

Modern families and the winter holidays

December 12 2012, by Andrew Baulcomb

Norman Rockwell defined the winter holidays for an entire generation with his depictions of rosy-cheeked children and their doting parents set against a heartfelt winter wonderland.

But much has changed since the Post War heyday of Rockwell, says Melanie Heath, assistant professor in the Department of Sociology. The [family](#) unit has become a lot harder to define, and many holiday traditions are simply changing with the times.

"The norm of this idealized family—a white, middle-class, married couple with their biological children and grandchildren—has changed substantially in the past 50 years," says Heath. "Historically, wives usually had fewer rights than husbands, and were expected to be subservient. Most importantly, marriage was largely an economic arrangement in which romantic love was not seen as important."

According to Heath, whose research specializes in gender, sexuality and [social inequality](#), modern couples set their own parameters in terms of what defines the word "family," and who sits at the head of the table. Love and commitment are still valued, but so are individual desires and personal freedoms.

"Today, family members gathering to celebrate the holidays can be configured around a lesbian or gay couple who are married or not. They might be an interracial couple with their children. The dinner table might include a couple and the couple's exes, who celebrate together with children and [stepchildren](#)."

Across the country, [family demographics](#) are changing in a big way. More same-sex partners are getting married, but fewer couples of any orientation are walking down the aisle and saying, "I do." In the 1961 census, [married couples](#) accounted for more than 91 per cent of Canadian families. Five decades later, that number has dropped to 67 per cent. The number of lone-parent families in Canada has almost doubled over that same time, from 8.4 to 16.3 per cent, and the average number of children per household has dropped from 2.7 to 1.9.

Greater ethnic and racial diversity in Canada has also redefined the family unit, says Heath, and fewer holiday traditions are linked to religious observances.

"Families often went to church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day to celebrate the birth of Christ. Today, Canadians are not as religious as they were 50 or 60 years ago, and there are fewer tendencies to partake in such religious ceremonies and traditions," says Heath. "This secularization has meant an increase in other kinds of rituals, centered on commercialism and shopping. Time spent together as a family might include a trip to the local mall, for example."

Provided by McMaster University

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