also does not necessarily become part of the family—they can remain merely a household member. For the children involved, the establishment of a new family also involves great uncertainty. Both rivalry and loyalty conflicts are possible.

Family policy and welfare state regimes

We conceive of family policy as embedded in the overall framework of welfare state regimes. A broad conceptualization of family policy refers to

what government does to and for children and their families, in particular those public policies (laws, regulations) that are designed to affect the situation of families with children—or individuals in their family roles—and those that have clear consequences for such families even though the impacts may not have been intended

(Kamerman, 1996, p. 31)

Cross-national research has not only established that national policies vary in terms of “family-friendliness” in general, but also in regard to the legal options for families that do not align with traditional assumptions of what constitutes a family. Family policies are made in the context of demographic conditions, priorities of the economy and labor market, and considerations about gender egalitarianism and work–family conflicts. The norms and rights to form a family based on surrogacy or technological assistance, adoption, marital status, cultural background or sexual orientation vary in the selected countries. The consequences of these legal and policy patterns on doing family in non-traditional family forms are of particular interest.

Modern welfare states are legally committed to provide social protection against economic, health, age-related, and other risks for the population. Although the welfare state has a relatively short history, it has experienced tremendous expansion in the 20th century. Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1989) initially

distinguished three welfare regimes: the liberal or residual, conservative or corporate, and social democratic or Scandinavian models. This first typology was later supplemented by the “Mediterranean” or “Southern European” and the “post-socialist” models. These classifications are based on the way in which the production and redistribution of social welfare take place in a nation-state. For Esping-Andersen, the key criterion is “de-commodification,” which refers to the extent to which social policy reduces citizens’ (usually men’s) dependence on gainful employment for survival.

Although families and their well-being are key concerns in modern society, the connection between family and state remained invisible in most initial welfare state analysis (Neyer, 2021). It was not until feminist critics of comparative welfare state research developed gender-reflective concepts that liberated the welfare state models from their orientation toward male biographies and employment. It became clear that the models presuppose very different benefits for men in the labor market than for women and families. The welfare state can privilege a particular type of family and gender regime, such as the standard nuclear family with a male breadwinner and female carer, via family policy. While universal monetary benefits for parents can help reduce inequalities among families, tax credits and lengthy paid leave for mothers tend to promote traditional family arrangements. Measures to improve the reconciliation of work and family life for all parents, such as access to an inexpensive range of childcare options, support a broader range of family forms.

As a result, family policy is increasingly regarded as a central component of the welfare state, along with other social policies (Neyer, 2021, p. 25). The extent to which women’s gainful employment is constrained by policy prescriptions, women’s dependence for social security on (male) breadwinners (familialization), and the degree of social support linked to family have emerged as additional criteria for welfare state classification. Welfare regimes are now viewed “through the analytical lens of the family” (Esping-Andersen, 1999, p. 49). The regimes are also distinguished by how responsibilities for work and family are divided among women, men, the state, and the market (Crompton, 1999), by “cultures of care” (Adler & Brayfield, 2006), i.e., arrangements for child care, which can be organized as a service provided by the family and thus mostly by women, or as a public or private service, and “gender arrangements” (Pfau-Effinger, 2004).

Comparative perspective and selection of countries

The departure from the standard family and the diversification of family forms is observable to differing degrees in all advanced countries. A comparative lens to examine variations among countries is necessary in order to understand the extent to which non-standard families are supported in various welfare states. In this context, our interest is mainly directed at family and gender-related policies and based on a legal and social rights approach. Countries with different cultures, laws, and family policies also vary in their support for parents and children in

diverse family forms. That includes variation in countries' recognition of and granting rights to families that do not conform to the heteronormative patterns of the standard, heterosexual, and biological familial relationships. Governments can both enable and promote family diversity, but also impede and inhibit it. We also ask how doing family in non-standard families is justified and accounted for, both externally and internally, in the face of the dominant cultural prescriptions of the biologically based nuclear family, heteronormativity, and the gender binary. The book problematizes the preeminence of data collection, research, and policy that focuses exclusively on standard families.

The selection criteria for the nine OECD countries in this volume included: (1) economic advancement and democratic political order, (2) welfare state classification, (3) geographical coverage, and (4) cultural variety. The countries selected were Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Lithuania, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the US. Thus, the countries cover three continents, represent different welfare regimes, and reflect differences in family policy, family law, and cultural traditions. All country chapters are written by family researchers from the respective nations.

The US, the UK, and Canada represent different versions of the cluster of "liberal welfare states." In the multicultural US, the dual-earner model and private child care are highly prevalent. There is no public support for family leave, and the welfare system encourages traditional marriage. In contrast, Canada features more generous family policies and public day care, as well as Indigenous, English, and French variations. Although the UK has more generous family policies than the US, its dual-earner gender regime involves fewer full-time-working mothers. Formal child care is widespread but receives little public financial support. France and Germany, by contrast, are considered to be conservative welfare states. However, France is a welfare state with a longer tradition of comprehensive public child care and a high female labor force participation rate. France's policies also have historically been more oriented toward family diversity, gender diversity, and the dual-earner model. This includes support for employed parents, particularly mothers, and the acknowledgment of lifestyles beyond heteronormativity. Germany is a modified conservative welfare state because unification combined two different welfare regimes. West Germany was long considered the prototype of the conservative welfare regime, featuring a traditional breadwinner model and a family policy focused on long leave for mothers. In East Germany, by contrast, the dual-earner system included an expansive affordable childcare system. These differences have not disappeared, even though a one-and-a-half breadwinner model now dominates and childcare facilities were expanded in the West (Lenz & Adler, 2010).

Japan, as a familialist or "Confucian" welfare state, underwent rapid development after World War II. However, its strong cultural traditions often collide with changes in contemporary family life. Thus, despite higher women's labor force participation, women are expected to care for children and elders in multigenerational households. As a consequence, Japan's fertility rate is one of the

lowest in the world. Similarly, Spain's Southern or familialist welfare state has historically provided little state support for families and featured a traditional gender regime. However, Spain recently experienced a rapid transformation in family diversity and very low fertility rates, as well as a shift toward more progressive family policies. Sweden is part of the Social Democratic or Nordic welfare state cluster and is considered to have a very generous family policy regime. In particular, single mothers are supported to the same extent as married mothers. Single, divorced, and gay fathers have the same rights as those in a traditional marriage arrangement. The Eastern European country of Lithuania belongs to the post-socialist cluster of welfare states. As such, Lithuania has undergone major political and economic regime changes while adhering to traditional ideas about the family. At the same time, it features the highest labor force participation rates for women.

The comparative indicators

To facilitate cross-country comparisons, the country chapters have an identical structure. Each chapter begins with an introduction outlining the historically significant developments that contextualize the country's current family diversity. The country-specific definition of family in official statistics will be explained. In the following section, data on the developments in union formation and dissolution, fertility, and living arrangements since 2000 will be presented. The limitations of the data in capturing the extent of family diversity are also highlighted. The third part discusses current research on non-standard family forms and on how they do family. This overview also highlights the impact on family life of political and legal regulations, processes of social change, and technological innovations, particularly in the context of reproductive medicine. The final section identifies the need for research and also addresses the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the various family forms.

In order to better compare the nine countries, the contributions present selected indicators for demographic processes and living arrangements in tables. These indicators will be briefly described here.

In terms of union formation, the data include the average age at first marriage and the crude marriage rate (CMR), which is the number of marriages (first and remarriages) in a year per 1,000 inhabitants. These data come from the national official marriage statistics. For union dissolution, the crude divorce rate (CDR), or in some cases, the total divorce rate (TDR) is reported. The CDR is the number of marriages in a year per 1,000 inhabitants. The TDR indicates how many marriages would end in divorce if the divorce frequency of the respective calendar year were to remain constant over a period of 25 years.

The total fertility rate (TFR) indicates how many children a woman would have in the course of her life if her fertility behavior were the same as that of all women between the ages of 15 and 49 in the year under consideration. The final number of children born, or cohort fertility rate, is known only after the

completion of the fertile phase and thus is compiled after the relevant cohort of women has reached the age of 45 or 50. Before that, only estimates are possible. It is common practice to report these fertility indicators for women only. In some countries, however, they are now also available for men. In addition, the tables present the average age at birth of the first child or of all children, the percentage of non-marital births, and the proportion of women who never have a child. The non-marital births are measured by the share of non-marital births of the total number of live births a year. The proportion of women who never gave birth to a child out of all women of the respective birth cohort is presented.

For information on living arrangements, different data are available in the selected countries. Family statistics are generally presented as household statistics. As a basic unit, the household is recorded as a residential and economic unit. Official statistics vary in their definition of what is counted as a family. In order to provide comparable information despite the heterogeneity of the data, the country chapters show the proportion of adults living in different living arrangements (e.g., with a spouse, unmarried with a partner, single parent with one or more children, or living alone) and the proportion of household including various family forms.

Our concluding chapter will first present a comparative overview of the observed changes in the demography and living arrangements in the nine countries, including an evaluation of the indicators in relation to OECD averages. In addition, we offer a comparison of current patterns related to the trends regarding “non-standard” family forms in the countries. We then discuss how family diversity is promoted and curtailed in the laws and family policies of the different welfare states. Of interest are those changes in gender regimes and policies that move beyond heteronormativity, biological reductionism, and ethnic homogeneity. Finally, based on the lessons learned from the comparisons of the countries, we make recommendations for new developments in research and family policies addressing the support of diversity.

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