The Emerging Symmetrical Family
Fact or Fiction?*

A Cross-National Analysis

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Introduction

Predictions in the social sciences are exceedingly rare. One meritorious exception is the recent collaborative effort of Michael Young and Peter Willmott (1975). In their provocative book, The Symmetrical Family, they maintain that the family has undergone three major changes in the past 200 years, and that future family and work roles of both husband and wife will gradually become symmetrical in structure and function.

A) Young and Willmott’s Thesis

In the first, the pre-industrial stage, the family was a unit of production and an economic partnership of husband, wife and children. To secure its survival, the family represented a collective, working together in the home and in the field. “Work” and “life” were not clearly separated, and home was the centre of economic as well as of other activities. Stage 1 family lasted until the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries in England.

Stage 2 arose from the creation of new production techniques. In early Stage 2 the family remained the production unit, either through the “putting out” system or by bringing the whole family into the early manufacturing institution. But during the 19th century the factory system eliminated most of the productive functions of the non-farm family. The family then was transformed into individual wage earners so “work” and “home” became sharply differentiated. Those most affected were the families of manual workers. Forerunners

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of this transformation in family organization, then, were the working, not the middle classes. The shift in the focus of economic production from the family to the factory established the basis for developing a new division of labour both at home and in the factory. Woman's dependency was established in Stage 2. She became responsible for the work in the home—the domestic labour, and her husband took over the paid labour activity. Not that women did not work for wages in factories and mines, which indeed they did, but the responsibility for family labour became clearly differentiated. Stage 2 families may still be found today, but early in the 20th century, yet another form began to emerge.

Both technological change and the rise of feminism contributed to the development of the third family type, which Young and Willmott call the "symmetrical family." In this stage, the unity of the family is restored, but in consumptive form rather than as a productive unit. The trend has been away from the extended family,¹ so the Stage 3 family is nuclear and home-centred. Husband, wife, and children spend much of their time together and share many aspects of their lives.

The most important feature of the Stage 3 family is desegregation of roles based on sex. The sexual division of labour that existed in the Stage 2 family is broken down, and husband and wife share paid labour and domestic work. Decisions are made jointly, child care and household tasks are shared, and both husband and wife contribute "equally" to the economic support of the family unit. In Stage 3, it is the middle classes, not the manual workers who are the harbingers of the change. Young and Willmott suggest that in time, the Stage 3 family—the symmetrical family—will prevail in all social strata. From their data base of London families, the authors develop a more general model of change in family structure and functioning. This model, as well as our criticisms, are focused on post-industrial societies. The applicability of these arguments to third world countries is a matter of empirical investigation.

Young and Willmott's theoretical approach is useful, bridging as it does two interrelated but often separately conceptualized areas of investigation: the changing family roles and work roles of both men and women. They observed that the single most important manifestation of change in the male role in contemporary society is an increased family role, just as increased labour force participation is the most important change in the female role. In Young and Willmott's view, the contemporary family is gradually becoming "sym-