

## Family in constant flux, despite traditional ideals, UF author says

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Ozzie and Harriett could say “Father Knows Best” and “Leave it to Beaver,” but a University of Florida author of a new book finds that stay-at-home moms and traditional marriage have seldom been the prevailing standards throughout history.

Polygamy, bisexuality, homosexuality, philandering men and working women have been accepted in many societies throughout recorded history, said John Scanzoni, a UF sociology professor and author of “Healthy American Families: A Progressive Alternative to the Religious Right,” published earlier this year by Praeger.

“Ever since humans have been around, we’ve been continually altering, tinkering, tweaking, reinventing and changing every aspect of our families,” he said.

One example of a failure to understand how [family](#) life has evolved to meet people’s needs is the argument that homosexual marriage is wrong because it violates the ancient moral ideal that marriage is the union of one man and one woman, he said.

“Throughout history in most parts of the world, people believed that the right and moral thing to do was for one man to have several wives,” he said.

The vast majority of the world’s populations practiced some form of polygamy, which was invented by men primarily for their own economic

and social benefit, Scanzoni said. A man wanted to be assured that his land and livestock would be passed onto his sons after he died, and having multiple wives increased his chances of having male heirs, he said.

“Insights into polygamous marriage – including male promiscuity – can be gotten by reading the stories of revered Bible characters such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David,” he said.

The Greeks and Romans began to move away from polygamy for practical reasons, but men still had sex before and after marriage with as many women as they wished, Scanzoni said. Furthermore, many Greco-Roman men were bisexual, and many Greek thinkers believed the most profound love occurred between two men, not between a man and woman, he said.

“Plato, for instance, believed sex with one’s wife was necessary in order to bear children for the sake of family honor, but for sexual ecstasy one turned to one’s male lover,” he said.

Along with accepting alternate forms of sexuality, people have long been receptive to the idea of women in the labor force, Scanzoni said. Prior to the early 19th century Industrial Revolution, women typically worked alongside their husbands on farms and many also carried on vital occupations such as seamstress and midwife, he said.

“There was no sense at all in people’s minds that women should not do productive labor; the woman’s labor was as essential as the man’s for the survival of the household,” he said. “Women did not grow up thinking a man would support them, unless they belonged to that tiny handful of elite upper-class women who were aristocrats or royalty.”

During the Industrial Revolution, women, men and their children left

their farms to work in factories, but many men eventually moved to the board room to become the core of the emerging middle class while women were excluded from these economic opportunities and encouraged to stay home, he said.

“For the first time in history a new style of marriage was born, in which the husband was provider and the wife was homemaker, and it permeated late 19th and 20th century America, becoming the 1950s style of marriage championed by the Religious Right,” he said.

Today, however, there has been a shift away from that option as increasing numbers of younger, well-educated women view work just as men do, as essential for gaining a sense of autonomy or control over one’s life, he said.

A second reason for the change is that during the current economic crisis men have been more likely than women to lose their jobs, Scanzoni said. The downturn has highlighted how essential women’s earnings are to the economic well-being of the household; underscoring that just as men don’t have the option not to work, neither do women, he said.

“The male as primary breadwinner used to be practical when men earned more than women,” he said. “But as women start to earn more or even the same money as men, that male breadwinner role no longer makes any economic sense.”

Recent census data show that in large urban centers, and for the first time ever, child-free [women](#) in their 20s earn more than young men, he said.

Provided by University of Florida

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