

HOW MUCH HAVE FAMILIES CHANGED IN YOUR LIFETIME?

by Professor Emeritus Karen Bogenschneider
University of Wisconsin-Madison

In the last 25 to 30 years, there is no doubt that families have changed dramatically in ways that require different kinds of family support. Throughout the class, students will be learning about family changes such as the remarkable rise in cohabitation, the stunning decline in marriage, the dramatic drop in the stability of children's lives, and the looming gap between the demand and supply of family caregivers for older adults with impairments. I use the following exercise to illustrate the extent of changes that have occurred in family life in only one generation.

I ask the students to indicate, by a raising of hands, their response to the following questions. First, the students respond to the questions for their mother. (The instructor can record the number of hands).

- Did your mother grow up within 30 miles of extended family?
- Was your mother raised primarily by two parents?
- Did your mother grow up with parents who married and stay married for most of their lives?
- Were most of your mother's friends and neighbors the same race and ethnicity as she was?
- Did your mother have a mother who was a stay-at-home mom?
- Did your mother have three or more siblings?
- Did your mother have three living grandparents when she was growing up?

Then ask the students to indicate, by a raising of hands, the response to the following questions for themselves. (The instructor can record the number of hands raised).

- Did you grow up within 30 miles of extended family?
- Were you raised primarily by two parents?
- Did you grow up with parents who married and stay married for most of their lives?
- Were most of your friends and neighbors the same race and ethnicity as you?
- Was your mother a full-time homemaker when you were a child?
- Do you have three or more siblings?
- Did you have three living grandparents when you were growing up?

The instructor can indicate which of the questions had the largest number of discrepancies between the two generations. This activity exemplifies in a concrete way the extent of changes that have occurred in the context of family life in only one generation. Students can be asked for their reaction to the extent of family changes in their lifetime. Students can discuss what these changes mean for families, for family policy, and for society.