

FAMILY LIFESTYLES, SCARCITY, AND THE ABUNDANT LIFE

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FAMILY LIFESTYLES IN TRANSITION

. Futurists refer to the 1980's as a transitional period (Harman 1977; Rufkin & Howard 1979; Toffler 1980; Brown 1980). They do not agree on what to call this period, or what its result will be, but they say that our society is in the midst of pervasive change. Changes in lifestyle which affect family relations are apparent, and scarcity of many resources is an aspect of the transformation. They question whether an abundant life will be possible in an age of growing scarcity. We use the term lifestyle to include people, their roles, and use of resources, and define it as the way in which people organize personal relations, use resources, and relate to the social and natural environment.

. We should examine past and present family lifestyles, because they are the prelude to the future. The stability of the family of the past is falsely romanticized. The truth is that thousands of children were orphaned. Few women lived to see their last child fully grown. Families were sundered by movement to the frontier. Men, though responsible to protect the family, left mothers, wives and children, as they went to war, or to sea, or to the frontier seeking gold, furs, and land. The terms mobile and isolated are used to describe the modern family, but these terms also accurately describe frontier families and those of earlier times.

. A wide variety of family types has always existed. These include households of one person, nuclear families, communes, one-parent families, and multiple families. Communal living arrangements prevalent in the 1960's and 1970's are not a new phenomenon. Earlier generations saw the Oneida community, the Hutterites, and many others.

. Despite diversity of family structures, we continue to assume that the family is typically a nuclear

family of husband, wife, and several minor children. To think about the future families, we must consider how families and their resources are actually organized.

. There is no longer a typical American family, and family lifestyles are quite diverse. An increasing portion of the people live in non-traditional family structures. Households composed of parents and children make up a bare majority (54%). This includes married parents with children, and separated, widowed, divorced and never-married parents with children (Glick 1979a). Married couples with no children in the home make up over a third of American households. About 7 percent of our population live alone as a one-person household, and 1 percent are cohabiting adults of opposite sex. A small portion have other arrangements, such as apartments shared by friends.

. Projections are for the number of married couples with no children to increase (Bane 1980). Veivers (1975) reports that defenses used by voluntarily childless wives are reinterpretation of others' disapproval as envy. There is a trend among contemporary child-free couples to state openly that they prefer travel, homes and furniture and leisure to having and rearing children. An increase in the number of one-child families is also projected. More young adults will live alone. Young adults living informally as unmarried couples of opposite sex are still a small group, but are rapidly increasing. Since 1975, the divorce rate has risen much more slowly than in the 1970-1975 period (Glick 1979b).

SCARCITY & CHANGING RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION

Economic issues. Regardless of the lifestyles of individuals, they will face changes in future years unlike those of past generations. Many aspects of the 1980's transformation are issues of scarce

economic, food, energy, and human resources. The United States experiences severe economic problems. Inflation of prices erodes consumers' ability to buy the same amount of goods and services from year to year. Unemployment rates climb steadily. Both have an impact on intra-family relations. The United States economy depends on mass production and mass consumption. "People are encouraged by the language of industrial society to think of themselves as consumers, a shocking change from the day when frugality was a virtue, and consuming was something a moral person did only sparingly." (Harman 1980). As economic conditions worsen, consumers will necessarily reduce their purchases, which may contribute to perceived scarcity. Peoples' ability to live on savings, or on anticipated income through credit buying is reaching its limit. Movement toward a more frugal society can be seen in reduced driving, buying smaller cars, and changes in food consumption. Bartering of services among the poor and the affluent is increasing.

Food. World food production increased dramatically in recent years in the green revolution, but that increase in food is being consumed by increases in population. Without other major breakthroughs in agriculture, further increases in food production are unlikely. A confounding problem in scarcity of food is its distribution. The worldwide distribution of food is so uneven that a quarter of the world's people eat half of the food, while the other three quarters get the other half (Clark 1976). Starvation is a constant factor in many third world countries, and there are many predictions of a bleak future in world food production.

Energy. The causes and consequences of the new era of oil scarcity are not taken seriously in the United States. Many people consider energy issues as an energy crisis, but a crisis is an event which occurs, runs its course,

and is resolved. The oil crisis of 1973-1974 was a turning point in post war history which delivered a powerful shock to the entire world (Stobaugh & Yergin 1979). That event permanently slowed postwar economic growth, contributed to inflation of prices, and set in motion a drastic shift in world power and international relations.

Human Resources. Human resources include intelligence, technical skills, knowledge, personality, physical strength, health, and values which people use to solve problems, relate to others, and develop their own potential. Since human resources vary in availability and combinations, the differences along with changing lifestyle may result in perceived scarcity. For example, few people today live in the communities where they grew up, and fewer people have an extended family as part of their human resource support system.

. Researchers report a major value shift since 1970 from the Protestant ethic based on hard work and self-sacrifice, to a concentration on selfish indulgence. "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion - to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity.." (Lasch 1979). This me-first-and-only attitude isolates families and individuals within families.

. Scarcity of material resources may force us to be more creative in the use of human resources, and this may enhance human resources. At the same time, increased pressure on human resources could increase personal stress and family and community tensions. Much will depend on how the abundant life is defined.

THE ABUNDANT LIFE

. Does an abundant life depend on setting the thermostat at 72 degrees Fahrenheit all year, access to a private automobile, a house, and financial security? Abundant life does not necessarily exclude hardship, and it depends

both on the amount of resources and how they are perceived. When we camp out on a vacation, chopping wood, cooking with an open fire, and wearing old clothing is part of the enjoyment. If we do these things of necessity, wear clothing until it is frayed, and stay at home to save energy, we would consider it hardship and suffering.

. Abundance in life depends on the way people organize personal relations, including living arrangements and social roles. Abundance can be created or diminished by the way in which persons and families relate to the natural environment, to the social system, and to each other.

Personal Relations. In seeking the abundant life, how can we organize our relations so as to enhance well-being? Tensions and insecurity about scarcity create stress for individuals and families. Some seek new directions for different social roles and social structures. The voluntary simplicity movement and job sharing are examples. Many others seek a sense of security in established structures, as illustrated by the resurgence of conservative religious and political organizations.

. How will families reorder their relations in response to increased scarcity? Will relatives take in unemployed kindred, and create extended family structures? Will youth stay longer in the parental home, thwarting parents' anticipation of independence? How they respond will influence the quality of life which is experienced.

Consumer vs Conserving Society.

. Use of material resources and expectations about resource allocation will influence whether an abundant life is attainable. In a recent poll, the American public indicated willingness to change consumption of resources. Asked whether they would prefer 1) changing lifestyle by consuming fewer physical goods, or 2) risking continued inflation and unemployment due to raw material shortages, 77 percent favored a lifestyle change (Rufkin 1979).

. In the early 1900's the term American worker labeled a producer. Life was described in terms of one's role in the workplace. Since World War II the predominant term is American consumer. A more recent term is the American conserver, and the conserver society is offered as an alternative for the future, with a stewardship of resources as well as an adequacy of material goods (Valaskakis et al 1979).

Family & Production. If we change lifestyle in the consumer role in seeking the abundant life, we can also change in the area of production. Changes in the organization of production would profoundly affect the family. Toffler (1980) predicts development of the electronic cottage where people can work at home with electronic connections to the central office. Lifestyle alternatives in which working parents and perhaps their children share both jobs and homemaking may emerge. When children become able to operate computers we may see vast increases of family businesses and productive enterprises. Families may respond to the increased cost of mass produced goods by producing more of what they consume. Bartering of services has also become a means of coping with increased costs which result from scarcity. Many people contribute to their own health by scheduled exercise and improved diet.

PUBLIC POLICY

. Public policies of taxation, incentives and controls promote lifestyles and decisions on the use of resources. If scarcity of resources forces people to change lifestyle, the unpopular changes may be more readily accepted as policy issues, and may help bring about more efficient use of resources. However, policies which are appropriate in an era of affluence may conflict with the requirements of conservation of scarce resources. City zoning laws which forbid more than one family in a single-family house may need changing if unemployment and higher fuel

costs force a worker and family to move in with relatives.

. The 5 public policies which follow illustrate possible responses to scarcity.

1) Communities could establish garden plots for rent to families at low cost for augmenting their food supply. Such programs exist in European countries.

2) Incentives by a rebate on utility bills for recycling glass, metals and paper could be provided to families which separate these items for trash collection.

3) Tax policy could allow two single parents who establish a shared household to file a joint tax return at a lower tax rate than those in separate households. Such a policy would encourage economy of scale inherent in multiple person households, and recognize social supports which accrue to adults and children.

4) Many policies continue to promote conservation of non-renewable resources with tax credits, as they do in support of improving thermal insulation in homes.

5) Community agencies could be established to facilitate sharing knowledge, skills, tools, and other resources. Such community resource centers could help promote altruism and a sense of commitment in the community.

CONCLUSION

. Such public policies regarding food, energy, human resources, and economics can be examined in connection with several questions. Does the policy foster continued high levels of consumption, or does it foster conservation? Does it value one lifestyle over another without regard to the efficiency of each? Is the public policy tied to economic theories which have been questioned due to real changes? Is the policy short-sighted or far-sighted? A systematic study of public policies now in effect should be made at local, state, and national levels with a view to making policy changes which would ease the social transformations required for the abundant life in a time of increasing

scarcity of resources.

. Family adjustments in interperson relations, lifestyles, consumption, and production contribute to the quality of life. If the family nurtures its members with an outlook on life as accepting the challenge of a dwindling resource base, the age of scarcity can be creatively transformed. The future could lead either to a Hobbsian war of all against all, or it could be transformed into an era of cooperation. Life can be diverse as well, since variety of lifestyles seems to offer the best possibility of the desire for an abundant life.

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