Articles   Faculty Publications

2014

Southern Families

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The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia

Southern Families

Although there is some dispute about the precise borders of the American south, the south is generally **[p. 1255 ↓]** considered to contain the 11 former Confederate States of America (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) plus Kentucky and West Virginia, unless otherwise stated.

The emphasis on family unity that is characteristic of the southern family has its roots in the traditional values of the agrarian upper class. The English, Scottish-Irish, and African immigrants to the south, who arrived in the 1600 and 1700s, instituted the basics of southern culture, though these patterns continued to develop and progress, as they do today. The basis of the southern lifestyle was farming and rural living, which lingered well into the 20th century, at least in certain parts of the south. Even today, agrarian traditions continue to influence southern culture. Because of the influential governing classes, family was, traditionally, more important in the southern United States than any other region of the country. Critics have insightfully argued that the southerner's emphasis on family echoes concerns with social stratification just as much as it does his dedication to family values. Beginning in the mid-20th century, however, the paternalism of the southern family began to decline with women's increased autonomy and economic independence.

From the antebellum era to the present, the changing principles and structure of southern society have not weakened the importance of the family; conversely, the construction of the southern family has changed. Until the early 1900s, the south was predominantly rural, with many families living on farms. Particularly on small farms, families lived, worked, and socialized with each other. Individuals' identities, values, and even social status, thus, were formed primarily from the family. In recent years, definitions of the southern family have begun to realize the significance family forms had on the framework of American society.

From the myth of nuclear families before the Civil War to the poverty-stricken single parent family of the contemporary south to reality-television portrayals of southern families, ideals of the southern family have morphed from the authoritarian, romantic family of the historical agrarian ruling classes to more democratic roles in all classes.

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Antebellum Myth of the Nuclear Family

While the term *family* refers to the nuclear or conjugal family, that is, parents with their children, in the antebellum south, the number of associations that might be included in the term *family* were often more distant and could possibly include a span of relationships.

Contrary to the myth that the traditional southern family had been a nuclear family, research indicates that the portrait of the antebellum southern family was diverse, consisting of many other relatives, including aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews, and rarely conformed to the stereotyped nuclear family. In fact, differences between nuclear relatives and other family members were much less definite than scholars previously presumed. Kinship refers to a structure of family that includes, in addition to nuclear connections by blood, family associations by marriage, adoption, and/or social fiction. Many individuals who were considered peripheral figures in the larger kinship system were actually important members of the family. Researchers currently understand that kinship is socially constructed, but, in the antebellum south, it was more widely constructed than it is today.

Elite Antebellum Families

In the antebellum years, slavery and gender shaped the southern family because southern families valued patriarchal dominance over both women and slaves. Southern family values limited agency not only of women and slaves but also of poor whites. Until the mid-20th century, children held a more significant place in southern families than in other regions of the United States. As early as the 1700s, southern boys were aware of the links between their class, race, and opportunity. Sons of the antebellum period were raised to be autonomous. According to historians, southern boys' independence stemmed from slaveholding, because white men considered dependence and submission anathema for themselves, and thus taught their sons accordingly.

Elite white southern boys were reared to defy authority; their independence was the epitome of masculinity, built on their domination of slaves. Southern boys realized

their superiority at an early age; they soon discovered that they could employ the same authority over those of lesser status that their elders lauded over them. Family members, who were proud of their sons' autonomy, rebuffed any concerns regarding unmanageable young boys, and they even took pride in their male offspring's willfulness.

[p. 1256 ↓] Although such parenting produced unmanageable sons, parents were actually more concerned with their sons' independence than they were with the boys' future reputations in southern society. Elite white southern boys were to adhere strictly to codes of conduct so that they could promote their public status; after all, southern elites valued reputation and social status over the practicality of education. These strong-willed boys grew into young gentlemen who focused on social obligations, for their future wealth was dependent on inheriting land and slaves. Even voting at the local level, for example, reflected the power of families more exactly than party politics. These family networks were essential to fortifying the political or legal status of their members in their neighborhoods and towns.

There were options, however, for both women and slaves to pave the path to autonomy in the antebellum patriarchal southern society. One way women gained agency in the male-dominated south was through orphanages, which allowed them to assert their maternal instincts within the confines of southern family values. Cross-plantation marriages, on the other hand, created an environment for love and a sense of independence for slaves. Called broad marriages, African American husbands and wives lived in different locations with different masters. Legally, though, slaves could not marry; defined as property, enslaved men and women could only partake of non–legally binding ceremonies to solidify their bonds. Not surprisingly, the system of slavery contributed to strains on enslaved African Americans' marriages, and these marriages were at a higher chance of dissolving.

Contemporary Southern Families, Social Class, and Race

As evidenced by the elite white families, the southern family was tremendously influenced by social class. Until relatively recently, southern practices and traditions both endorsed and encouraged paternalism. For black families, in contrast, family roles have played out differently. Slavery, and later segregation, had a remarkable impact on family and gender roles. In the 1970s, pioneering historian Herbert G. Guntman surveyed marriages of **[p. 1257 ↓]** African Americans from the antebellum/postbellum plantation era through those in the Union army and on to freedom. His research emphasizes the two-parent family and strength of slaves' marriages, although recent historians have continued to build on Guntman's models. Contrasting the paternalism of white southern families, southern black families traditionally are matriarchal.

This photo of the Hatfield family from February 11, 1899, ran in newspapers under the headline "Famous West Virginia Outlaws." The Hatfield–McCoy feud along the West Virginia and Kentucky border lasted from 1863 until 1891, yet still remains a mainstream American folklore tale and a modern symbol of bitter feuding, family rivalry, and vengeance.

Statistics reveal that African American and white families with children under the age of 18 differ in kin network participation. Contemporary studies on black families report that extended family and kin networks are a primary foundation of support in African American communities. Black families are more likely to live with other family members in a non-nuclear household, although recent studies indicate that community poverty may compromise the effectiveness of kin networks.

Estimates suggest that poverty in southern rural regions is at 17.5 percent, and kin networks and extended families, including fictive kin, whose kinship ties are not bound by blood or marriage, but who, for a variety of reasons, are considered kin, have historically alleviated hardship among poor single mothers in rural and urban settings. While kin networks may serve an economical function, researchers have noted a greater cultural importance on kin networks for African American families. It should also be noted that there is a greater frequency of households headed by African American females than by white females.

Southern Families and Popular Culture

In the agrarian south, the family defined and conveyed southern culture. In the modern, postindustrial south, however, other entities such as mass media diffuse the culture. Television programs depicting the south have become increasingly popular over the last 40 years, and the concept of the southern family has begun to permeate American popular culture. The 1960s featured scripted programs such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–68) and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–71), while the 1980s saw *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979–85) and *Dallas* (1979–91); the 1990s enjoyed *Evening Shade* (1990–94) and viewers in the 2000s and 2010s learned about a variety of southern families in *My Name Is Earl* (2005–09) and *Friday Night Lights* (2006–11). In the late 2000s and early 2010s, producers from a variety of networks turned from these types of scripted series and launched reality television programming that featured southern families.

The idea of the southern man has been picked up by the mainstream media and television programming and has consequently been labeled a plethora of interesting titles—big country, good ol' boy, hick, hillbilly, redneck, and white trash, for example —and broadcast across America. The rural southern middle-class man and his family have become nationally advertised in unscripted reality television shows such as *Swamp People* and *Hatfields and McCoys: White Lightning*, both on the History Channel, or even A&E's bearded duck call franchise family on *Duck Dynasty*.

Take the Robertson family from *Duck Dynasty* fame, for instance. Many viewers laud them for staying true to their family values and their depiction of family, hard work, and discipline, especially when they say a prayer of thanksgiving around the table at the conclusion of each episode. At the same time, however, *Duck Dynasty* and other southern family shows such as *American Hoggers* and *Honey Boo Boo* have drawn criticism from detractors. Critics of reality television depicting southern families fear that such programming could exacerbate negative stereotypes surrounding the south. While it seems that Hollywood executives believe Americans want to laugh at rural southerners, the television-viewing public appears to see a little of themselves and their families in southern families.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452286143.n498
See Also:

- Poverty and Poor Families
- Reality Television
- Rural Families
- Television, 2010s
- Wealthy Families
- "White Trash"

Further Readings

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