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The Androgynous American Family: What happened to Ward and June?

The year is 1957. Ward is just coming home from a day at the office, when he is greeted by his loving wife June. Their sons are upstairs dutifully studying while June finishes cooking dinner and Ward reads the paper. Ah, the typical American family—what a joy! But hold that thought; is this *really* the typical American family? Picture this: The year is 2009. It's about 6:30pm and the boys have recently come home from school, having caught a ride home after practice. They haven't yet started their mountain of homework, but they managed to order a pizza because Ward and June are expected home any minute, in no mood to make dinner. First comes Ward: tired and hardly interested in the newspaper. He mutters something about homework being done to his sons before heading upstairs. Next, the pizza arrives. No sign of June yet. The boys dig in and yell to their dad that dinner has arrived. Ward comes down to find his share of pizza left in the box. Finally June frantically stumbles through the door, home from the office—and grocery shopping and the bank. She may frown upon the eating habits of her family, but there's no time for that now, she has a PTA meeting and she's already late. Starting to sound a little more accurate? Today's American family is no longer the cookie cutter image it was once believed to be. Roles have been added to and changed. Gender roles are no longer the stereotypes from America's past, and the American family is changing as a result.

To begin, let's look at the parents in the workplace of today's society. According to the United States Bureau of Labor, Women make up 49 percent of the workforce, when they made up 15 percent in 1950. This basically levels the playing field for who's who in the workforce. Mom is just as likely as dad to be the bread winner. But, the statistics do not reflect that gender roles have switched. Dad's not at home so Mom can work in most cases. As industries and jobs have grown in America, we find that many families now have both parents working. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 77 percent of

American households with an “income earner” had two or more, meaning that most likely both parents and the eligible children are working.

What does all of this working say for families and the changing of gender roles? It says that sex no longer defines the caregiver in a family. It may also be pointing out that there is no longer a caregiver in the family. According to a journal published by the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, The role of mother and house-keeper has been added to the role of business woman, although the workload does not decrease in one role because of the addition of another (GPAC, 2007). This can make it very difficult for parents of either sex to find ways to care for their children in the home. Many turn instead to child care providers. Children may find themselves playing the role of parent more than their parents do, because with so many roles added on, there's simply not enough time to parent.

However, not all families are stuck in the struggle to join the androgynous workforce, and some interesting parenting situations have come of it. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2007 there were 159,000 stay-at-home-fathers (and that's just 2.7% of all stay at home parents!). This relatively new form of parenting (to America) has had mixed responses. Some stay-at-home-dads feel mixed emotions about their role, wondering if this new role can really compare to society's expectation of masculinity, i.e. the working male. Others are proud to be a part of their children's lives in such an influential way and are glad to be rid of the gender restrictions that would tell them a game of catch was the safest way to relate to their child. Not a lot of studies have come back yet to show the effects of stay-at-home fatherhood on families and children (the lack of information seems to be a prevalent complaint among stay-at-home-dads), but the fathers and their families seem very happy with this new form of involvement. Many fathers, as mothers have before them, plan to return to work, but want to keep flexible hours so they can be involved in their children's lives still (Shaver, 2007).

But family and married life through the gender lens goes far beyond who's driving the kids to school and who's making dinner tonight. It goes even beyond discipline methods (which is such an extensive topic in itself that it will not be covered here). The couple's sexual relationship is also

strongly influenced by gender roles. The Magnus Hirschfeld Archive for Sexology published a journal by Dr. Erwin J. Haeberle discussing gender roles as they relate to the sexual relationship of a couple. In typical American culture, every sexual act is considered to have a “masculine” or dominant role, and a “feminine” or passive role. Dr. Haeberle calls this view of sex ridiculous, as it limits the couple from expressing love for one another because of pride, or fear of being seen outside of their prescribed gender role. He speculates that this limited view of sexuality is what keeps American couples from exploring their sexuality with each other, where some European cultures are more open to experimenting within their monogamous relationships (Haeberle, 2008).

Linking Dr. Haeberle's work with that of the Public Gender Advocacy Coalition, one can speculate why so many marriages (53% according to the Barna Group) end in divorce. Sexuality and gender are being questioned in our culture. Outside of the bedroom, both partners in a couple are struggling with their individuality to prove they are strong, functioning members of society, but that they are also competent, caring parents. For the stay-at-home-dad, the looks of “how clueless can you get?” from veteran moms is discouraging. For the working mother, the boss who keeps her down makes her question whether she made the right decision to drop her children off at day care rather than stay with them. Perhaps there is jealousy when one parent sees the other building a stronger relationship with the children, or bringing home a paycheck while they feel useless, making no income. There could be a power struggle in who's paycheck is larger, and a question of whether he is making more because he's a man, or whether she got that promotion because the interviewer was more interested in her neckline than her resume. Even a slight pay discrepancy can cause problems, no matter how well meaning one spouse may be in hoping to see the other succeed. Add these tensions to the unspoken tension that hides behind the bedroom doors. A conflict of whether one is acting in love or societal submission. A feeling of inadequacy that may stem from an identity defined by another role. Simply put, it is an inability to clearly communicate with a language of love because of conflicting gender issues.

These gender issues, both the positive and negative, have an effect on children. As both parents now enter the workforce, children learn earlier and earlier to parent themselves. They begin to see their parents take on multiple roles, and either by their own ambition or at their parent's behest, take on multiple roles themselves. Children learn that their gender is not what's going to define them in society, but that they can define themselves. Unfortunately, that knowledge is bought with a price: a caring full-time parent was not there for them. They met latchkey almost as soon as they met mommy. Their most extensive knowledge of dad may be what tie he wears on Friday, or where he works. Without full time parents to instill full time values in them, children can get some very deranged ideas about gender and sexuality as they form their own and allow the media to form the rest (speculation largely based off of the works of Clark and Barna).

So how do we balance it all? How does a mother with a vocation leave her family to go and work without feeling that she has abandoned her child? How can a father who needs to work in order to help keep food on the table find time to spend with his children so that he can become a caregiver to them? How does a couple resolve their sexuality conflicts so that their sex life can be happy and healthy, rather than an awkward submission/domination dance that society has tightly instructed them in? The writer believes that balance comes from a knowledge of one's own sexual identity. There is no grand solution that will make every family the perfect “nuclear” family of today. The truth is, Ward and June Cleaver were always a myth. Their roles may at one time have been more prevalent in society, but they were not, are not and can never be the definition of healthy family living. There are families who still function much like the Cleavers and do so in an extremely healthy fashion because they are comfortable in their sexual identity. The roles fit the people, rather than the people trying to fit the roles. Others have reversed and are healthy because father is not threatened by being a man among mothers, and mother is glad to be in her vocation. There is certainly family struggle. As we explored earlier in this paper, two-income homes are largely the norm. Some families are dealing well with this balance, some struggle to balance family, work and social life. Other families have found that there is a

way to compromise. Using your day off to actually spend with your family is a great way to use the changing gender roles of society to act in your favor: either mother or father can be the caregiver in that moment. You can shape the life of your child, and your gender identity will help them to discover and become confident in their own. Some homes have found ways to cut costs so that both parents can work part time jobs, and split parenting responsibilities in a way that creates an amount of time spent with the children that is comparable to having a stay at home parent.

However the family chooses to meet the gender changing challenge, what is important is that each member of the family be able to understand and express their gender in a way that is healthy for them and their family. The family can work together as one unit towards the greatest good when each member is treated with importance, each task met with dignity and each role treated with respect.

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