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Confessions of a

Maine-iac:

The Family, Academia, and Modernity

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We are all familiar with the common media depictions of the family versus friends: Your family is an embarrassment, whereas your friends are the only ones who “truly” understand you. Alternatively, there is the “Full House” mentality, where the family is a place of perfection, and the all-knowing patriarch solves every dispute fully and instantaneously. Neither depictions, obviously, come close to the real ways in which families function. There is also an overwhelming notion that adolescence and early adulthood are a time of struggle for “freedom” and understanding of the self, often combined with the belief that there is a “true” self. Sociologist Lillian B. Rubin captures this conception nicely, stating:

Relations inside the family at this time [adolescence] are likely to be fraught with the conflict of the struggle for independence. Separation, autonomy, identity—all are continuing themes, all reaching new levels of intensity through the

adolescent years.... But all of it, the constraint and the freedom, is part of the way the child learns to determine the boundaries of the self, to find the space between conformity and rebellion that feels most comfortable, that permits the growth of individuality within the context of relatedness. (1985, pg. 110-111)

This essay seeks to explore the truth behind the “naturalness” of adolescent/young adult independence from the family, the importance (or over-importance) of individuality, and the links between the modern, American family and professional middle class academia. Clearly, the ideology of the family goes beyond media depictions and becomes a way of life that is supported and restricted by societal institutions. What is it about academia and the “liberal arts” experience that makes it so hard to go “home”? How does this revolve around the professional middle class ideology of what a family is and what functions a family serves, e.g. what is the role of a mother, what is the role of a daughter? What structural barriers are in place that compel students in higher education to experience “family” in a similar manner and seek their own independence apart from the family?

JUST AN ORDINARY FAMILY?

I come from a very close family. Or so I've been told. The thought never occurred to me until friends and acquaintances in college started labeling my family as such. I talk to my mother a minimum of four times a week. I have close connections with nearly all of my mother's seven siblings and their children. Though we are close emotionally, the same cannot be said geographically (except on holidays): currently my aunts, uncles, and cousins are living in nine different states and two different

countries. Eleven of them are flying half-way across the country to see me graduate this May (this number does not include either of my maternal grandparents who are unable to travel, but it does include my “nuclear” family, three aunts, an uncle, and two cousins). When my mother mentioned to me that everyone would be coming to my award ceremonies before graduation, I argued, “No, everyone doesn’t have to come to that. It’ll be so boring. Seriously, no one more than the immediate family [meaning nuclear] needs to come.” Her reply: “They’re coming all the way out for your graduation—they *are* your immediate family.”

As a near graduate of Macalester College, I am regretful that it has become increasingly difficult for me to be as close to my family as I have been in the past, both geographically and in regards to frequency of contact. Once I graduate, this will become even more difficult. I have known since I was little that, as an adult, I would most likely move out of my home state of Maine. As a child, this was a conscious decision to get out of “the middle of nowhere.” As I have gotten older, I have become increasingly aware of a desire to return to Maine. I have realized that my attachment to the state is actually an effect of my desire to remain close (geographically) to my family. Maine, as the birthplace of my maternal grandparents, is still the meeting ground for virtually all family gatherings. To me, the entire state has come to represent “home.” Regrettably, returning to Maine is something that seems nearly impossible at this stage in my life. This simply does not fit into the encouraged trajectory of professional middle class families. The recognition of these structural barriers led me to think of the relationship between my family, the family as an institution, and academia as an institution/way of life.

STRUGGLING WITH PROFESSIONAL NOTIONS OF THE FAMILY

I came to Macalester College partly as a reaction against my close, extended family and partly as a foot in the door of academia. I did not view my family as being “too close” or closer than “normal” but rather saw this as the natural reaction of an 18-year-old female who was trying to “find herself.” I chose a school 1500 miles away from home in order to strengthen my “self” and become more independent. This went starkly against the wishes of my mother, who would have preferred my matriculation at Boston University, a three-hour drive from my home and minutes away from my extended family in the Boston area. Torn over what decision to make, I sought the advice of a respected high school teacher. He emphasized the need to make my own decision, based on what would be best for *me*—separate from my family’s desires. At this point, I was seriously reconsidering my previous goal of becoming a teacher, and he underscored the importance of getting an undergraduate education at a liberal arts college such as Macalester in order to open up my opportunities for the future.

It is only as the years have passed at Macalester that I have realized how closely intertwined the ideals of the family are with those of academia and middle class professionalism and how the structures of the two reinforce one another. Buying into the notion of the modern, nuclear family as progressive and ideal, I sought to emulate this model. My decision to attend Macalester can be viewed as bounded by my understanding of what a family “should” be and what an appropriate goal is for a young adult. Young adults are encouraged and expected to reach their full potential, even if this goes against the interests of the family. In fact, the family is intended as a place to enrich children, so they are then able to

leave and reach their own full potentials. It is assumed that the individualized self-actualization of progeny *is* the purpose of the family and is thus in the family's best interest. Likewise, my choice of college was influenced by my understanding of what that institution "should" be and how it is able to help students: Being a part of an elite environment, such as Macalester would allow me the chance to "set off on my own" to reach my (ambiguous) full potential. Without these things, I would otherwise never be guaranteed "success" or "happiness."

TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

There are numerous structural and ideological ways in which academia and modernity have impacted the institution of the family. On a more concrete level, it is useful to examine the ways in which the accumulation of knowledge can have a distancing effect on students and their families. Lillian Rubin, in her discussion of family and friendship, argues that because the family has so much knowledge of one's past, family members remember the "old version" of one's self and hence are less accepting of changes in the self: "...the shared history, which consoles and reassures us with kin, too often disables them from seeing the person who lives today" (1985, pg. 28). The knowledge obtained from academic institutions can often have profound effects on the ideology of its students, whereas their families are presumably left intact, unchanged. This can create a divide between the way one views one's own "self" versus how one is assumed to be by one's family.

Particularly as a Sociology major, I have found this phenomenon to apply to my experiences with my own family. Though my family members generally consider themselves to be "liberal," my new idea of what it means to be "liberal" often

goes beyond their own definitions. My education on topics of gender, class, and race have led me to analyze the world and seemingly miniscule aspects of daily life in a way that most of my family simply does not understand or agree with. They are still supportive of my beliefs—they just do not always share them. It is hard for me, with my newfound obsession, not to receive complete validation from my family in this new area of my life.

As an example, I would consider the women in my family to be "feminists." They are relatively outspoken about the need for equality, the injustice of the "second shift," and so forth. However, a couple of years back, I came home for Christmas after reading a book on the sociology of marriage. In conversations with my family over the holiday, the topic of engagement and marriage came up. Sharing with my family some of the details that I had learned, I explained to them my moral opposition to the idea of an engagement ring because of what it symbolizes, the fact that it is something worn only by women, and the horror of the realities behind the diamond trade. While some of my female relatives remained silent and perhaps tacitly agreed, a few others were disturbed by this notion. I was told that I was "making a big deal out of nothing" and that it is "just a ring" and am still the butt of jokes about an "engagement kitten" (my facetious attempt at suggesting an alternative). It was easier for my family to accept those arguments that were less ideological—but also easier for them to find alternatives to "solve" the problem. For example, to my statement that it is a waste of money, I was told that the engagement ring my cousin bought his wife only cost one or two hundred dollars. To my objection to the sale of diamonds, I was told that I could simply have a ring with a different precious stone.

In the end, it appeared that my family was not able to accept the *heart* of my argument, as to them it seems a harmless tradi-

tion. I realize that almost all of these women are married and received engagement rings decades ago. Thus, it is probably hard for them to accept my argument wholeheartedly, as they made this decision years ago—possibly without even giving it a second thought. If they do not see their engagement rings as having negatively affected their own relationships, then why should it mine? But this explanation does not leave me satisfied. At the crux of this matter is the question of why it is so painful for me that they did not validate this new “self”? Did I view my family’s denial of my belief as evidence that, for them, family is expected to be more important than any individual moral? Perhaps they view the tradition of engagement rings as a symbolic strengthening of the family institution, which is too important for any individual “whim” to disrupt? Was I upset because I feel that it is “wrong” to place the family over the “self”? Furthermore, if family is important because of shared experience (as Rubin argues), then this leads to a potential breach in understanding when academia creates a divide in that shared experience. But why do Americans, in general, feel it is so vital that they are “completely understood” by those to whom they are close?

Both of these notions—that one must be completely understood and validated by family/friends and also that it is “wrong” to strengthen the family over the self at all costs—have an interesting relation to the ideal of independence/individualism. What ideology is reinforcing the notion that to be a “complete” person, you must seek your “self” in others, *but* if your “self” gets too intertwined with others (e.g., always putting family over the self), then this connotes weakness and a personal failing? In order to address this question, it is beneficial to look at the trajectory of sociological theories and the history of the American family.

THE MODERN IDEAL

One of the main tenets of Enlightenment thought was the notion of progress. Fundamental to this ideal was (and remains) the belief that as time passes, societies become increasingly superior and successful, as compared to those societies that are not seen to embrace modernity: There are traditional or “primitive” societies and modern or “progressive” societies. This belief in progress carried over to many “classic” and present-day social theorists. Functionalist Talcott Parsons (1951, cited in So 1990) argues that there are five sets of “pattern variables” that distinguish traditional societies from modern societies. Modern societies are (and should be) more impersonal, universalistic, achievement-oriented, and efficient (due to the division of labor). Individualism also prevails, where there is “encouragement to be yourself, to develop your own talent, to try your best, and to build up your own career” (So 1990, pg. 22).

With the accepted notion during the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries that modernity brings progress, it is not hard to see that changes in the family would also be viewed as natural and necessary progressions. The overarching theory of what it means to be “modern” permeates all aspects of life. Hence, if the new ideal is to have impersonal relationships, then this leaves the nuclear family as the appropriate, limited realm for affection. If the new ideal is individualism, then this affection within the nuclear family must end once adulthood is reached and children “set off” to become “whole.” Whereas the family was once a place of education, religious teaching, and shelter, the family now holds only the fixed responsibilities of childcare and acculturation. With this new, modern ideal of the family in place, those families that fail to conform to this standard are viewed as strange (at best) or pathological (at worst).

One only need look at contemporary theorists and news coverage to recognize that the modern, nuclear family is still held up as the ideal. Whitehead argues that single-parent and step-parent families are the source of “our most vexing social problems”:

These new families are not an improvement on the nuclear family, nor are they even just as good, whether you look at outcomes for children or outcomes for society as a whole. In short, far from representing society *progress*, family change represents a stunning example of social *regress*. (1993, cited in Rice 1998, pg. 552, emphasis mine)

Thus families that expand beyond the nuclear model are demonized and scapegoated. If one is working from within the limited framework of progressive modernity (discussed above), then single-parent or step-parent families become “regressive.” Both family types encourage familial relationships outside of the nuclear family. In step-parent families, children may now have two “moms” and two “dads;” in single-parent families, there is often a friend or family member who helps out. Such families are threateningly proximate to the communal, extended families of traditional societies and this connotes weakness. Single- or step-parent families are often simply viewed as a failed attempt at establishing a nuclear family, as opposed to a valid and healthy model for the family.

For some, the nuclear family can be a stable, functioning family unit, however, there is no reason to believe that it is the only or even the best model. Why should children and their parents be deprived of a wider range of support structures simply because this might limit (nuclear) family autonomy and personal “freedom”? Why should a couple remain in an unhappy

marriage simply because this goes against the accepted ideal? Though Enlightenment thought asserts that all decisions are based on rational, self-interest, there are many people who might be needlessly limiting themselves by trying to conform to an unrealistic and damaging ideal, simply because it is the accepted ideal. It is not always easy to discern what your “self-interest” is when all angles of society are telling you that one thing is best for you—especially if when put into context this ideal differs by country and time period.

DEAR OLD MACALESTER...

Looking back on my high school and early college experience, it is obvious that I was buying into the professional ideal of family. My decision to attend Macalester College can be viewed as my first real step in the direction of professional and individual life over family. In reaction to my “too close” family, I felt like I needed to “break free” from my family geographically to form “real” friendships. In high school, I was always measuring up the importance of family with friends. I knew that family would be around and that I most likely would not keep in touch with high school friends for the rest of my life. So my priority was family. I convinced myself to go to college 1500 miles away partially in an attempt to make “real” friends and connections, which I assumed was normal and healthy.

Especially during my first year of college, I felt that my “self” was too tied up in my notion of family. Whereas my roommate rarely ever talked to her parents, my mother often called multiple times in the same day. While I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life and trying to navigate the ever-complex world of dating, I was also still expected to help deal with the personal problems of my family members. I began to feel like I would never

be whole or complete unless I became my own person, separated from my family. This thought was compounded by the glorified media representations of the late teen and twenty-something years, where young adults are surrounded by friends with similar interests and are always having fun. Additionally, as mentioned above, I saw that my friends at college had a different kind of relationship with their families. It seemed like, without family obligations, they had much more free time for “fun” and were better able to fully enjoy their youth.

At an institution where the professional family is the norm, I was torn over what role family should play in my life and felt somewhat wronged. During this “privileged” time in my life, I felt I should be stress free. I saw my family commitments as causing me stress that I should not have to deal with. My mentality was very much about freedom and individuality—without any idea of obligation. Overwhelmed by the sense of what I “should” be doing in college, I began to feel resentment at the imposed need to make more friends and be “social”: I already had enough obligations from my family and old friends. To me, socializing could not be equated with family, and so I felt like I was continuously performing a chore that kept me from being a normal and healthy social individual. Freedom, to me, came to symbolize a cutting off of all obligations and ties (and the guilt that was associated with those obligations I felt I did not truly fulfill). Sociologist Robert Bellah explains this new ideology of freedom as a larger part of Enlightenment theory:

Freedom is perhaps the most resonant, deeply held American value.... Yet freedom turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people's values, ideas or styles of life forced upon one.' But 'if the entire world is

made up of individuals, each endowed with the right to be free of others' demands, it becomes hard to forge bonds of attachment to, or cooperation with other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one's freedom (Bellah cited in Coontz 1992, pg. 51-52).

With the overwhelming pressure to be normal, “to be yourself, to develop your own talent, to try your best, and to build up your own career” (So 1990, pg. 22), there is little room left for interdependence or mutual obligation.

The general atmosphere at a closed academic institution, such as Macalester, reinforces this mentality. In the individualized education system of the United States, the focus is on each student's knowledge and growth. One of the major goals is to prepare students for the ubiquitous “professional world” that they will need to navigate later on in life. Particularly at college, this professional world is very much separated from the world of family. At college, few people know your family and the main emphasis is on the development of the student. In the context of professional growth, there is little room for anything outside of individualized knowledge and preparation. Though you may discuss family problems with friends, it is an individual choice to do so. It is assumed that the break from the family already occurred when you left for college. Students are encouraged to take summer internships, which often prevent them from spending the summer break with family. In this manner, a summer with the family represents professional regress, whereas a summer internship is viewed as a necessary step in professional growth. The only family you are expected to have is perhaps the one you will create with a fellow student—you are to become an academically-oriented nuclear couple, with a shared experience of professional accultur-

ation.

Academic institutions are able to separate families both emotionally and geographically. It is interesting to note that of the eight children in my mother's family, the four who received undergraduate degrees in their youth left the state of Maine. The four who did not (though my mother received her undergraduate degree in her 30s, after she had children) still live in Maine, a short drive from their birthplace. Likewise, of my maternal grandmother's four siblings, the one daughter who graduated with a four-year degree is no longer in Maine. This pattern is perhaps more noticeable in rural states, such as Maine. The notion of progress (or lack thereof) discredits the state of Maine, as it does the extended family. Maine is known to have a "brain drain," where successful, professional residents move out of state once they have finished their education. As a rural state that prides itself on simplicity, Maine is not usually viewed as modern or progressive. It is an appropriate place to go on vacation to relax from the "real world," but it is not a place to live a successful life. Maine represents tradition and a "turn back to the past," as opposed to the excitement and stimulation of a more urban area. Aside from ideology, there are also often fewer job opportunities within the state for professionals. The interdependence stressed by a rural way of life is often viewed in a negative light, much like the idea of interdependence in the family.

THE FEAR OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Obviously, interdependence for humans is necessary during early childhood. Given the importance of rational thought and independence, the only place to show "weakness" or emotion would be in this specific family context where it was necessary. Stephanie Coontz discusses the mounting fear of interdependence begin-

ning in the Enlightenment period:

A growing preoccupation with personal equality, individual self-reliance, and objective contractual rights made it very hard for theorists to incorporate positive notions of interdependence or neediness into their ideal models of socioeconomic and political arrangements. Instead, liberal theory projected all dependence onto women and children, relocating interdependence in "natural" gender and age relations: men's protection of women and children and women's personal nurturing qualities (1992, pg. 44).

It is interesting how easily this meshes with the professional notion of the progressive life trajectory: Weakness and emotion is acceptable only when mothers (or perhaps fathers) have to take care of helpless children. However, as soon as those children are old enough to "make their way in the world," the strings are cut and parents are left with an "empty nest."

Even the words "children" or "child" are a reflection of cultural assumptions of what this relationship means. To say "children" conveys youth—as opposed to a relational connection between two family members. Implicit is the assumption that "childhood" or the state of being a "child" is a very limited part of your life. Between parent and child all obligation and responsibility is one-sided, where the parent gives and the child receives. Even in cases where an adult child is forced to take care of his or her elderly parents, this is often viewed as an unfortunate and tragic life event.

"[If] The character traits that keep families together are associated in all other arenas of life with immaturity or nonrationality, family interdependence is now the only thing that stands in the way of 'self-actualization'" (Coontz 1992, pg. 120).

As noted above, it was not until I was in college that my family was deemed “too close.” In high school, my mother was actually less strict than those of most of my friends, and so there was no reason to think that she was too controlling or too much a part of my life. When children are still under the age of eighteen, the parents’ expected job is to protect them and watch out for them. It is only when this personal tie goes beyond what is deemed “childhood” that it becomes abnormal or “too much of a good thing.” While other parents fear that calling their college-aged children hinders the children’s ability to “make it” and be healthy, my mother assumes that a connection with family *is* a main life goal. This is in stark opposition to the assumed relationship between parents and children during the “college years.” As an example, when a close friend’s grandfather died, his parents waited two weeks to tell him for fear that it might stress him out too much. Ironically, matters such as this simply stress him out more, because he is always trying to figure out what his family is hiding from him.

The fear of interdependence is reinforced by academic knowledge acquired while at progressive institutions such as Macalester. For instance, psychology teaches family life cycle theory, which has very confined notions about what makes a “normal” family. The healthy family consists of a heterosexual, two-parent, nuclear household. It is considered pathological for family members to be too close. Roles in the family are extremely rigid, with an assumed hierarchy between the various members. Joy Rice (1998) criticizes this framework as a “deficit comparison model in which variations from the intact nuclear family are regarded as dysfunctional, problematic, and inadequate” (p. 552). With the full weight of “scientific knowledge” behind theories such as family life cycle, students are likely to compare their own families with this ideal and fall short.

RETHINKING THE IDEAL

Given my aforementioned “dread” of the family, it may seem strange that I have come to distrust the professional notion of what a family should be. It is hard for me to pinpoint what exactly led to this change. There are two factors that seem significant.

My closest friend from high school comes from an extremely unsupportive family. As evidence of the importance of family support in the academic experience, she left college after one year because her family was neither supporting her emotionally nor financially. To some extent, she has been adopted into my family and has spent several holidays with us. Whenever I complain about the stifling effects of the family, she reminds me of how lucky I am to have family that cares about you and is willing to support you. The contrast between her experiences and mine underscore just how valuable a family support system can be. Though clichéd, I have now come to focus on the positive aspects of my close family, instead of only the negative.

An important turning point in the realization of the positive aspects of family came when I was entering my sophomore year of college. At the end of the summer, I came down with mononucleosis and was the sickest that I have ever been in my life (complete with liver damage that turned me yellow and a horrible, itching rash all over my body). Away from school, my family members were the ones who took care of me. I came to value having such a large, extended network of support at a time when I was unable to reject the interdependence of my family structure. Though frustrating at times, I began to understand that it can be worth the trouble it takes to maintain so many close and even long-distance ties due to the mutual benefits they afford.

BALANCING OBLIGATION: FEMINISM AND THE FAMILY

Though I no longer feel that separation from the family is the best and only way to be happy and succeed professionally, I can still see the ways in which my experiences at Macalester have separated me from my family. In spite of my continuing connection with my family, I will not be returning to Maine after graduation. I will be spending the summer with my family, as sort of a symbolic reaffirmation of our bonds. However, after that I will be “leaving the flock” to try to find a job and figure out exactly what it is that I want to do with my life. It’s hard for me to decide what role I believe family should play in my life. Though I know that the mythical nuclear, separated-at-graduation family is not what I desire, it is difficult to determine how my own family can fit into my future life.

Essential in answering the question of what role the family should play in one’s life is an understanding of what the “self” is and should be. Should we privilege the idea of an individualized self over that of a contextualized self? Does my “self” belong to my family as much as it does to myself? In her discussion of family and friendship, Rubin (1985) highlights the importance of a shared history among family members: Who else could tell me about the operation I had on my nose when I was one-and-a-half? The family can help you “remember” and construct aspects of your self to which you otherwise would not have access. Rubin further contends that the boundaries between one’s “self” and one’s friends are much more clear than those between one’s “self” and one’s family. Rubin argues that this is why friends are able to help you out in times of crises when your family cannot. But is this really the ideal? Rubin takes it for granted that it is “natural” to seek independence from the family and operates from within a fixed framework. She assumes that

one’s self is the most important person in times of crisis. Therefore, it is damaging to the self if your family tries to understand your problems as part of a larger system of obligation. On the other hand, friends view only your present, isolated self and are able to provide individualized support. However, if the “selves” of your family are bound up in your own self, perhaps you have an obligation to them as well. Though every decision may seem like an individual choice, when placed in a familial context it becomes much larger than your own, private decision. How can a balance be reached between obligation to the self and obligation to one’s family (not to mention obligation to society in general)?

In this discussion of obligation, it is vital to underscore the history of subjugation and mistreatment that has been rationalized as “healthy obligation.” In the practice of “mutual obligation” it often happens that she or he with the most power ends up with fewer obligations, and those with less power have more obligations that they “deserve” and for which they are responsible. Coontz (1992) postulates that part of the original reason for eschewing interdependence during the Enlightenment was a desire to eliminate the oppressive “obligations” imposed by the ruling class. This reality of inequality is also evident in many first- and second-wave feminist arguments that the family is a place of repression for women, whereas the professional sphere is a place of freedom. Historically, women have been the ones left with “obligations” to husbands and children; (upstanding) white women were placed on a pedestal because of their self-sacrifice for the family.

It is important not to underestimate the extent to which inequality negates the benefits of (supposed) mutual obligation. However, the historical family relations criticized by first- and second-wave feminists did not amount to true mutual obligation. While men were dependent on

women for love or comfort, women were economically and legally dependent on men. Particularly if, as argued above, the family was the only place where interdependence was acceptable, the weakness and bulk of the duties of “interdependence” would necessarily fall on women. Furthermore, this ideology allowed for the flourishing of benevolent sexism, where “good” women are all that is pure and noble, are protected by men, and also “complete” men. In opposition to the “good” woman is the “fallen” or “bad” woman who is blamed for all of society’s ills (a prime contemporary example is the single mother).

While it is important to create an awareness of inequality, discounting the value of the family as a response to this has not, on the whole, been beneficial for women. In general, women are still responsible for the bulk of family “obligations”—they merely receive little credit or validation for the work that they do in the home. Though women should have no obstacles to success in the professional sphere, they (and men as well) should not be discouraged from having close ties within the family or told that the family, by nature, represents societal regression. This ideology simply plays back into the limited notion of “progress” that was discussed earlier. This biased notion of progress is evident in the writings of many first- and second-wave feminists. Betty Frieden (cited in Ehrenreich 1990, 1983) holds up the ideals of both progress and middle class superiority. Frieden approaches feminist theory from the assumption that a family should be a strong and autonomous unit. The fact that women are housewives is what *causes* the inappropriate dependence of children; she believes that this “progressive demoralization” (Frieden, cited in Ehrenreich 1990, pg. 41) is what must be prevented. Women, unable to take part in the world of men, were falling dangerously close to lifelong interdependence with the family and were spreading

this “disease” to their children.

Frieden was right in some respects—women should not be limited to the role of housewife, and they should not have to place the family’s well being over their own. But neither should they be told that it is wrong to be a housewife nor that familial relationships should *always* come second to the desires of the self.

TOWARDS A CONTEXTUALIZED VIEW OF THE SELF

The questions remain: Can there be interdependence without a reality of stark inequality? Is it possible to move away from the confining paradigm of progress in order to develop a less judgmental theory of the family? Perhaps the recognition of the true value of what has been traditionally deemed “women’s” work—but disconnected from the idea of gender—would be a tangible improvement. Maybe gendered families are able to produce gender aschematic children. For instance, though my family is heavily gendered, I feel that it is still a source of support *and* “liberation” for me as a woman. While the women in my family are, to some extent, trapped in gender roles, they have always been extremely independent and self-sufficient. Though it has always been very obvious that family is the most important thing in my mother’s life, she has also always made it clear that family is not the *only* thing in her life. When I was younger, and we would discuss the “what ifs” of the future if she were to win the lottery, she always emphasized that she would not quit her job: “I like to work. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself otherwise.” Due to my mother’s dissatisfaction in her fixed gender role, she has encouraged and supported me in my attempt to ensure that my life situation is different from hers. There are, obviously, some limitations to this support as discussed earlier with my views on engagement rings.

However, in the grand scheme of things, this does not negate the overwhelming support and acceptance that she gives me.

As a way to more broadly interpret the “family,” it is useful to explore the idea of a contextualized, as opposed to individualized self. Coontz states that in precapitalist societies “definitions of self were always contextual, because the self did not pick and choose relations with others; it emerged out of these relations and remained dependent on them” (1992, pg. 45). Though we do not want to replicate the past, it is also important that we realize the past is not *all* bad, just as the present is neither all bad nor good. Moving (back) toward a more contextual view of the self does not have to mean regression—and neither does it mean progression simply because we are moving forward in time. Perhaps keeping in mind one’s past, in addition to one’s present and future, will create a vision of a more complete self that will not necessitate a break with the family. As sociologists, we are taught to place all things in context—so why should the “self” be an exception?

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