

CHAPTER THREE

Canadian Families in the Past: The Decline of the Patriarchal Family

Maureen Baker

INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century, European social theorists saw the growth of the nuclear family and the demise of patriarchal authority in the home as some of the consequences of industrialization, urbanization and modernization. The idea that family life was altered by **modernization** underpins much of sociological theory, as we saw in Chapter Two, but our discussion of Canadian families also needs to consider the effects of **colonization** and immigration.

When Europeans first settled in what is now Canada, the sanctity of family life was central to the colonial project. Family members as well as community, church, and state officials encouraged marriage and reproduction because they were seen as synonymous with social responsibility and nation building. Many people believed then (as they do today) that marriage and parenthood help individuals to mature socially, to develop strong relationships with relatives and neighbours, to work hard and retain permanent employment, to remain law-abiding, and to develop their local community and collectively, their nation. Yet, as we know, typical family practices, laws and ideal families have evolved substantially since the beginning of Canada's history.

To understand how and why families have changed over the years, we need to acknowledge the importance of socio-economic and political changes in the larger society, as well as changes in public attitudes. To make this chapter manageable, the focus will be on changing patterns of earning a living, courtship, marriage, and parenting among British and French settlers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To provide the necessary background, however, we need to begin with some of the family patterns in the eighteenth century, and to contrast British/French patterns with those of several First Nations tribes at the time of contact. We also need to mention some of the immigrant groups that settled later across Canada, although this will be discussed in Chapter Seven in more detail.

This chapter will show that conflicting models of family and gender roles were always present from the early days of European settlement, based largely on culture and social

class but also on the ways that people needed to live in order to subsist in a harsh land. We will see that family life constantly changes with evolving patterns of work, new technologies and policies, and current ideas about relationships and desirable lifestyles. The next section provides some background about family life in the early days of European exploration and colonial settlement, before outlining various indigenous and migrant family patterns.

EARLY EUROPEAN CONTACT AND SETTLEMENT

In the 1600s, French migrants settled in New France (which is now eastern Canada) and brought with them the French language, the Roman Catholic religion, and the French **civil code** that was used to govern the colony. However, British migrants also explored, traded and settled in some of the same territory, bringing the English language, mainly the Protestant religion and English common law. North America became one of the many sites of prolonged warfare between Britain and France over land and resources, including the furs, fish and timber they found in Canada. Both rivals created alliances with different tribes of indigenous people to further their commercial interests, to help them survive in the severe climate, and to claim and defend their separate colonies (Baker, 2001).

French family life varied from the British in a number of ways but noticeable differences were also evident among the people from different parts of Britain: the Scots, Irish, Welsh and English who sometimes differed in language, religion, class background and values. However, the family systems brought by early European migrants were monogamous, patriarchal and nuclear, which differed substantially from the kin-based extended families of many of the indigenous tribes who lived there at the time of European contact (Bradbury, 2005). Nevertheless, the early missionaries, state officials and educators from both European countries promoted their own models of family, and generally devalued the lifestyles and practices of the indigenous people.

In the early years of trading and settlement, the **sex ratio** among the European population was skewed, with a serious surplus of men. Many of these men viewed indigenous women as exotic but valuable partners, relying on their skills in procuring food, processing furs, and making clothing, snowshoes and canoes. Sexual relationships and intermarriage took place between French traders and indigenous women, sometimes forming relationships that lasted for life, but children born to these unions (called **Métis**) were not always accepted as equals in the colony of New France (Baker, 2001). European men were often attracted to the way sexuality seemed to be less restricted among indigenous women but the early missionaries tried to restrict sexual relations to marriage, and discouraged intermarriage between French and 'Indians.' Missionaries also criticised indigenous family practices, reacting to men's apparent lack of family power within some tribes, and attempted to reshape childrearing practices according to European ideals (Bradbury, 2005).

In the colonial outpost of New France, marriage was essential for the economic survival of both men and women, but it was also seen as a way of controlling the unruly

behaviour of single men or maintaining social control. Governors endeavoured to find ways to encourage these men to settle down and marry, including bringing wives from France. From 1663 to 1673, seven hundred poor and homeless young women were sent from France to become the wives of the single male settlers (*ibid*). Because the sex ratio continued to favour men, marriage rates for women in New France remained very high and girls were legally permitted to marry at the age of twelve, but young women typically married much older husbands. Premature death rates were high from wars, work-related accidents, poor sanitation and nutrition, and epidemics, while death rates were especially high for infants and women during childbirth. Consequently, marriages were often short-lived and spouses, especially men, typically remarried soon after their partner died (Dechêne, 1992: 254). The sparse population and lack of money meant that families needed to create their own labour force through reproduction in order to make a living from the land. In addition, birth rates were high because contraception was underdeveloped and morally unacceptable in this mainly Catholic and rural settlement.

The British colonies also contained a surplus of men who developed sexual liaisons and marriages with indigenous women and with women settlers from overseas. British officials from the church and state also discouraged inter-ethnic marriage, promoting legal marriage and reproduction only within marriage and among European couples, although birth rates were never as high as in French Canada. After British troops defeated the French in 1759 in Quebec City, the French were permitted to retain their language, civil law, education system and Catholic religion within the jurisdiction of Lower Canada (in what is now the province of Quebec). This agreement was reconfirmed with The British North America Act in 1867, and Canada was consequently established as a bicultural and bilingual nation with two cultures, languages and legal systems (Colombo, 1992: 72). As European settlement pushed west, the British cultural ideas and family laws came to dominate much of Canada (except Quebec), even after more culturally diverse settlers arrived.

Gendered and class-based ideas about families were transplanted from Britain and other European countries. However, in the harsh Canadian conditions, working class households depended on all adults to work hard and earn money for the entire household, and relied heavily on extended kin and neighbours in times of birth, accidents, death or unemployment. Despite the church's emphasis on Christian marriage, legal marriage rates were low and illegitimacy rates were high among early European settlers (Nett, 1981). Yet the upper and middle classes, especially in Upper and Lower Canada, retained the ideal of the male-breadwinner family. Wealthy wives were expected to engage in household management, '**conspicuous consumption**,' philanthropy, and 'accomplishments,' while their children attended boarding schools or were educated by private tutors. This suggests that social class differences were always apparent in patterns of Canadian family life in the past.

When European settlers first arrived in Canada, they encountered many tribes with different family systems and ways of life. The next section briefly outlines several tribal patterns and how they differed from European family models. It is impossible in this short chapter to cover the extent of variations so the focus is on three tribes with different family and social structures.

FAMILY PATTERNS OF THREE INDIGENOUS TRIBES

Like the Europeans, First Nations families were typically based on a division of labour by sex (Bradbury, 2005). War and hunting were typically men's work, while women were responsible for food cultivation and gathering as well as childcare. Women in some tribes held more political power than European women did at the time, but First Nations' women were generally excluded from public, formalized and symbolic areas of power (Prentice, 1988; Anderson, 1991).

The Huron People

One tribe with family practices quite different from the Europeans were the Huron people, who lived in **extended families** in villages organized by clan membership in what is now Ontario (Castellano, 1991). Descent was matrilineal or traced through the female line. The Huron lived in 'longhouses' that were communal homes divided into four or more pairs of compartments separated by a central passageway and serving as a common fire for heating and cooking. The occupants were the descendants of the senior woman, her unmarried sons and daughters, and her married daughters with their husbands and children. Relationships between mothers and daughters were typically strong, with **matrilocal** and **matrilineal** living arrangements, but mothers also held considerable power over their daughters after marriage (Anderson, 1991). Men's absence from the home during trading, hunting and war expeditions tended to reinforce mother/daughter relationships, and the women who remained in the village were responsible for the stability of agricultural crops and food trade. As men were highly mobile, patterns of residence and lineage that centred on women provided both economic security and family stability (Castellano, 1991).

At the time of European contact, Huron men and women were granted similar levels of sexual freedom. The clan acknowledged a personal commitment between couples, particularly when they produced a child, but each partner held the right to terminate the relationship. Divorce seldom occurred after a child was born as relatives helped deal with childcare and worked to resolve any marital problems. Although many activities were shared by Huron men and women, men more often hunted and engaged in warfare while women grew and gathered food, cared for the young (female) children, and maintained the home. Yet women enjoyed more respect and autonomy within their own communities than their white female contemporaries (Castellano, 1991: 9).

The Ojibway People

In contrast, the Ojibway people were migratory hunters and gatherers who usually lived in tents or 'wigwams' suitable for highly mobile nuclear families, except for seasonal economic and ceremonial exchanges when they gathered in family groups. Marriage was considered essential for both men and women because neither could survive economically without the other. Parents sometimes arranged marriages, but young married couples established separate households from their parents. Ojibway women held important economic roles in addition to cooking, sewing, and childcare, including weaving their fishing nets, constructing parts of their dwellings, tanning hides, and harvesting rice and maple sap.

Nevertheless, men's activities of hunter, warrior and shaman were given greater public recognition (ibid). For this reason, few males took on 'female' tasks but some females, especially if they were the only child in the family, were taught 'male' skills such as hunting, **shamanism** and warfare.

The Iroquois People

The Iroquois people lived in matrilineal kinship groups in bark and wood longhouses, containing compartments connected by a central aisle for individual families that shared several fires (Brown, 1988). Each longhouse was under the authority of a woman elder or matron. Marriages were typically arranged by mothers, although both marriage and divorce involved little ceremony. According to many sources, Iroquois women held even greater power than Huron or Ojibway within their families as well as in the larger economy, politics and religious ceremonies (Prentice et al., 1988). Iroquois society has been described as one of the few matriarchies because the power women could exercise at the time of contact superseded the roles granted to both European women and other First Nations tribes. Judith Brown (1988) argued that Iroquois women's strong position in politics, religion and domestic life could not be explained by their kinship structure but resulted from their control of the tribe's economic organization. Iroquois women controlled agricultural activities and production, including land, implements, seeds, and stored food. Through this economic control, they were also able to influence Council meetings, war parties, religious festivals, and household activities.

Indigenous People and the Consequences of Colonization

When treaties were signed between indigenous people and their colonial masters in the nineteenth century, the land allocated for 'reserves' was seldom adequate in size or resources to support their former lifestyles. Especially for those who were migratory hunters and gatherers, such as the Ojibway, the transition to a sedentary life was difficult. Yet Castellano (1991) argued that colonisation changed men's roles more than women's. Men, whose childhood socialization was directed to preparing them to be hunters, warriors and visionaries, saw their opportunities to use these skills shrink with urbanization, industrial development and environmental degradation. In contrast, women as farmers, gatherers, and homemakers retained more of their traditional lifestyles despite cultural change.

The livelihood and culture of the various tribes were undermined by European governance and advancing settlement. Not only did the tribes lose much of their land but the European legal system and culture by which they were governed varied considerably from their own. The Huron, for example, practised matrilineal descent but early Canadian family law was **patriarchal** and **patrilineal**, requiring '**status Indian**' women to take on their husband's ethnicity when they married non-Indians. This law, which was not changed until the 1980s, meant that children also lost their ethnic identity when their mother married outside the group (Nett, 1988: 95).

By the late nineteenth century, many indigenous people living in areas with European settlement were forced to acculturate to European-style life or became marginalized. Nomadic and indigenous parents living in remote areas were pressured to send their

children to distant residential schools, often run by religious orders that prohibited them from speaking their own languages or practising their culture (Bolt, 1993). Many of these children suffered from loneliness, abuse and loss of culture. Other indigenous families were better able to retain their culture and family practices because they lived in tight-knit cultural communities with little outside contact. Nevertheless, indigenous people gradually became a smaller percentage of the total Canadian population as European diseases shortened their lives and new immigrants flooded into the country.

RISING IMMIGRATION AND FAMILY VARIATIONS

In the early twentieth century, **immigration** increased in Canada, especially between 1901 and 1911 (Kalbach and McVey, 1979: 54). Some immigrants came as individuals, but most arrived as part of a **chain migration** involving groups of families and neighbours (Conrad, Finkel and Jaenan, 1993). For many migrants, the voyage was seen as a new and exciting venture, but some wives and children were involuntary or reluctant migrants, brought by male family heads with the legal right to decide where the rest of the family would live. In addition, abandoned or orphaned children were sent to Canada by British child welfare agents to live with foster families, receive on-the-job training, and provide farm labour for settlers, especially in Ontario and the Prairies.

Many immigrants to Canada were simply seeking a better life where they could earn a living and eventually build or buy their own home, but others were fleeing severe economic problems or political, religious and ethnic persecution in their homeland. Although immigration policies initially gave preference to immigrants from the British Isles and Northern Europe, the need for colonists and workers meant that migrants were also accepted from other countries. For example, Afro-Americans came north to Atlantic Canada and Ontario in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to escape the vestiges of slavery and became free citizens. Chinese men arrived in British Columbia and the Yukon to mine for gold, to work on the construction of the trans-Canada railway, and to earn enough money to support their families back in China.

Despite the growing multicultural nature of western Canada and the continued need for new workers, many British settlers became concerned about the ‘dangerous foreigners,’ especially those who were willing to work for low wages or others who joined trade unions and fought for better working conditions (Avery, 1979). Concern was especially expressed about the Chinese newcomers in British Columbia, who held non-Christian beliefs, spoke a ‘foreign’ language, and failed to integrate into colonial society. Although these migrants normally lived in extended families, they had come to Canada alone and were willing to work hard for low wages in order to send money home or eventually to bring their families to join them. British settlers, supported by trade unions, successfully petitioned the federal government to tighten immigration laws to curb the flow of these migrants. This came in the form of a **head tax** in 1884, which was high enough to prevent most Chinese men from bringing their families to Canada. Consequently, the 1921 census reported a ratio of sixteen Chinese males to one Chinese female (Bradbury, 2005).

The population of western Canada gradually became more diverse as Mennonites, Hutterites, Doukhobors, and Jews came from Central and Eastern Europe and Russia, and

settlers came from Germany, Holland, Scandinavia, and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire to join the British and French. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, migrants were lured to the Prairie Provinces by offers of jobs, free land and religious freedom, making this the most ethnically diverse region of Canada (Conrad, Finkel, and Jaenen, 1993). After the Second World War, Canadian immigration laws were gradually modified to enable more people from non-European backgrounds to enter Canada as immigrants and refugees (Bristow, 1994; Bradbury, 2005). Family re-unification became a major goal for those families torn apart by war and persecution (Conrad, Finkel, and Jaenen, 1993).

Most Anglo-Canadians remained convinced of the superiority of their own forms of marriage, family and child rearing. They often criticized the way that immigrant families lived in crowded quarters and relied on their children's earnings and translation services. Immigrant husbands were more likely than wives to find employment and hence to learn the English or French needed to negotiate daily life outside the limits of their community. These families often practised patriarchal authority patterns long after they were diminishing in the rest of English Canada (Comacchio, 1999).

As the cost of living increased after the Second World War, growing numbers of immigrant wives sought wage labour but usually found only poorly paid jobs. Some immigrants prospered and integrated into the larger society while retaining their cultural practices at home. Others were disappointed with the employment opportunities in their new land but worked hard at menial jobs to provide their children with a better life. The children of these immigrants were frequently torn between parental understandings of family relationships and those learned at school (Iacovetta, 1992). Nevertheless, extended families and the ethnic community often became havens for adult immigrants who faced hostility and criticism from the larger society.

The rest of this chapter will focus on typical family patterns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, we delve more deeply into gendered patterns of paid and unpaid work and how these were transformed by industrialization and urbanization.

FAMILIES AND GENDERED LABOUR

In the early days of European settlement, many colonial families lived in rural areas and villages, sustaining themselves through the **family economy**. This meant that all family members sharing the same household worked together in productive activities such as growing food, keeping farm animals, trapping or fishing, trading, or producing goods at home for sale. A few settlers in every community were landowners who lived in large homes financed with inherited money or business profits, and hired workers to help with production and domestic work. Nevertheless, the transformation from pre-industrial to industrial production throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gradually changed the way most people earned a living and divided their labour at home.

Industrialization and urbanization encouraged young people to leave rural areas and farm work to seek education and employment in the growing towns and cities. Mass production and urbanization reduced opportunities for others to continue working on the family farm or in cottage industries, eroding some rural communities. In particular, the new wage labour jobs lured people away from domestic service positions, which had

required them to live in their employer's home and work for little more than 'room and board' with virtually no leisure (Baker, 2007). Assembly-line production, with its emphasis on speed and efficiency, required different ways of organising time, placing greater emphasis on punctuality and the distinction between work and leisure.

Mass production eventually displaced some skilled craftsmen, as their products became more expensive for consumers to buy than factory-made goods. In addition, fewer factory owners wanted to hire expensive skilled workers, less dexterous workers, or those unwilling or unable to acquire new skills. Therefore, employers' groups lobbied governments for mandatory retirement programs to permit them to give preference to younger, more malleable and cheaper workers. At the same time, trade unions and social reformers pressured governments to restrict child labour, protect women employees from unhealthy working conditions, provide public education for children, and develop social programs to deal with higher levels of unemployment and a growing number of workplace injuries. They also wanted to ensure that retirement from paid work came with some guarantee of income security (Myles, 1989).

Both men and women from the working classes had always been expected to work throughout their lives and to contribute to the wellbeing of the entire household. With industrialization, more men and single women left home to become wage workers in factories or offices. In these jobs, single men usually earned less than married men, and women employees (who were usually single) were typically paid less than single men (until the 1950s and 1960s). Married men were sometimes paid a higher **family wage**, which was supposed to be high enough to cover the living costs of themselves, their wife and children. The family wage policy, supported by trade unions, legitimized the practice of paying women less than men. **Protective legislation** (initially fought for by women's groups and trade unions) excluded women from jobs or work shifts (such as midnight to dawn) that were considered dangerous to their health or safety but were also the most lucrative ones (Baker and Robson, 1981). Governments, employers and co-workers all expected women to resign from employment when they became engaged or married because they would soon become pregnant without reliable contraception and would be expected to devote their lives to childcare and homemaking. Also, it was assumed that men were more dependable and intelligent workers who had a greater social need for employment and higher earnings because they were (or would be) family breadwinners.

Working class wives always contributed to the household income, working long hours in family businesses, doing sewing or mending at home for pay, caring for other people's children, cleaning houses, taking in neighbours' laundry, cooking meals for farm labourers, and providing accommodation and meals for paying boarders. Much of this work was done at home or in the community while they supervised their young children and did the housework as well. In contrast, middle and upper class wives and mothers were encouraged to focus on managing the household servants, but these wives also engaged in artistic or literary pursuits, and performed volunteer work that enhanced the well-being of the community. In other words, most men and women, regardless of social class, contributed

to the maintenance of their households and communities, either through volunteer work, wages, housework, childcare, or household management or a combination of these.

The gendered division of labour within the home was based on the idea that men and women had different aptitudes and that the contributions of husbands and wives were complementary but equal. However, the husband legally represented the family to the larger society and acted as the **family head**. As we will see in the next section, this meant that the position of married women was not equal to men's in many respects. The husband had the legal right to decide where the family lived and to establish their standard of living. He controlled their joint property, retained guardianship rights to their children, voted on his wife's behalf, and had the right to sex with his wife at any time, even against her will (Dranoff, 1977; Baker, 2007).

CHANGES IN FAMILY LAW

Both the church and state historically viewed marriage as an economic and heterosexual partnership involving mutual dependency in the common endeavours of earning a living and raising children (Baker, 2001). Particularly in agrarian and cottage-based economies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, marriage was essential for economic and social survival. Christian beliefs and practices expected the community to help the church and the state to confirm that marriage partners were 'legitimate,' requiring partners to be legal adults, unmarried and not closely related, and insisting that they voluntarily enter marriage. Marriage contracts, unlike business contracts, were seen as sacred or blessed by God, and were expected to last until the death of one partner. As we will see in Chapter Eight, divorce was not feasible for many people until the 1960s, although a few partners walked away from unhappy marriages, had their marriages annulled or were legally separated, while others continued to live together with minimal levels of affection and contact. While many partners enjoyed their marriages and children, some merely expected their spouses to be willing and hardworking partners in subsistence and child-rearing.

Marriage laws in English Canada were derived from English common law, while the French civil code provided the basis for the development of family law in Quebec. Under both these legal systems, the husband and father retained authority over his wife and children, and wives had the legal status of minor children. Women did not acquire political or civil rights until the late nineteenth century or later in some provinces, as Table 3.1 indicates. As household heads, men represented the interests of their family to the larger community and were legally entitled to make major decisions such as where the family would live and at what living standard. Until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, husbands were legally entitled to control their wife's earnings and any property she inherited, to vote on her behalf, and to retain guardianship of any children resulting from the marriage. In 1918, women gained the right to vote in federal elections, but political rights were gained much later in some provinces. In Quebec, for instance, married women were not permitted to vote in provincial elections until 1940 or to become the legal guardians of their own children until 1964 (Baker, 2001: 183).

TABLE 3.1 Legal Changes Relating to Families in Canada

Date of Legal/Policy Change	Description of Change
1855 Mother's Right to Child Custody	Ontario was the first province to permit separated mothers to gain child custody under certain conditions
1871 Compulsory Education	Ontario was the first Canadian province to require parents to send their children to school until 16 years old
1872 Married Women's Property Act	Ontario was the first province to permit married women to control their own earnings and property during marriage
1884 Restrictions on Child Labour	Ontario first provided health and safety regulations and restrictions on the labour of women and children
1888 Support after separation	Ontario was the 1st province to require husbands to support their wife and children after desertion or separation
1893 Children's Protection Act	Ontario legislation permitting the Children's Aid Societies to remove abused and neglected children from their home
1917 Mothers as Legal Guardians	British Columbia was first province to give mothers equal rights with fathers to become legal guardians of children (not until 1964 in Quebec)
1920 Mothers/Widows Pensions	Developed around 1920 but date varies by province
1918 Female Suffrage	Women permitted to vote in federal elections but not in Quebec provincial elections until 1940
1925 Divorce Reform	The grounds for divorce were equalized for men and women
1940 Unemployment Insurance	Established as a federal social insurance program (Maternity benefits added in 1971, adoption benefits in 1984, parental benefits in 1990. Renamed Employment Insurance in 1996)
1945–93 Family Allowance	All mothers with children under 16 received a cash benefit (targeted to moderate and low-income families in 1993)
1966–96 Canada Assistance Plan	Federal-provincial cost sharing program for social assistance and social services; replaced by Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) in 1996
1968 Divorce Act	The grounds of divorce were liberalized
1969 Abortion, contraception & homosexuality legalized	Therapeutic abortions could be performed in hospitals Contraceptives could be advertised (but not 'the pill') Being a homosexual was no longer a criminal offence
2005	Same-sex couples given the right to marry

Sources: Compiled from many sources in Ward 1990, Ursel 1992.

In wedding ceremonies, brides promised to 'love, honour, and obey' their husband, while grooms promised to 'love, honour, and cherish' the bride (Baker, 2001: 186). Even until the 1960s, a Canadian husband had the right to establish the couple's legal residence

or **domicile** and the wife was expected to live where he wanted to live. If she refused to move, she could risk being charged with desertion and losing custody of her children. In return, the husband was expected to provide his wife with the ‘necessaries of life,’ even if they separated and lived apart. However, he had the right to decide what was necessary (Dranoff, 1977: 25). Furthermore, a wife was expected to maintain the household, care for the children, and be sexually available whenever he wanted.

In recognition of these services, a wife was entitled to **dower rights** or the right to one third of her husband’s property under common law, should the marriage dissolve. In Quebec civil law, the wife could retain the property brought into the marriage but her husband controlled it for her. In both forms of law, the husband and wife had distinct marital roles. These colonial laws treated women as legal minors but also disregarded children’s rights as well as the customs and laws of indigenous people (Baker, 2001: 183). As previously noted, some tribes practised arranged marriages, matrilineal descent, a less gendered division of labour, and were the guardians of tribal land rather than the owners of family property.

By the 1960s, growing dissatisfaction with the restrictions of life-long marriage encouraged more spouses to separate and apply for divorce. As we will see in Chapter Eight, the federal government eventually reformed the divorce law after a growing demand for less acrimonious and complicated divorce procedures, as well as concerns about poverty in mother-led families, but in the nineteenth century marriage was for life. In the next section, we examine courtship patterns leading to marriage.

COURTSHIP, LOVE, AND MARRIAGE

With long working hours and close parental supervision, young people in the nineteenth century had few opportunities to party or date widely before they married (Baker, 2007). Especially those who lived in remote or rural areas also had few opportunities to meet potential partners, and marriage rates were relatively low in 1901 compared to the 1970s (Kalbach and McVey, 1979). Young people usually met their partners through siblings and other relatives or at community dances, parties and other social functions. These activities were always heterosexual events where adult chaperones ensured that no “unseemly conduct” occurred.

In nineteenth century North America, courtship, love and marriage was heavily constrained by social, institutional and familial influences (Shorter, 1975; Ward, 1990). From the eighteenth century, young men increasingly took the initiative to find their own bride but were expected to ask for her father’s permission to **court** her, or gradually develop a relationship leading to marriage. The father, as well as other relatives, wanted to ensure that the suitor’s intentions were honourable, which meant that he sincerely intended to marry his daughter rather than just wanting a good time that would ruin her reputation. The father also expected some assurance that the intended fiancé would become a kind and faithful husband who could adequately support her (Ward, 1990).

Most young people lived with their parents and siblings until they married, paying room and board if they worked for wages or performing unpaid chores for the family if they were not employed. Those who lived apart from their parents for schooling or

work usually stayed with relatives or lived in boarding houses or supervised residences with little autonomy or privacy. Young people usually anticipated marriage because it was synonymous with maturity, adulthood, and more personal independence. Parents wanted their children to marry because they would no longer need to support them but also because a marriage partner could sometimes help the family out of debt or bring additional resources. Parents also wanted their children to marry a kind person who loved them, a steady worker, and a strong and healthy person who would bring grandchildren and contribute to their care in old age (Baker, 2007).

Men were typically permitted to date more widely than women, and if women accepted more than a few partners they could damage their future marriage prospects. Dating activities were usually relatively public and couple activities excluded any open displays of affection. However, we know that many unmarried couples engaged in illicit sexual activities from records of illegal abortions, illegitimate births, adoptions, **shot-gun marriages** and “premature” babies. Wealthier families especially valued premarital chastity for their daughters as they had more to lose in terms of reputation or family wealth if their daughter linked up with an unacceptable partner and was then forced by premarital pregnancy into a hasty marriage.

Few men in nineteenth century Canada could survive without a wife. Housework and meal preparation was time-consuming, especially before electricity and refrigeration, and both wage labourers and farmers worked long hours without paid holidays. For example, working hours were not regulated by government until the 1920s when employers were required to give full-time employees one day off per week in 1922 in Ontario and 1928 in Manitoba (Ursel, 1992: 336). Women were excluded from many paid jobs and daughters were less likely than sons to inherit family property, so securing a marital partner was particularly important for women. Even when women found wage work, they were seldom able to support themselves on their low wages. They needed a husband to earn most of the household money but also to provide them with legitimate children, which raised their status in the community.

When a man proposed marriage, and his girlfriend and her father agreed, the family typically enjoyed a celebration. After this, the couple could visit friends and relatives together, attend church as a couple, and spend more time alone in the parlour after her family went to bed (Ward, 1990: 112). Many men bought their fiancée an engagement ring made of gold or silver and sometimes with a precious stone symbolizing a public commitment to lifelong marriage. This engagement ring, or even the couple appearing together in the community on a regular basis, became public evidence of their contractual agreement that could not be easily broken without mutual consent. If she broke the engagement, she was expected to return the ring to him. If he changed his mind after the community assumed that they would marry or after her family had made costly wedding preparations, the bride-to-be could sue him for **breach of promise** under English common law and possibly receive a payment for damages at the jury’s discretion (Ward, 1990: 32). However, few jilted fiancées had the money to hire lawyers, and few former fiancés could afford to pay damages (Baker, 2007).

Formal engagements allowed couples more privacy and opportunities for intimacy but premarital pregnancy would lead to parental pressure to marry quickly before the relatives and neighbours noticed. If pregnant women were unable or unwilling to marry or to

have an (illegal) abortion, they usually left their community and gave birth surreptitiously. Private or church-run **maternity homes** assisted unmarried mothers through childbirth and quietly arranged an adoption. If the neighbours knew unmarried women were pregnant or single mothers actually tried to raise their babies alone, they would have brought shame upon themselves and disgraced their families.

Typically, couples could not marry unless they had sufficient resources to set up a separate household. Especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s, many engaged couples (who were not pregnant) were forced by economic circumstances to delay the wedding. Before social security programs or credit cards, young men with inadequate resources often had to ask their employers for higher wages or ask parents for a loan, gifts of household furnishings, or a temporary place to live in the parental home before they could get married. In some cases, parents objected to the match or pressed the couple to postpone the wedding until the man completed his education or saved more money. After all, the couple would have to depend on his earnings or family gifts.

Couples needed to save money for daily living expenses but also for future costs such as doctor's fees for normal childbirth, childbirth complications, accidents, illnesses or disabilities. Credit cards were not used until the 1970s and any credit given was at the personal discretion of the shopkeeper or doctor (Baker, 2007). Nevertheless, as the wedding date approached, engaged women were expected to leave their employment, regardless of how interesting or lucrative their jobs were. The **banns** or the official announcements of forthcoming marriages were read in church for three consecutive Sundays to ensure that no one knew of any reason why the marriage should not take place. This was largely to ensure against **bigamy** or marriage to more than one partner at a time. When the provincial governments became more involved in legalizing marriage, a licence was also required to ensure that marriage partners were appropriate from the viewpoint of the government, but most Canadian weddings continued to be legalized in places of worship (VIF, 2004).

A 'good' marriage for women meant one to a kind and considerate man from the same religious and ethnic group and same social class background (called **endogamy**), who worked hard and earned a steady income that was high enough to support her and their future children. For men, a suitable marriage meant one to an attractive and respectable woman with social skills, good health, childbearing potential, and valuable skills in home-making and money management (Baker, 2007). The higher the social class of the family, the more strict parents were about who their children married because the family's reputation and inheritance needed to be considered. Poor families were more likely to rely on their children's choices but to remind them that good health and willingness to work hard were important considerations in marriage partners.

During the Second World War, dating, premarital sex and abortion rates increased sharply when young people were away from parents and chaperones (ibid). Soldiers tended to take more risks with their partners, as life seemed so dangerous and short. Many couples married hastily before or during the war, which enabled them to live together when the man was on leave and to have sex without social disapproval. Wartime marriages also increased the social and economic security of brides and gave the grooms some hope of future domestic security (although many men were killed and never returned home). After the war, broken engagements as well as rates of separation, annulments, and

divorces increased when men returned home after years of absence, finding their partners were not the same people as they remembered (Mongomerie, 1999). Many women who had been engaged to men killed in the war remained permanently unmarried. After the war, governments were pressed to enhance income support for widows or unmarried mothers raising children alone.

By the later 1940s, dating without chaperones became widespread but this was replaced by strict gendered etiquette rules. For example, men were permitted to invite women to attend social functions but women could not directly ask men. Men normally provided the transportation and paid the expenses, while women were expected to remain appreciative, congenial and attentive companions. Both dressed in their best clothes for dating, tried to make a favourable impression on each other, and attended public social events. Without reliable birth control, the social and economic consequences of premarital sex were still considerable.

The rules of endogamy remained quite strict throughout the 1950s. For example, dating and engagements between Protestants and Catholics were frowned upon but parents and friends typically refused to accept interracial, inter-cultural, or inter-faith liaisons. Most people still attended regular religious services and church leaders encouraged high moral values, heterosexuality, endogamous marriage, two-parent families, marital reproduction, and complementary marriage roles. In addition, parents, school teachers and clergy maintained strict authority over the behaviour of children and youth in the early years of the twentieth century.

PARENTING AND CHILDHOOD IN THE PAST

In the nineteenth century, parenting experiences differed considerably by gender, age, social class and culture, just as they do today. However, experiences were particularly influenced by assumptions of heterosexuality, social expectations of parenthood, unreliable contraception, lack of public childcare services, and the permanence of marriage. Relatives and neighbours pitied childless couples, who were seen as immature or sexually inadequate (May, 1995), but childless married women were discouraged from accepting full-time employment. Instead, they were pressured to become housewives although some helped to run family businesses while others worked at artistic pursuits, voluntary work or temporary jobs. Men and women who did not want to become parents could avoid marriage, but single adults (even those who covertly might have preferred same-sex relationships) were continually pressured to find a heterosexual partner and ‘start a family’ unless they were ill or disabled, or joined a religious order that promoted celibacy. Single women were pressed to help care for aging parents or their sibling’s children, and sometimes lived with relatives with few employment options and little personal autonomy or social status. Some unmarried sons remained on the family farm to assist their frail fathers and consequently found few opportunities to meet a potential wife and become a married father.

When couples married, it was assumed that they would reproduce. Women were encouraged by their families and state officials to view childbearing and child-rearing as their major purpose in life. Having sex outside marriage was risky for women, but using contraception within marriage implied a rejection of the prevalent idea that the purpose

of marriage was procreation. Without reliable birth control, wives spent much of their premenopausal years in pregnancy, lactation and miscarriage unless couples used some form of contraception or abstained from sexual intercourse. Contraception has been available for hundreds of years, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was unreliable and socially unacceptable to use.

Marriages that were not consummated (through sexual intercourse) could be annulled, but most husbands expected their **conjugal rights**. Husbands were exempt from the crime of rape, which implied that married men had the right to have sex with their wives at any time, with or without their wives' consent. Wives were not expected to enjoy sex but rather to view it as a wifely duty. Sexual activity between same-sex partners was against the law, as were some heterosexual acts that did not lead to reproduction. Men were urged to continue the family line and eventually to become the ultimate disciplinarian of the children.

Many wives produced a child within the first year of marriage and most had their babies at home with few medical interventions, although they were assisted by relatives, neighbours, midwives or doctors. As we can see in old cemeteries, many women died at young ages, often from childbirth complications, and many children died from infectious diseases. Although most married couples produced children, the birth rate gradually declined with industrialization and urbanization, although it later surged from the 1940s to the 1960s (during the post-war baby boom) before declining sharply, as we noted in Chapter One.

The benefits of large families diminished as more people lived in towns and cities and when compulsory education laws prevented parents from withdrawing children from school to help support the family. As infant mortality rates fell with improved living standards, couples began producing fewer children because more were expected to reach maturity (Chesnais, 1992). After income security programs were developed, parents were less likely to see children as "old age insurance" and fertility decline accelerated from the rising cost of raising children in urban areas. When birth control became more reliable in the 1960s and the cost of living increased, more married women entered paid work, which made having more than two children even more costly in terms of lost income, time and childcare costs.

Households in the nineteenth century contained more children than today but also more relatives, servants and paying boarders. Working class wives sometimes took in paying boarders to supplement their husbands' earnings and to help meet household expenses. Pregnant women asked female relatives to stay with them to help with birth preparations, childbirth and housework, or to manage the household when the wife/mother was "confined" to her bed during childbirth and recovery. Although infant and maternal death rates were high for everyone, working class mothers and babies were at greater risk with poor living conditions, diet and health care (Baker, 2007).

Changing Patterns of Childhood

Young children raised in working class households were soon expected to contribute to the family economy by minding younger siblings, helping around the home, and when they grew older, contributing their wages to the entire household. In the nineteenth century,

children from very poor families sometimes worked in dangerous jobs such as factory workers and chimney sweeps, until laws were enacted to abolish child labour and require compulsory education. However, even after these laws were developed, low-income parents often withdrew their children from school for short periods when they needed their labour, or permanently if they could obtain permission from education authorities after the child turned 14 years old (Gaffield, 1990).

In low-income households, childhood and especially adolescence was not much different from adult life in the nineteenth century. However, middle-class families could usually afford to hire servants to help with housework and childcare, as the cost of labour was relatively low compared to today. Wives retained responsibility for hiring and disciplining the servants, planning the meals and household furnishings, supervising the children, and caring for their husband. Middle class parents sent their children to schools to learn to read and write but also to learn the value of hard work, discipline, sportsmanship, religious values and obedience.

In contrast, wealthy parents could afford to pamper their children, to allow them to play, and to idealise them as symbols of innocence because they did not need their labour or income (Coveney, 1982: 45). These parents were only partially engaged in the daily care and supervision of their children, as 'wet nurses' breast fed babies, and nannies and other servants catered to their physical and emotional needs. Wealthy parents also hired special tutors to educate their children until they were sent to school. While boys sometimes attended same-sex residential schools where they could develop friendships with other wealthy boys that might prove useful later in life, girls were more often educated at home by nannies and tutors. During the daytime, rich parents pursued their own occupations and interests, seeing their children for short periods each day or during school holidays. At night, their children were cared for by nurses or nannies at home or by school employees if they boarded at a residential school. While some people today believe that young children 'need their moms' during the daytime, they forget that many children from wealthy families were raised largely by servants and teachers in the past. However, some of the nannies stayed with the family for years and even continued working for the family for more than one generation (Baker, 2007).

In the nineteenth century, children were expected to be 'seen but not heard,' to obey their elders and to abide by parental rules without question. Adults learned to parent from their own family with some assistance from doctors, religious leaders and teachers. British parents were discouraged from praising their children too much or allowing them to express their own views, while physical punishment was used to discipline children at home and school. Neither the church nor state offered much protection to children or granted them legal rights because they were considered to be the property of their parents. Teenage boys often had their schooling and even their future profession decided by their father. Wealthy fathers might have sent their sons to university in a nearby city or even to England, with little consultation about the youth's own educational or occupational plans. Over the years, however, young people were gradually given more opportunities to voice their personal preferences for education and work. By the twentieth century, values had shifted from emphasizing children's economic utility to the family to focusing on love, companionship, and enjoyment (Cameron, 1997).

In the 1920s, high rates of **infant mortality** and maternal death in the colonies led to considerable debate about the causes and solutions. (Male) professionals expressed their opinions that most mothers lacked knowledge about sanitation, nutrition and childcare, and strongly criticised the worldly ambitions of the 'new woman' who desired education and paid work, suggesting that these ambitions would lead to the deterioration of family life (Strong-Boag, 1982: 161; May, 1997). Doctors and government health officials produced written advice about child-rearing, promoting bottle-feeding and 'scientific' infant formula (Baker, 2001). Governments also established special clinics for expectant mothers and babies as part of a campaign to reduce infant mortality and to improve baby care. However, fathers were not expected to be involved in the physical parenting of infants but were urged to understand their wife's responsibilities and provide economic support to the family. Strict scheduling was recommended for infant and childcare.

By the late 1940s, doctors were encouraging a more permissive approach to parenting and advising mothers to trust their 'common sense' and enjoy their babies while providing constant care and stimulation. Throughout the 1950s, women's magazines celebrated **maternalism** and homemaking, while later ideas about infant and childcare became even more flexible, as we will read in Chapter Five. Throughout the 1960s, educational opportunities expanded for children and especially female and working class youth. By the 1970s, more married women were drawn into paid work but without a system of public childcare services, many mothers felt guilty about leaving their children with relatives, neighbours or sitters. Social reformers challenged the gendered division of labour both at home and in paid work, lobbying for public childcare and encouraging husbands to become more involved in childbirth, housework and child-rearing (Benoit et al., 2002).

Children's economic contributions to families and their potential to support parents in old age became less important with urbanization, with compulsory education and the development of old age pensions. Redefinitions of motherhood also influenced how children were valued, particularly the new maternal ideologies that focused on the mother's natural duty to support the health and wellbeing of the child and to raise 'quality' children. The value of children was further enhanced by government programs that focused on children's welfare and rights rather than just their discipline and education. The economic utility of children has now been replaced with the government ideology that children are a form of **social capital** and an investment in the future of the nation (Cameron, 1997: 109; Jenson, 2004). As reproduction becomes more voluntary for couples, children remain sources of personal pleasure and exasperation but also symbols of their parents' status.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief overview of former patterns in Canadian families illustrates that there were always many variations in structure and practices in the past, influenced particularly by ethnicity and social class. While some new settlers enhanced their personal or family circumstances by migrating to colonial Canada, others suffered when they were separated from friends and relatives and struggled to survive as immigrants in the isolated and harsh conditions. Especially for the working classes, many marriages were dissolved through

premature death and desertion, numerous children died in infancy or youth, and previously romantic relationships were eroded and made mundane by the sheer struggle to earn a living. Many migrants yearned for their homeland and struggled to pass on their cultural practices to their children, although other migrants found more personal freedom and economic prosperity in Canada.

In the early days of colonial Canada, family members were disciplined by strict ideas of normal behaviour perpetuated by the church, state, school system and parents. Neighbours and relatives helped maintain acceptable practices through public reprimands, gossip and shunning people who violated social rules. Church officials, truant officers, social workers and police officers visited families whose members misbehaved and tried to persuade them to follow the social rules, while community members as well as parents disciplined children who stepped out of line. However, private ideas about family and gendered behaviour were also negotiated behind closed doors. Some people refused to attend church, quietly lived with same-sex partners, avoided marriage or opposed social conventions in other ways, but they did not always publicly voice their anti-social views. Instead, many lived secret private lives that quietly violated the prevalent understandings about family life.

In the nineteenth century compared to today, however, fewer choices were available about any aspect of life, with rigid and hierarchical behavioural rules at home, school and work. Even if individuals or couples personally disagreed with these rules, few could afford to contravene them, either socially or financially (Baker, 2007). Many people were reliant on the good will of their parents and neighbours, and were less able to move away and create a different kind of life than their parents had experienced. Throughout the twentieth century, people's lives were transformed by the expansion of higher education, greater levels of social mobility, the development of social security programs, the availability of credit, and new ideas about human rights and personal entitlements. In some ways, these social changes have created less reliance on parental authority and community standards, although some traditional family practices and pressures still remain.

Suggested Readings

- Castellano, Marlene Brant. 1991. "Women in Iroquois and Ojibway Societies," *Transition* 21 (4): 6–10. This article provides a brief but informative introduction to gender in two indigenous societies.
- Nett, Emily (1988). "Canadian Families in Social-Historical Perspective," In *Family Bonds and Gender Divisions: Readings in the Sociology of the Family*. Edited by Bonnie Fox. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press: 125–153. This chapter provides a well-researched view of the history of Canadian families written by a sociologist.
- Parr, Joy (editor). 1982. *Childhood and Family in Canadian History*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart. This edited social history collection discusses the lives of children and other family members from the seventeenth century onward.
- Ward, Peter (1990). *Courtship, Love, and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada*. Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. This social history book provides a wealth of details about relationships in the past.

Web Resources



The Canadian Archives provide a wealth of material on many aspects of Canadian history:
www.collectionscanada.gc.ca.

The Global Gazette. Canada's Family History Magazine. This is particularly useful for students seeking to explore their family roots: **www.globalgazette.net.**