

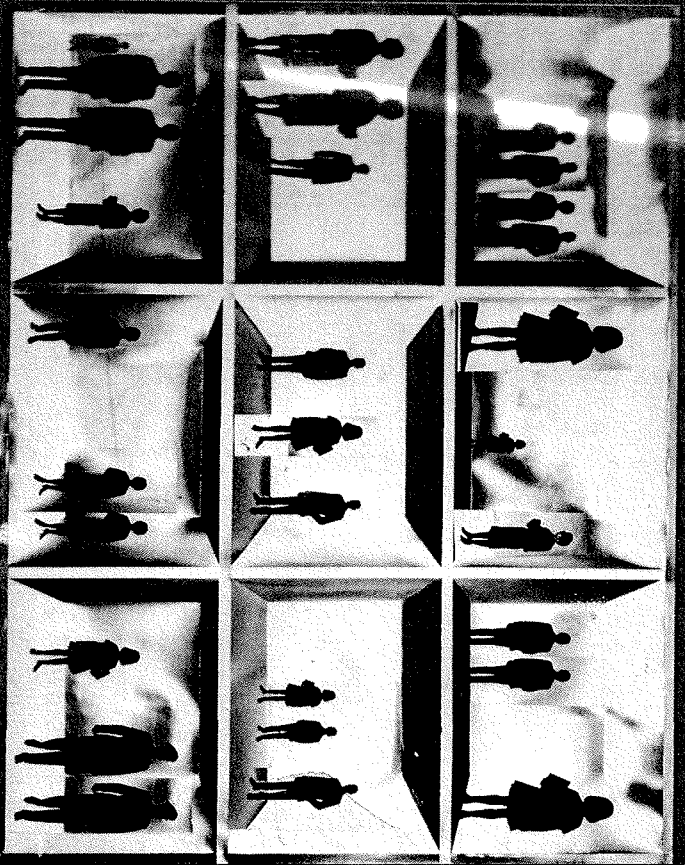
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The Family and Alternate Life Styles

Nelson
Hall
1987

The Family and Alternate Life Styles

Nick Stinnett
Craig Wayne Birdsong



The Family

and Alternate Life Styles

Nick Stinnett
Craig Wayne Birdsong

This important work is the result of extensive studies dealing with six alternatives to traditional marriage: cohabitation, communes, swinging, group marriage, extramarital affairs, and one-parent families.

Forms of associations and relations between men and women that were once subject to public censure are now often hailed as the beginning of a new society of human emancipation and fulfillment. Why are we currently witnessing an explosion in alternate life styles? Is the family really dying? What do participants see as the benefits and advantages of these alternate life styles? What are the major problems experienced in these life styles?

Concerned with these questions, Nick Stinnett and Craig W. Birdsong examine some of the more popular and significant developments in the search for commitment and stability. It is the authors' belief that, through alternatives to marriage, people are largely searching for more intimate relationships and an extended family experience. Many of those who have opted for alternate life styles are trying to escape the loneliness,

(continued on the back flap)

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restrictiveness, hypocrisy, and materialism that they see in the Establishment.

The authors explore at length the circumstances and, as much as possible, the "results" of the various social experiments mentioned above, with extramarital affairs heading the list of alternatives to conventional marriage (although it is not usually thought of in this way). The authors remind us that like death and taxes, such affairs will always be with us, whether or not looked at by the prying eyes of social scientists.

Then, the more exotic and, until now, verboten life styles are examined. In the process, many popular myths are exploded; i.e., people living in communes do not spend 50 percent of their time engaging in group sex. And practical matters are considered, too; Stinnett and Birdsong ask the question (as many commune members have) "If everyone is doing his or her own thing, who is doing the dishes?"

On a more serious note, the authors do not fail to remind us that the fundamental question behind all of these experiments is "Can we as a people and as individuals survive the mad scrambling for a piece of the emotional rock which is becoming all the more illusive? In short, to paraphrase Freud, what do women (and men) want?"

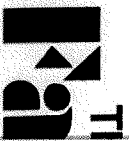
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Printed in the USA

Jacket design: Willis Proudfoot/Robert Amft



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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Stinnett, Nick

The family and alternate life styles.

Includes index.

I. Family. 2. Marriage. 3. Unmarried couples. 4. Group sex. 5. Collective

Settlements. I. Birdsong, Craig Wayne, joint

Author. II. Stinnett, Nancy M., joint author.

III. Title.

HQ735.S553 301.42

77-16593

ISBN 0-89229-208-0

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Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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fronted with a bewildering multiplicity of options, who wish to make sensible decisions in critical areas of their lives.

Living in an open, rapidly changing culture is never dull, and is often exciting. But it lays upon us heavy responsibilities and the constant need to make difficult decisions that may have far-reaching effects for ourselves and for other people. At such a time we need greatly the guidance of wise and objective authorities, not to tell us what to do, but to enable us to identify and evaluate the options that present themselves. In writing this book, Nick Stinnett, a well-qualified family specialist, has shown himself to be a dependable guide. Many will be grateful for the clear and steady light he and his associates have projected on some very confusing and controversial questions that concern us all.

David R. Mace

Professor of Family Sociology
Wake Forest University
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1 emerging alternatives

*A Revolution?
Why the Life-Style Explosion?
The Changing Family
The Market of Life Styles*

A Revolution?

Some call the new life styles a revolution. Others say they are a fad and will soon wane. It is a fact that life styles that depart sharply from traditional patterns of living have recently emerged upon the American scene.

In every generation there are those who feel compelled to separate themselves from the traditional, accepted ways of living. They wish to see for themselves what it takes to survive. They want to discover if their dreams of utopia can be realized through an alternate way of living. More than ever people today are free to choose from several different life styles; and thousands of people have left the mainstream of society to pursue life styles that were previously taboo.

Most of the publicity and controversy has raged over five alternative life-style developments:

- Two unmarried people living together is the living arrangement for a growing number of men and women on many college campuses and in many single apartment dwellings; an increasing number of senior citizens are also adopting this life style.

- Thousands of people of all ages are joining communes. An estimated 3,000 communes exist throughout the United States.

- Husbands and wives who are interested in swinging advertise in magazines and visit bars to recruit other couples to this life style.

- Group marriage has emerged since the middle 1960s and has become popularized through such novels as *The Harard Experiment* by Robert Rimmer and *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein.

● Extramarital affairs are major themes in movies, television, and popular magazine articles. More important, extramarital affairs are increasingly portrayed in a positive manner by the media.

All these life styles are chosen voluntarily. Another alternative life style that is not as controversial—and is not as often voluntarily chosen—is that of the one-parent family. It is nonetheless a significant form of family life. A growing number of children, about 1 in 6, are now being reared by one parent.

While the percentage of the total population that adopts such nontraditional styles is small, the number of persons choosing them has dramatically increased during the last ten years. Also important is the greater acceptance of these alternate life styles, which represents a potential revolutionary movement in America.

In simplest terms, a life style is a way of looking at life. It consists of the principles, values, and habits that guide one's daily decisions and organize one's life. The selection of a life style is a serious decision; it strongly shapes and influences lives in the present and in the future.

What are the effects of such life styles as communal living, group marriage, cohabitation, extramarital affairs, swinging, and one-parent families? How does adoption of these alternate life styles influence one's life? Do such life styles bring people closer together or cause alienation? Are the participants' emotional needs satisfied or thwarted? Do alternate life styles offer ways to improve the quality of traditional marriage and family living?

The people involved in or studying alternate life styles today have only sketchy answers to these questions. There are few guidelines and little accurate information for persons who are participating or considering participation in an alternate life style to rely on. Many people—perhaps the majority—make their decisions to adopt or reject an alternate life style primarily on the basis of propaganda either pro or con, or because of what their friends do.

A sound foundation for viewing nontraditional life

styles and for responding to some of the unanswered questions about them is needed. In order to achieve this, many research studies dealing with communal living, group marriage, cohabitation, extramarital affairs, swinging, and one-parent families have been examined. This book is the result of that research.

Why the Life-Style Explosion?

One of the first questions that arises is "Why are we witnessing an explosion in alternate life styles?" Many persons experiment with different life styles because of dissatisfaction with traditional patterns of living. Several conditions in society contribute to this dissatisfaction.

Tendency to View People as Things

Psychiatrist Erich Fromm has noted that people too often view others as things to be used. Many people exploit others for what they can do for them.

According to Fromm, this tendency to view people as things is a result of our emphasis on economic productivity.¹ If a business is productive and competitive, it survives and is rewarded with profit, influence, and expansion. This is great from a business point of view, but it frequently has some unfortunate implications for the individual and for the relationship of one person to another.

Individuals within a business organization are also judged in terms of their productivity. If one is productive and competent, one is rewarded with a promotion and an increase in salary. The business organization, partly due to necessity, views the individual in terms of what he or she can do for the organization. It is at this point that a person is transformed into an object.

Most people are conditioned to this type of orientation in the working world. Quite naturally much importance is placed on a person's occupation, success, productivity, salary, and prestige. In the process, the individual is often diminished. When this happens people interact with each other on a superficial level that is frustrating to their need for

meaningful relationships, as shown in the following example:

Mrs. Raburn has been married for four years. She is dissatisfied and disappointed with her marriage. She and her husband, John, were married shortly after graduating from high school. The major reason she had been attracted to John was that he was a "good catch." He was a football hero and president of the student council. His popularity with the girls made dating him and marrying him like winning a coveted prize in the midst of intense competition. It gave her a sense of esteem and prestige. She married John primarily because she saw him as a "good thing," rather than because she loved or liked him. She had very little understanding of him as a person. They shared few interests. After marriage, it was financially impossible for either of them to go to college. John was forced to take a modest-paying job. In the following four years, he had received only small raises and one promotion. One of Mrs. Raburn's major sources of dissatisfaction is that John no longer feeds her ego needs in the manner that she desires. He no longer is the football hero and most eligible bachelor. As she sees it, he simply has a modest, dull job that does nothing for her ego. Over the years John has become aware of her feelings, and he experiences depression and disappointment himself because he realizes that she has never really understood him as a person but has used him as a thing to meet her own needs.

This example shows one of the ways in which viewing people as things creates an insidious condition. There is manipulation and exploitation, the tendency to regard relationships with others primarily in terms of the benefits they offer.

An increasing number of people, young and old, are rejecting this tendency to view people as objects to be exploited and manipulated. They are saying, in effect, "There is something wrong with this way of living. We reject a system that forces us to be this way. We will adopt a way of life that enables us to interact with each other as real people." An individual may or may not find less exploitation of people in a particular life style, but this is nevertheless

one major reason for experimenting with an alternate life style.

The Fast Pace of a Technological Society

As society has become more industrialized, emphasis has been placed not only on productivity but on rapid productivity. People are pressured to do many things quickly, as this example shows:

Mr. Sands, a typical middle-class professional, gets up at 6:00 A.M. After shaving and dressing, he hurriedly drinks coffee and eats a doughnut for breakfast. He then dashes to work. After work he battles the rush hour traffic to get home as fast as possible. If he is lucky, he can make it in an hour. In a flurry of activity, he and his wife dress, pick up the babysitter, and leave for a dinner party. After dinner they quickly excuse themselves so that Mr. Sands can hurriedly review the report he must present to the Board of Directors tomorrow. By the time he goes to bed at 1:30 A.M., his wife and child have been asleep for two hours, and he has spent no real visiting time with either of them.

Day after day millions of persons experience this type of rushed schedule. Charles Reich observed in *The Greening of America* that many professionals today are dissatisfied with their careers because of the competitive rat race they must endure. Although the professional may earn many rewards of society, he or she may be far too busy to enjoy them. Reich stated: "And on top of these job dissatisfactions may come the acute personal misery of finding that his children are alienated from him, and perhaps his wife also, so that the joys of home life dissolve in bitterness and his work has become an end in itself."²

Greater Diversity

The United States is evolving toward an ever-increasing diversity in material goods, art, education, and culture. People constantly must choose between different brands, different types of homes, different restaurants, and different schools. We are moving toward a condition of "over-

"choice," as described by Alvin Toffler in his book *Future Shock*:

Philip Morris, for example, sold a single major brand of cigarettes for twenty-one years. Since 1954, by contrast, it has introduced six new brands and so many options with respect to size, filter and menthol that the smoker now has a choice among sixteen different variations. This fact would be trivial, were it not duplicated in virtually every major product field. Gasoline? Until a few years ago, the American motorist took his pick of either "regular" or "premium." Today he drives up to a Conoco pump and is asked to choose among eight different blends and mixes. Groceries? Between 1950 and 1963 the number of different soaps and detergents on the American grocery shelf increased from sixty-five to 200; frozen goods from 121 to 350; baking mixes and flour from eighty-four to 200. Even the variety of pet foods increased from fifty-eight to eighty-one.³

The endless range of options concerning consumer products, education, and recreation has also been accompanied by an increased range of choice concerning life styles. The diversified society in which we live is conducive to the emergence of various alternative life styles.

An Increasingly Permissive Society

As the United States has become more industrialized and urban, an increasingly permissive attitude concerning behavior that differs from the norm has emerged. For example, much less stigma is now attached to divorce than in the past, and there is now a far more permissive attitude concerning sexual behavior.

A national attitude of "do your own thing" prevails, and many people feel pressure from their peer groups to adopt behavior and attitudes that differ from the Establishment. The increasingly permissive atmosphere and the emergence of "do your own thing" philosophy contribute to an environment that is conducive to the emergence of alternate life styles. People feel freer today to experiment with different ways of living. For some the experimentation is simply a

passing fad. For others it represents a sincere, determined decision to adopt a new life style.

Emergence of a New Life Orientation

In his controversial book, *The Greening of America*, Charles Reich emphasized that a new life orientation has emerged in the United States. He calls this life orientation Consciousness III. While supposedly expressed primarily among the younger generation, it is not restricted to any age group.

According to Reich this new life orientation is a reaction to the emptiness, alienation, and artificiality that many people experience as a result of living in a technology-controlled, competitive society. There is an increased awareness that people who spend all of their energies pursuing position, money, and power ignore other goals that are vital to their personal growth and fulfillment. Spiritual meditation and work done purely for enjoyment rather than for money are examples of such neglected goals. As one midwestern man commented:

Yes, there are several important things in life that I miss out on. I consider myself a religious person, and I would like to spend a lot more time in meditation and reading the Bible and inspirational books. I would like to play with my kids more. They really don't get enough attention from me. I've always wanted to take up landscape painting. But I don't get around to doing these things. By the time I get in from work, run a few errands, and eat dinner, I don't feel like doing anything except watching the news on television and going to bed.

Consciousness III comes into one's personal experience the moment he realizes he can reject the goals and life styles that society imposes. Consciousness III means that an individual can begin anew and establish a life style that offers a greater chance of happiness. This is not a new idea, only a new awareness, as our country was founded in part on this principle.

It is not possible to say that most of the younger

Generation possess a Consciousness III orientation. Nor can anyone estimate the proportion of the population that has internalized this outlook. Furthermore, people who share the Consciousness III outlook are not any more perfect than others. They have just as many shortcomings and hang-ups as persons with more traditional views. There are indications, however, that Consciousness III is being felt enough to merit an attempt to analyze and understand it.

What we are talking about is an idealized consciousness. There are, according to Reich, four important characteristics of the Consciousness III outlook toward life.

First, the individual, rather than society or public interest, is considered to be most important. It is considered a crime to allow oneself to be used primarily as a means to achieving a goal for an organization. The absolute worth of every person is emphasized.

Next, competition and the tendency to judge others according to the concepts of excellence, comparative merit, and traditional roles are rejected. The tendency to stereotype people is shunned. Uniqueness is valued.

A third characteristic is the great emphasis on how one feels in a relationship. To feel a sense of duty toward another person after close, loving feelings are gone is not considered a virtue.

Finally, there is a rejection of any imposed system of living. There is instead an openness to any and all living experiences.

Consciousness III may create problems rather than improve society. It is too early to know. The most important aspect of Consciousness III, is that it contributes to an atmosphere that encourages the emergence and acceptance of alternate life styles.

Greater Individualism and Alienation

Fromm stated that the greatest need any of us has is the need to overcome feelings of separateness, to achieve a sense of union and relatedness with others. This is quite difficult in our highly urban and mobile society.

Families move frequently to different geographic locations to take advantage of better job opportunities. This means leaving behind relatives and old friends. There is little emphasis on a group identity even within the family. Increasingly, husbands and wives follow separate careers, and the children are involved in their own activities, so there is little activity as a family unit.

Two-thirds of the population now live in metropolitan areas. With metropolitan living comes anonymity, an advantage because it provides more privacy but a disadvantage because it gives a feeling of being alienated from others. Mr. Williams, a middle-class executive, expressed his sense of alienation:

You know, I am with people during practically all of my waking hours, on the subway, at work and at home. Yet I feel alone. Everyone is so busy pursuing his own goals that no one takes time to get to know anyone else. This is true at work. No one there would feel any grief or loss if I were run over by a truck. I'd be replaced in a day or two, and no one would even notice the difference.

Disillusionment with Traditional Marriage and Family

Most people count a happy marriage and family life as one of their important dreams. Much is expected of marriage and the family. Yet thousands of individuals fail in this area.⁴

Several changes in the American family have caused some persons to become disillusioned with traditional marriage and family life. Research indicates that the youth who are most in favor of alternate life styles are those who have experienced negative parent-child relationships.⁴ More persons are turning to alternate life styles in an attempt to find the close relationships that they have not found in their own families. As one commune member in Washington, D. C. stated:

Most of the people in our commune came from upper middle-class families. But we didn't have much of a family life. Our parents were too busy to spend any time with each other or with us. In fact we were too busy to

spend much time with them. In a sense what we are trying to do now is to establish the type of family experience we never had. We have structured our lives so that we can spend plenty of time together.

The family offers tremendous opportunities for achieving fulfilling human relationships. Yet, many people are frustrated and disappointed with their family life. At this point there is merit in examining what has happened to the family to cause the growing dissatisfaction with it and the subsequent appeal of alternative ways of living.

The Changing Family

The American family has undergone tremendous changes in the last 200 years. An awareness of these changes can give us a better understanding of the emerging alternate life styles movement.

There was a time in the United States when the family provided its own protective services, was an economic producer rather than strictly a consumer, was the center for play and recreation, and provided much of the education that children received.

The Transfer of Major Functions from the Family

The scene is a suburban home immediately after dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Shannon have gone out for the evening, leaving their two children, Jackie and Mike, with a special babysitter—their grandfather. Jackie and Mike are spellbound as they sit next to the fireplace listening to their grandfather, who is their favorite storyteller. They are transported into another world as he tells them about his boyhood on an Alabama farm. They have heard the story before, but they want him to describe again how his father taught him to shoe horses, how the family made molasses, and what it was like when the whole family picked cotton and the times when they went to the cotton gin. They also want to hear about husking bees and horseshoe contests and other events the family participated in together.

Today many of these activities and functions have been transferred from the family to other institutions. As a result

family members are less dependent on each other in these respects.

Previously the family was held together primarily by tangible utilitarian and materialistic bonds. Today it is held together by intangible psychological qualities of love, happiness, and fulfillment of basic emotional needs.⁵

Psychological bonds are extremely strong and important, but they are also less dependable as a means of holding together the family than were the utilitarian and materialistic bonds. When family stability depends mainly on psychological bonds, a greater degree of individual maturity is needed with respect to meeting the psychological needs of a mate and also with respect to realistic expectations concerning the fulfillment of one's own needs.

It also happens that, in some families, no important functions replace the utilitarian functions that have been transferred to other institutions. Family members frequently even depend primarily upon outside sources for meeting their psychological and emotional needs. They may do very little together, and their relationships with each other gradually lose meaning and feeling. When family life appears to have no clear function, fertile soil is provided for family instability and greater attraction to other life styles.

Fragmented Family Life

Life has become more complex, and this has led to fragmentation of the family. People are pressured by occupational demands and involvement in various civic activities. These activities and demands may leave little time for family life.

Mr. Lee hasn't spent an evening with his children in over a week. As an ambitious urban lawyer, he frequently works late and even then brings work home. He is active in Lions Club, Kiwanis, PTA and several fund drives. By the time he completes his work or meetings, the children are usually asleep. When he can spend time with the family, he is too tired to be really interested in the children's talk of school and their accomplishments.

As people become less involved with their family members, family relationships become less important. As one woman stated:

We really don't know each other in our family. That's because we don't spend any time together. We're too busy. Oh, superficially we know each other. I still know my husband hates chicken livers and red neckties. But I don't know anymore if everything's okay in his business. The kids are teenagers now—almost grown—and I don't know what their dreams and ambitions are beyond the latest record album. When we are together, we're all preoccupied with other things. Home is a place to sleep at night and change clothes.

This is a condition that more and more families are experiencing. As Anne Lindbergh noted in her book, *Gift From the Sea*, when life becomes extremely fragmented as a result of being involved in several activities at the same time, we tend to be less in communion with both ourselves and our family members.⁶

More Unrealistic Expectations

Today people expect a great deal of each other in marriage with respect to satisfying the needs of love and happiness. These expectations can be self-centered and unrealistic. Many persons expect a spouse to provide constant happiness and bliss but give no thought to meeting the needs of the spouse.

In recent years the mass media have portrayed marriage in two extreme ways. One view depicts marriage as a total and constant joy: one marries with little thought or preparation and lives happily ever after. This superficial romanticism is, of course, unrealistic.

The other view overemphasizes the conflicts, problems, and dissatisfactions of family living, which has led some individuals to expect great problems and dissatisfaction in marriage. Such expectations may influence them to behave in a manner such as to bring about problems. The overemphasis on problems in marriage and family living

has no doubt played a part in encouraging some people to experiment with alternate life styles.

Less Extended-Family Contact

Along with industrialization and urbanization have come higher standards of living, more education, and more and better occupational opportunities, changes that have led to greater geographical and social mobility. Approximately 40 million people in the United States change their home addresses at least once a year. In Los Angeles, for example, 85 percent of the people who rent their homes move each year. It has been estimated that the average American moves fourteen times in a lifetime.⁷

Geographic and social mobility increase the chances that a young married couple will not live in the same community with their parents and close relatives. It is not uncommon for a couple to begin their married life in a community 1,000 miles or more away from the area in which their parents live.

This means that today's household frequently consists only of parents and children (nuclear family). Consequently face-to-face contacts with relatives are fewer, and the influence of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents is less powerful than in the past. For example, at the turn of the century, 70 percent of the families in the Boston area were composed of parents, children, and at least one grandparent living in the same household. Today the percentage has dwindled to approximately 4 percent.

Decreased extended-family contact means that many children never really know their grandparents. They may see their grandparents less than once a year. According to some anthropologists, such as Margaret Mead, this means that many children grow up without a sense of history of their own families.

There are indications that many persons would like to return to an extended-family system. For example, the phenomenal growth of communes in recent years can be

seen in part as an attempt to create an extended-family life style—to meet the need to belong to a large family.

More Women Working Outside Homes

The percentage of working women has steadily been increasing in the United States. For example in 1890 only 4.6 percent of married women were employed in the labor force. The percentage has now skyrocketed to over 44 percent, and the trend has had a significant impact on family life.

There are some advantages. Satisfying work can contribute to a woman's sense of significance, which in turn improves the quality of relationships with her family. Also, if the income is badly needed, the wife's employment is greatly appreciated by the entire family and may raise the morale of the family members. Another advantage is that working gives a woman more understanding of her husband's work pressures and concerns. Many husbands of working wives take a greater role in childrearing and household tasks and thereby gain more understanding of the domestic contribution of their wives.

Certain negative effects can also arise when the wife works. The husband and children may feel neglected. The husband may feel threatened by his wife's employment, fearing that she will make more money than he does or that her employment implies that he is an inadequate provider. The wife may also experience extreme emotional and physical strain because of the demands on time and energy involved in working outside the home and at the same time being a homemaker.

Research offers no clear answer as to whether the increase in employment of wives is generally good or bad. This depends upon many factors such as the particular woman and her particular family, why she works, whether she enjoys her work, and her fatigue tolerance.

The increase in working wives, in combination with other trends, may serve to further fragment the family. The husband works, the wife works, the children go to school.

They come home at different times and often do not eat together. Each person has paper work or homework to ponder over in the evening. The husband may go bowling, the wife to a civic meeting, and the children may attend a school dance. As a result there is often little sense of family identity. As mentioned earlier this type of fragmented life is becoming more common, making family living less satisfying and less attractive.

Family Roles More Flexible

In the past when the economic, protective, recreational, and educational functions were performed in the home, the roles of family members were clearly defined. Men and women knew exactly what was expected of them. People lived by traditional rules and expectations that were maintained by social pressure.

Today social pressures have relaxed with regard to the performance of family roles. Democracy and egalitarianism are emphasized in the family. There is greater sharing and overlapping of roles.

The women's liberation movement has helped to minimize rigid masculine-feminine role expectations and will probably continue to influence family roles in several ways. First, many women will work outside the home and follow careers. Increasingly doors to certain careers that have been traditionally male-oriented will open to women. There will be less emphasis upon having children. Rearing children will become less important to a woman's self-esteem. Children will spend more time in day care centers and nurseries. Alvin Toffler predicts that many children will be reared by "professional parents" (persons who have been professionally trained to perform the details of parenthood).

The change toward more flexible role definitions and expectations has potential advantages for family life that can contribute to more shared experience and companionship. Overlapping of roles contributes to better understanding among family members. Husbands and wives, for

example, with first-hand experience in the roles each performs, should have greater appreciation for, and understanding of, each other. Less rigid role expectations can encourage family members to interact with each other as individuals rather than as stereotypes.

Certain disadvantages have attended the move toward less rigid role definitions. One is that family members may experience confusion and insecurity because they do not know what is expected of them, a disadvantage that seems especially true with children, as child development specialists have pointed out.

When family roles are not clearly defined, there is also the possibility of creating a situation in which there is greater opportunity for conflict and disagreement.

As conflict in families becomes more prevalent, the institution of the family may become less attractive, while other life styles become more attractive as alternatives to traditional marriage and family.

The trend toward more flexible sex roles also means that more options will be open to both men and women. This will result in people feeling freer to adopt nontraditional life styles in the future.

More Teenage Marriages

The marriage age has dropped during the twentieth century. For example in 1890 the median marriage age was 26.1 for males and 22.0 for females. The greater number of teenage marriages is largely the result of several factors, which include greater affluence, a higher standard of living, and an increased willingness of parents to support married children who are attending college. There is also more effective and widespread practice of birth control and the increased possibility of women working after marriage. Dating at an early age is also associated with marriage at an early age.⁵

Marrying at a young age seems to be an important contributing factor in the rising divorce rate. Various studies indicate that teenage marriages are less stable and encounter

more problems than do the marriages of older persons. The divorce rate is higher among teenage marriages than among any other age group.⁹

Changing Childrearing Patterns

Americans have progressively moved away from authoritarian childrearing methods. Parents generally are more permissive and take the attitude that children, within limits, should make their own decisions. Parents more often use democratic methods such as appealing to the child's sense of reason, explaining rules, and providing a reasonable degree of freedom in which the child can express feelings.

Children today are also taught to develop a high degree of autonomy and independence from parents. In a sense there is an emphasis on separateness from adults, including parents. From an early age, children are isolated into peer groups and are taught to consider their peers as colleagues whose approval and respect they must win. Many children naturally feel that the most important thing in life is the approval of the peer group. When such high value is placed on peer acceptance, children often accept the values of their peers over those of their parents. This has significantly decreased parental influence on the child's socialization and development.

Our wholehearted acceptance of the assumption that children should be autonomous, independent, and separated from adults may result in children's developing a self-centered, materialistic orientation toward interpersonal relationships.¹⁰ It also creates communication gaps between parents and children.

This trend is further supported by a study that investigated family attitudes of Vietnamese and American children. Vietnamese children were more influenced by, and felt a greater obligation to, their families than were American children. The goals of American children were more self-centered and materialistic than were those of the Vietnamese children.¹¹

If American society continues to emphasize extreme

degrees of individualism and self-centeredness, we can expect to see less commitment to and identity with groups in general, including the family. This pattern of extreme individualism played a role in the fall of other societies such as the empires of Greece, Rome, and Egypt.

Divorce Becomes More Acceptable

The divorce rate has risen from approximately 0.5 per thousand population in 1890 to approximately 4.7 per thousand population today.¹² This does not necessarily mean that there is more marital unhappiness today but simply that divorce is easier to obtain legally and is more socially acceptable in most communities. Also, the general affluence of the United States has been rising over the last hundred years, and there is a positive relationship between divorce rates and economic prosperity. When there is prosperity, divorces are more easily afforded.

Divorce is becoming so common and accepted that a cartoon from *The New Yorker* showing a new bride turning to the groom and saying, "Darling, our first marriage!" reflects more truth than humor.

Although easier divorce allows more individual freedom, it also seems to have encouraged many people to marry with little commitment and with an attitude that seems to say, "If it doesn't work out we can get a divorce." All too frequently, when a newly married couple are asked, "How is married life?" their answer is, "It's ok so far," as if to imply that they expect that it won't be ok for very long.

As the divorce rate has increased over the last few decades, many children have been emotionally hurt by the divorce of their parents. Approximately one million children in the U.S. are affected by divorce each year. Some children may fear marriage because they do not want to have to go through the hurt and conflict that their parents experienced. One 22-year-old man commented:

I had to stand by and watch my parents almost destroy each other with a divorce when I was 16 years old. I knew the marriage hadn't been right for some time, but I still

loved them both and it was hard to split up and not be a family anymore. I can tell you it was hell. The hate they showed each other during the divorce was worse than anything I had ever seen. I think getting the divorce multiplied the bad feelings between them. One reason it was hard for me to watch was that I could remember the good times they used to have together—I knew they had once loved each other. I've thought about it a lot since then. It still bothers me. I never want to go through that kind of hurt again.

Children who see their parents divorce and their friends' parents divorce frequently ask, "Why bother?" or "Wouldn't it be simpler to choose a life style other than traditional marriage?" This seems to be a major factor contributing to an increased number of persons experimenting with alternate life styles today.

One picture of contemporary family life in America that may be drawn from these major changes is that the family is becoming more individualized, more fragmented, more temporary and less stable. One social scientist noted:

Nowadays, with earlier marriage, culturally easier separation and divorce, greater mobility demanded by a technological society, there is a loss of, for want of a better word, the "glue" of meaningful family interactions. Deep, lasting roots don't develop; and there is a disruption of continuity from one generation to another. One begins to feel the loss of closeness and the sense of past traditions. Intimacy and mutuality of relationships grow thin.¹³

It is not surprising that the emergence of these qualities in family life has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in experimentation with alternate life styles.

The Market of Life Styles

Today more than ever before, there is a multiplication of alternate life styles to choose from. Alternate life styles are marketed and publicized in a manner unheard of in previous years.

Because of their differentness, they are considered

newsworthy. They are topics in popular magazines and newspapers; they are flashed on television screens; they are the subjects of movies. Too often the media exposure represents either a promotion of the alternate life styles or a denial of them; rarely are the actual experiences, advantages, and problems experienced in these particular life styles discussed.

The marketing of alternate life styles seems to urge people, especially youth, to choose and consume life styles in much the same way that they choose a breakfast cereal or a tooth paste. Toffler stated in *Future Shock* that the pressure to choose life styles is much like that on the tourist walking down Bourbon Street in New Orleans who is grabbed by the doormen of the various joints and urged to peek in to glimpse the erotic dancing inside.

The individual is assured that if one adopts this or that life style he or she will become a happier, better adjusted, more complete person. This is the same type of appeal that advertisers of beer and deodorants use.

It is sad that people too often adopt alternate life styles almost completely on the basis of this market appeal. They are convinced that a particular alternate life style is the "in," "hip," or "fashionable" thing to do. Therefore they plunge into a life style that they may know nothing about and with which both their emotions and values may be incompatible. They often expect their new life style to be a panacea for all their problems, disappointments, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships, only to be badly disillusioned.

People who are considering adopting a certain life style, particularly one that is not accepted by the mainstream of society, should have a sound basis for their decisions. They need to acquire as much available knowledge as possible about alternate life styles rather than relying on propaganda. They need as much objective information as possible because choosing a life style is a very important decision. Alvin Toffler clearly saw the need for this:

How we choose a life style, and what it means to us, therefore, looms as one of the central issues of the

psychology of tomorrow. For the selection of a life style, whether consciously done or not, powerfully shapes the individual's future. It does this by imposing order, a set of principles or criteria on the choices he makes in his daily life.¹⁴

As mentioned earlier there are few guidelines or easily accessible sources of sound information to draw upon as individuals contemplate alternate life styles. In the following chapters of this book, a compilation of available research knowledge concerning six of the most widely discussed and publicized alternate life styles—extramarital sexual relationships, swinging, cohabitation, communes, group marriage, and one-parent families—is presented.