

# History and Cultural Diversity of Canadian Families

## INSTRUCTOR'S INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a chronological narrative of the changes that have taken place among the first three groups of founding families: the First Nations, the Québécois and their predecessors in France, and then the British, and how the latter two have particularly affected Aboriginal families. This chapter then illustrates the increasing diversity of origins of Canadian families as new Canadians arrive in Canada from a broader spectrum of nationalities and religions. The focus is on black Canadian families, Chinese- and Indo-Canadian families.

## ADDITIONAL CLASS MATERIAL ON THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN FAMILIES

As a comparative note, and because some overlap and similarities exist between the two societies, a brief **history of families in the U.S. follows**. This section presents the broad strokes or, if you wish, the general outlines of the history of American families. (Not only are there similarities and parallels between Canadian and American history but also with Australia, for instance, and New Zealand. All involve British conquests and colonial rules as well as subjugated Aboriginal groups.)

### Multiple Historical Roots

Chronologically, the first set of civilizations belonged to the Natives: they were quite diverse by the time the first colonists arrived. In the south, some Native nations had already been in contact with Spaniards. In the northeast, other nations had been trading and even intermarried with the French. Much later on, in 1867, Alaskan Natives were included after having been under Russian rule; to this day, many still carry Russian surnames. The second set of historical roots lies in Protestant Europe, particularly England of the seventeenth century. These British Europeans became the dominant group in American society. A wide spectrum of African societies, whose members were brought to the American shores in chains, formed the third influence on American family life. The Latinos, ranging from Puerto Rico and then Florida to northern Mexico, in the latter case what became the American southwest, represented the fourth early cultural group in the formation of the American family.

These diverse Latinos were already in place long before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. But it is only much later that their territories were annexed by the U.S. It is also only toward the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that other immigrant groups, largely from Europe, began contributing to the landscape of American families. For their part, Hawaiians chronologically constitute one of the last indigenous cultural root of family life in the U.S., although their influence has remained largely isolated, both because of conquest and long distance.

compared to whites. Furthermore, the life courses of minority families have been deeply affected by developments among majority families. For example, the historian Franklin (1993) discusses the role that white males have played during slavery in African-American families and in the formation of black masculine identity. Although, southern white women were affected by this reality even as mothers, overall, the historical causality flowed from white to minorities.

## **The Colonial Period**

The 20,000 Puritans who arrived from England between 1620 and 1640 brought with them the traditional, nuclear family of father, mother, and children. Their dream was to establish a Godly family based on the teachings of the Bible. Families raised six or seven children who learned to read the scriptures at home and worked together as a unit of production. As the years went by and the colonists aged, grandparents co-resided with one of their adult children. But this extended family system at the household level never constituted the main form of family structure. The reason lies in the fact that life expectancy was low: Relatively few elderly parents survived until all their children were married. Further, elderly parents had many children, so that, when they lived with one, all the others constituted separate nuclear families. (The parallels with Quebec are evident here.)

In terms of gender stratification, the colonial society was a masculine one and women were subordinate to men, particularly their husbands and fathers. Fathers were responsible for the moral character of their children as well as their families' honour. They were the primary parent, although mothers were the main caretakers and it is only in the eighteenth century that they replaced fathers in the area of religious instruction. Sexual relationships outside marriage were condemned but nevertheless occurred and frequently led to legal proceedings. When the early moral standards of the small cohesive communities eroded somewhat, masculine infidelity became relatively more acceptable and, in the south, common between white men and slave women. Widowed women could receive some land and manage their families: They were seen as replacing their deceased husbands. Divorces were granted on a very limited basis. Fathers typically retained custody of children, as was the case in England.

In the period roughly bounded by the years 1620 and 1780 before industrialization, adults and children used to participate in the household economy. Families were **units of production** and much of what they needed was produced at home or in the vicinity. Everyone was involved and children contributed from an early age. Children were regarded as useful and responsible members of the family economy. Skills were acquired in one's immediate environment; children observed what their parents or host families were doing and learned by imitation as well as direct teaching. Families formed an integral part of their communities and many functions fulfilled by various social agencies in the twentieth century were taken care of at home, particularly education and social control. Fathers were responsible not only for their children's behaviours, but for that of their live-in servants as well as slaves. Thus, households, especially in the south, were more extensive than Canadian ones at the same time. Religion was a constitutive element of the family dynamics of these early Americans and was largely a masculine domain.

depending upon the geographic location of settlement and the nature of their work. Small cities became stratified, as was the case in Canada, along *social class* lines that later extended into the countryside. Social classes then largely consisted of three broad categories of families: important merchants and large plantation owners at the top, then artisans, and at the lowest rung were the labouring segments of the population. At the bottom of this stratification system were the slaves. After 1780, with the advent of industrialization, the merchant and large landowner class was enlarged by entrepreneurs, and the artisan class by various types of clerical workers as well as army personnel. The lower class of workers was exploited for its labour. American families were becoming more socially diversified and rigidly stratified, their economic base was evolving, and their lifestyles were becoming more varied.

In the eighteenth century, children often left home by the age of ten, particularly in poor families, to become apprentices or even servants. They were incorporated within their host family, and, in the late nineteenth century until World War II, lodgers became part of the households of the poor while servants lived in the homes of the more affluent. Thus, while the European-American family has always been predominantly nuclear rather than extended, the household unit often contained additional, unrelated persons.

While the seventeenth and eighteenth century family formed an economic unit, generally working together on a farm, the nineteenth century family, although still predominantly agricultural, became more diversified as production gradually shifted outside the home to an urban landscape of factories and office jobs. Around 1820, America witnessed the development of a middle-class ideal where the family became a site of comfort. A distinction was made between the home as a private domain and the public sphere of work, the economy, and politics from which women and children were excluded. The role of the father became less intimate and more externally oriented toward the public domain.

### **Industrialization and New Social Definitions**

With the rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization in the nineteenth century, the condition and **social definition of childhood** began to change. The new economy no longer needed child labour and concerns grew about the working conditions of poor children who toiled twelve hours a day in unsanitary environments. Moreover, romantic definitions of children as naturally innocent combined with the movement to control idle youth in urban areas resulted in a perception of children as needing protection and education. A consequence of these social developments taken together resulted in child and adolescent schooling becoming the norm. Farm children as well as many children of immigrants escaped this rule for a long time: They were needed to help their families economically. Thus, the social reconstruction of children did not reach all social classes or all ethnic groups simultaneously.

The new attitude toward children as objects of emotional gratification rather than coworkers as well as the generally declining birth rate among the white middle class occurred concurrently with a new ideology of domesticity. It was characterized by an emphasis on **intensive mothering** and the

more frequently placed in their mother's custody following divorce.

## **The Twentieth Century**

Husbands' and wives' emotional relations and companionship had become more important aspects of marriage by the early 1900s. The division of labour by gender solidified, particularly among the middle class: Mothers were relegated to the **domestic sphere** while fathers became the exclusive breadwinners and their families' representatives in the public domains. But again these developments occurred unevenly throughout the social class system: The working class could not exactly afford to live without the wife's economic contribution. Nor could African Americans. Boarders became more common in cities, particularly in immigrant households until the 1940s, in order to supplement families' income. Thus, the separation of the domestic sphere from the public domain was at first a white middle-class phenomenon.

As the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unfolded, most families had become **units of consumption**: Productivity took place elsewhere and basic necessities had to be purchased. Family heads worked outside for wages or occasionally had an office or business attached to their home. Working-class children and particularly adolescents continued their contribution to the family economy as wage labourers until the 1920s and on farms until much later. White women entered the work force in great numbers during World War II in order to replace men who went abroad as soldiers. But when the war was over, women were encouraged to stay home. This situation lasted until the 1960s after which point their labour force participation continued to rise to this day. However, African-American women had long preceded their white counterparts in this respect as over 40 percent were employed already in 1900, and this figure is probably an underestimate.

Then, in the 1970s, adolescents re-entered the work force in part-time jobs in the service sector, in order to acquire discretionary spending money. By 1990, 61 percent of tenth graders and 90 percent of eleventh and twelfth graders worked at some time during the school year. By the close of the twentieth century, the requirements of the labour market in terms of education had given rise to two new life stages. First, that of young adulthood--which stretched adolescent dependence on parents longer. Second, that of preadolescence, largely the result of consumerism and media influences which sold lifestyles to children. Thus, children became more differentiated along age lines and more isolated from other age groups, including adults.

## **ADDITIONAL CLASS MATERIAL ON ITALIAN-CANADIAN FAMILIES**

By coming to this country to pursue new lives and find new opportunities, immigrant groups other than the French and British have transformed the Canadian social and cultural mosaic. Italian Canadians provide a telling example of an older immigrant group with unique cultural traditions and family structure that, over time, has melded into Canadian society while retaining many of its traditions and adhering to the importance of family. Italians began to arrive in significant numbers in the late 19th century. Between 1870 and 1900, Italian immigration to

Italian immigration resumed: The prosperous 1920s saw 26,183 new arrivals. In the 1930s, as immigration was restricted to protect Canadian workers during the Great Depression, only 3,898 Italians arrived. Then in 1940, Italy's fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, aligned Italy with Nazi Germany, and Canada, as an ally of Great Britain, went to war against Germany and Italy. The immigration of Italians came to a halt.

After the Second World War, Italian immigration to Canada resumed, and by 1981, over 500,000 Italians had come to this country—an immigrant group second in size only to that from the British Isles. Since then, Italy's economic situation has improved markedly via the European Economic Community. Consequently, Italian immigration to Canada and the U.S. has declined. Still, despite lower immigration rates, Italian Canadians retain a significant presence in Canada, numbering over one million. Indeed, after the United Kingdom and China, Italy is the third most common birthplace of immigrants to Canada.

Italians have traditionally placed great importance on family life and especially on family solidarity between all blood relatives, in-law relations, and godparents. "One's personal identity was derived from his family, and family membership was essential in terms of defining one's place in society.... The strength of the norm of solidarity meant that the disgrace of one member of the family affected everyone—a disobedient child was the concern not only of the parents but of the extended kin as well." The extended family was headed by a male *capo di famiglia*—usually the oldest married male member—who made the decisions about all family matters, including children's education, dowries, and funeral expenses. Although the Italian family was patriarchal, women were not without power. Even in Italy, a woman could own property and contribute economically to her family by working part-time in the fields. She also retained her dowry after marriage, which gave her economic leverage and went to her children, not her husband, upon her death.

Many aspects of traditional Italian culture and family life were transplanted to Canada. Primarily from poor and agrarian southern Italy, early Italian immigrants came largely as families. Unmarried Italian men who decided to stay in Canada soon contacted their families in Italy in order to find wives. As Ramirez (1989:12) notes, early Italian immigrants brought with them "a notion of the family that rested on strict norms of authority, mutual responsibilities and honour. The family was viewed essentially as a cooperative enterprise whose material and emotional well-being was dependent on the specific roles that the various members were expected to perform."

Men's responsibilities centred on providing for their families. Although the first waves of immigrants who reached Canada were largely peasants and farm labourers—and some Italian farming communities were founded in places like Naples, Alberta—the majority of men worked in industrial jobs: mining, logging, and building and maintaining the railway. Women, on the other hand, were relegated to the domestic realm and were responsible for producing homemade articles (both for their families and to exchange for other goods and services); processing and preserving food; raising domestic animals; and tending their gardens. As in Italy, women also continued to be responsible for maintaining kinship ties, particularly with female relatives, and

still evident in many Italian-Canadian homes after the Second World War. Although these first-generation immigrant Italian women were discouraged from entering the wage-labour force, it was not unusual for them to take in boarders and thus contribute to the family earnings.

At first, new immigrants brought with them Old World notions such as “pride in one’s village or regional origin”; identity as Canadians remained elusive. However, as they began to see Canada as a land of opportunity, many second- and third-generation Italians conformed to the social norms of the English-speaking majority, pursued an education, and began moving into the middle classes as restaurateurs, small business owners, and professionals. Migrating to cities—primarily Toronto and Montreal—they tended first to settle in areas with low real estate prices. Consequently, there emerged in every major city a “Little Italy” with Italian shops, restaurants, and a strong social life built around the Roman Catholic Church and social and cultural organizations.

Post-1945 immigration also says much about the cohesive nature of Italian-Canadian society built around family, kinship, and friends. By 1950, the federal government’s more liberal immigration policies allowed Canadian citizens to sponsor family members, including cousins, as new immigrants. In this way, and wanting to reunite their families, members of the established Italian-Canadian community brought family members from war-torn Italy to Canada, where housing and employment awaited them. In the post-war economic boom in Canada, labourers were needed in construction and in the burgeoning industries in southern Ontario. Thus, if an Italian bricklayer brought his brother or a cousin to Canada, his brother or cousin would also work as a bricklayer. As these new Canadians became established, they in turn sponsored other immigrants to Canada. In his study on Italian immigrants in Alberta, Aliaga (1994) found that family was a key factor in the decision to immigrate to Canada and to adjust to the new environment once they were here. More than 90 percent of all Italian immigrants who came to Canada between 1946 and 1967 were sponsored by a family member who was already residing here. This enhanced the already existing notion that, despite social divisions in the working-, middle-, and even upper-classes, Italian Canadians constituted a distinct ethnic community in which family was central. Admittedly, the majority of new Italian Canadians settled in Toronto and its hinterland; but because of overall increased immigration, other Italian communities across the entire country expanded proportionately.

Italian immigrant husbands tended to be more educated than their wives, but both were less educated than the general Canadian population. This situation is indicative of the low levels of education that Italians had when they immigrated to this country. As late as the 1980s, 50 percent of Italian-Canadian husbands had less than a Grade 9 education, compared to 22 percent of Canadian husbands. Likewise, 56 percent of Italian immigrant wives had less than Grade 9 education, compared to 21 percent of Canadian wives. However, only 8 and 10 percent of younger Italian males and females, respectively, had less than a Grade 9 education, indicating that significant improvements were being made in levels of education.

Howell et al. (2001) reported from their study on ethnic groups in Toronto and Montreal that the majority of Italian men who immigrated to Canada after the Second World War were employed

they tended to be employed in lower status occupations and earned less than the general population, they were more likely than other Canadians to own their own home, even an expensive one. As Ramirez (1989:14) notes: “This ancestral desire for a measure of economic and psychic security to be concretized in the possession of a house became part of Italian migration folklore: during the post-World War Two era, one of the most popular songs in Italy spoke of ‘a little house in Canada which had a pool with fish inside, was surrounded by lots of lily flowers, and was admired by passers-by.’”

The economic success of Italian immigrant families has been due in part to women’s economic contributions. Given that Italian immigrant men earned considerably less on average than Canadian men, women’s salaries in the post-1945 era were crucial to a family’s economic well-being. After the Second World War, large numbers of young Italian immigrant women entered the paid labour force, indicating greater gender equality among second and subsequent generations of Italian immigrants. Because of their lower educational levels, most Italian immigrant women gained employment in the clothing, food, and light-manufacturing industries, and in service jobs such as cleaning. Whereas 52 percent of Canadian-educated females were in the labour force, 63 percent of Canadian-educated Italian females were employed. In one instance, Aliaga (1994) found that 84.7 percent of married Italian women in Calgary were either employed or had been in the workforce. Many employed Italian mothers relied on family members, friends, and neighbours to help with the children in their absence.

Increased participation by females in the labour force is not the only change that has taken place amongst Italian Canadians. Research indicates that, as early as the 1950s, second and subsequent generations of Italian immigrants increasingly detached themselves from traditional Italian cultural values and family structures and assimilated into the Canadian population. There has been a steady increase in the number of Italians who speak English rather than Italian in their homes, and more Italian Canadians have married non-Italians. Where first-generation families tended to be large, families of second and third generations have become smaller; though still strongly attached to the Church, younger women do not want the same kinds of domestic burdens that affected their mothers and grandmothers. Canadian-educated Italians, who are typically second- and subsequent-generation Italians, are more likely to be single (never married) and to have lower fertility rates than foreign-educated Italians, who tend to be first-generation immigrants.

Evidence now suggests that as immigration has slowed and Italian Canadians have rejected large families, the Italian-Canadian community has begun shrinking relative to the rest of Canada’s population which has been increased by new arrivals. **Ethnic exogamy** (marrying a spouse of a different ethnic origin) amongst Italian Canadians is also contributing to assimilation. Ethnic exogamy amongst Italian-Canadian men has increased from 19 percent in 1921 to 33 percent in the 1990s. However, the percentage of ethnic exogamy amongst second and subsequent generations of Italian immigrants is even more telling—approximately 70 percent of Canadian-born Italians are married to a non-Italian spouse, compared to 20 percent for foreign-born Italian Canadians. Often, these changes have created intergenerational conflict, as many first-generation Italian immigrants do not understand how their children and grandchildren can abandon the most

the most part, Italian parents hoped that their children would marry other Italians from good families or, at the very least, marry Catholics from good families. As two students explain it,

*“My brother made my parents very happy because he married a ‘good’ Italian girl whereas my sister myself and my younger brother have been disappointments here.... Mind you we are all engaged or going out with persons of a better social class than us and this would make other parents happy but not mine.... My parents don’t even notice that my brother’s marriage is rather shaky....”*

*“My parents are second-generation Canadian and it was impossible for them to marry a person that was not Italian and my mother therefore did not marry the man she loved. But us three kids will marry as we wish even though I am fortunate enough to have met a nice and kind Italian fellow who on top of it all is a real hunk and my parents are happy with whoever we bring home provided they come from good families. But there are limits and even though I didn’t mind, when my brother brought a girl from Jamaica home, this didn’t go over well....”*

Despite the many ways that Italian immigrants have assimilated into Canadian culture, they have also preserved important aspects of Italian culture and the primacy of family. The daily activities of churches and community centres within Italian communities have been pivotal in keeping individuals of Italian descent connected and in sustaining various cultural practices. Large Italian weddings also provide a means of ethnic solidarity. “Guest lists of four hundred to six hundred people, generous gifts to the bridal couple, elaborate meals and drinks, and entertainment at the reception have all become cultural expressions of Italian spirit in Canada” (Howell et al., 2001:138). The Italian-Canadian community remains a vibrant and cohesive ethnic group built around the family and a strong sense of culture and heritage.

**HELP WITH ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS** (Located at the end of Chapter 2 in the textbook).

The analytical questions for this chapter 2 are fairly straightforward and involve several options.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION, PROJECTS, PAPERS**

1. Write a paper on other minority-group families in Canada with the help of the Internet/newspapers/magazines.
2. Analyze the contents of newscasts or newspapers pertaining to non-white families. What facts are reported? How can these facts be explained (i.e., theories related to social inequalities, social construction, social capital)? What conclusions could these facts lead to? What facts are not reported?



Chinese families: Those who left Hong Kong in the 1970s were different from those who left in the late 1990s, and from those who are now moving to Canada directly from mainland China. Sending countries do change so that the families which arrive also differ throughout the decades. One cannot assume that all families that originate from one country, but have arrived at different times and thus belong to different cohorts, have lived through exactly the same experiences and that they are the same. The sociohistorical contexts change in home countries. So do the immigrants they produce. As well, some immigrants originate from a rural background while others come from large cities, which bring additional differences.

4. The issue of arranged (and even forced) marriages can be discussed in this chapter or in the previous one in conjunction with polygamy—although arranged marriages occur in societies and groups that are not polygamous, such as India and among very orthodox Jews.
5. The issue of female feticide, particularly in China and India, can be discussed here or later in Chapter 8 on Family Formation. In this chapter, it can be discussed in terms of feminism, while in later chapters it can be discussed in terms of consequences for the population.

### **SUGGESTED WEBLINK**

Regarding topic 4 above, **Human Rights Watch** presents information on honour killings in India.  
[www.hrw.org/](http://www.hrw.org/) Search: honor killings, India

### **CHAPTER LINKAGES**

1. Concepts presented in Chapter 2 (such as patrilineal, neolocal, clans, etc) can be added to those presented in Chapter 1 in terms of family types. Arranged marriages can be added to the type of unions presented in Table 1.1. Chapters 1 and 2 complement each other in terms of definitions.
2. The theme of family diversity heralded in Chapter 1 forms one of the cornerstones of Chapter 2, both historically and cross-culturally.