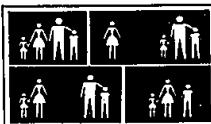


As society changes

Togetherness of family is fading

Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a series of articles exploring "American Families in Transition." In this article, historian Milton Coveny describes how a society in which most of us work in the service sector affects our family life.

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special writer



Families in Transition

WE ARE currently in the midst of a great transition. This shift from an industrial society to a post-industrial society has variously been called the second industrial revolution, the cybernetic revolution, the computer revolution or the information revolution.

Like the 19th-century industrial revolution that transformed the western world from an agricultural to an industrial society, this 20th century transition has had profound consequences for the family.

The family has increasingly become a center of consumption rather than of production, and it has been weakened as an institution in the process.

Prior to the first industrial revolution, most of the labor force in the United States was engaged in agriculture. A majority of family heads were farmers, and the family unit was oriented around agricultural production.

In the first half of the 20th century, with the triumph of industrial America,

while Nielsen estimates that children watch an average of almost 25 hours of television each week.

Further evidence of the consumption mentality is the American family's use of energy, which is higher per household unit than anywhere else in the world.

The service economy feeds and reinforces the family as a consumption center and vice versa. The supermarket is an institutionalized means of maximizing the food consumption of American families. Conversely, the need for "gratification now" promotes the proliferation of supermarkets, fast food chains, microwave ovens, frozen foods, and instant coffee, tea and soups.

The service economy also provides an apparatus of service agents such as consumer representatives and environmental protection surveillants, who ostensibly protect the interests of the family.

THE SPECTACULAR computer and electronics revolution advances the service economy and the family as a consumption center. The rise of instant credit, instant foods, instant news, instant TV movies, places an inordinate emphasis on the family's need to consume rather than to produce. The American family is, accordingly, more and more "now" oriented with a deep need to find quick, present gratification.

This tendency is also promoted by the search for models in the present rather than in past time. In earlier periods children could emulate their parents or grandparents as models. Today, they increasingly find their models among "ideals" who are present idols — rock stars, pop artists, current movie stars, pen pals, environmentalists and ephemeral "gurus."

Finally, the expansion of a service

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economy makes possible an enormous new flood of women into the independent labor force. The husband and wife who both have separate jobs, divorced women and widows working to support the family are now familiar on the American family and work scene.

The American family also has been transformed by urbanization. The rural landscape dominated American life until the late 19th century, but industrialization led to the dominance of the city and urban life. Since the 1950s, the expansion of metropolitan space in the form of the "suburbs" has been distinctive. Although there is some movement back to rural areas, it is estimated that by 1990, 90 percent of Americans will be living in either urban or suburban areas.

The city and urban transportation systems have vastly increased mobility among family members. The father and mother may travel miles to their

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respective jobs. Children may travel long distances to school, entertainment or friends.

DIFFERENT activities at different times among the various members of the family result in fewer opportunities for common meals, common sharing and participation. Moreover, the children increasingly move to other urban or suburban areas after college and employment, further loosening family ties.

Other things being equal, urbaniza-

tion is in conflict with primary family loyalties and ties of kinship. Urbanization tends to promote secondary or social contacts, for example, jobs, associations and clubs, rather than primary loyalties such as family or old-fashioned neighborhoods.

In the industrial and post-industrial phases of American society, numerous functions earlier assumed by the family have been absorbed by a variety of institutions. The pre-industrial family frequently had important educational functions, especially for girls.

These have been increasingly absorbed by the schools, which provide primary skills — reading, writing, and arithmetic — but also vocational education, education in the arts, sex education, and an increasing responsibility for the socialization of the child.

Similarly, religious functions earlier provided by the family have been taken over by the organized churches, which also encroach on recreational and counseling services, once the province of the family.

In addition, economic functions of the early American family have been taken over by a host of other institutions. For example, factories and machine production have displaced domestic production and relative self-sufficiency. The consumption sectors described above are another example.

THE NET RESULT is that the wide spectrum of functions once exercised by the early American family has been narrowed down to an extraordinary degree, leaving the family mainly to fulfill emotional and psychological needs.

The increasing secularization of modern life in industrial and post-industrial society poses a major threat to the contemporary family. It promotes both a loss of the sacred in the world and a loss of authority and authority figures.

In a sacred world there are holy



spaces, times, events, and persons that are inviolable and relatively immune from attack. In contemporary society it is becoming ever more difficult to find areas of the sacred. Marriage is no longer a sacred institution.

Families are decreasingly sacred figures to their children. The home is increasingly subject to terror, crime, and domestic disruption. Even the inviolability of the individual person as a human being with moral rights is under serious threat, as evidenced by meaningless muggings, rapes, and other violent attacks.

Meanwhile authority figures — the police and military, teachers and par-

ents are suffering a serious loss of their authority, both in image and in substance. A paramount problem for contemporary society is thus to provide a sense of authority and the sacredness of institutions, such as the family. This may need to be accomplished either within a religious framework, a humanistic framework that emphasizes the dignity and worth of all human beings, or both.

NEXT WEEK: Sociologist and author Philip Slater discusses "parental permissiveness" and the "me generation."

Most of the labor force is no longer employed in heavy industry but in such service sectors as government, hospital, banking, education and mass communication.

the industrial labor force exceeded the agricultural.

In the second half of the 20th century a further remarkable change has ensued. Only about 4 percent of the labor force is today engaged in agriculture. Even more startling, most of the labor force is no longer employed in heavy industry, such as automobile and steel production. Instead, the majority of workers are in service sectors, such as government, hospital, banking, education and mass communication.

THE CONSEQUENCES are momentous. In a service economy the family shifts more and more from a long-term production unit to a short-run consumption center.

Consumption and the consumer mentality become all important. Instead of producing a major part of its own entertainment, the family voraciously consumes entertainment provided by the mass media — television, movies, radio, mass newspapers and popular magazines. Much time is spent consuming sports events and popular music.

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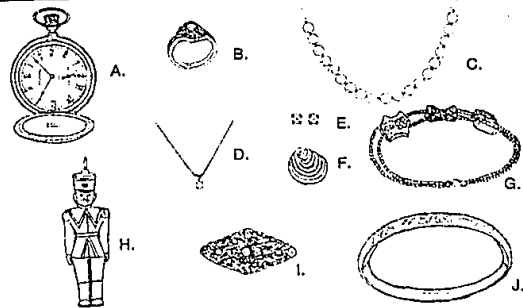
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