# Extended Definition of the word 'family'

We use words in our everyday life by comprehending their definitions or meanings. In fact, we are using many common words, without understanding the actual depth of the word in language. Sometimes, some words may have cultural, historic and social implications on the definition or meaning that it actually has. In this paper, I am trying to provide an extended definition of a very common word 'family' by analyzing how it evolved historically, culturally and socially.

As per the website of *Worldwide Words*, the word 'family' came into English in the fifteenth century only. The roots of the word can be traced back to the Latin word *famulus* which means "servant". The oldest English meaning of the word 'family' was almost equivalent to the modern word 'household'. In those days, the definition of 'family' implied a group of people who are in blood relations living in the same house. It also included servants. In eighteenth century, the word was used even to refer exclusively to the set of servants in a home. For example, "to take someone into one's family" meant that the person would be employed as a servant. Gradually, the definition was extended to mean those who are successors of a common ancestor or a house. For example, we say "the house of Windsor" referring to the whole kin group of the present British royal family. The word 'family' would also be used to describe a wider grouping of people who are considered as having equally descended from a common ancestor. We can see that word is used with similar implications in the Authorized Version of the Bible in 1611. In some places, the Bible uses the word 'family' to represent a tribe. For example, when it says "By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations", the word 'family' defines a tribe and not 'near kin'. (World Wide Words, 1998)

We have only some assumptions regarding the shift of the definition of the word 'family' from 'household including servants' to 'near kin' which is the current definition in our times. Scholars say that the change could have taken place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in a very slow pace. It would not have been completed until the early nineteenth century. (World Wide Words, 1998). As per the Online Etymology Dictionary, in early 15th century, the word 'family' meant "servants of a household". It also states that the word originated form the Latin word *familia* which meant 'family' servants or domestics together. As per this website, the word has an abstract noun form made from the word *famulus* which would mean "servant, slave" etc.  The website doesn't give any information about the origin of this definition for the word. (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The Latin word *famulus* has been very rarely found to have the sense 'parents and their children' as it currently has. The word *domus* was used to mean 'parents with their children'. One of the derivatives of *famulus* include *famula* which means 'serving woman or maid' and 'familiaris' which means "of one's household, private'.  (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.)

While researching the early history of the word 'family', we can see that the related adjective 'familiar' is linked to the early meaning of 'family'. The word 'familiar' would mean 'someone closely associated or a servant', 'someone of one's own household' etc. We can see that currently we comprehend the word 'familiar' with no implications of blood relationships.  We can see that the definition or meaning of the word 'family' has changed in a way that it matches closer to our modern concept of extended 'family'. Still it stays close to the original definition of 'household' in some other ways. (World Wide Words, 1998)

Researchers have opined that there are several social factors that have contributed to the shift of the definition of 'family'. Britain has undergone a social revolution in which households with servants were started to be considered as a unique and isolated group. The rise of the middle class was a substantial social change and it was closely connected to property. The change in the meaning of 'family' is considered as a consequence of this social change. Some scholars point out the separation of a man's business or occupation from his domestic and personal affairs as a contributing factor for the shift. However, this separation was complete only by early 19th century. This separation was most obvious among the lower middle and working classes. Thus, it also explains why there is a different sense of understanding the word 'ancestry' among the upper class when compared to the middle and lower class. (World Wide Words, 1998). As quoted in the Century Dictionary, in the 1540s, definition of 'family' gave a sense of a "collective body of persons who form one household under one head and one domestic government, including parents, children, and servants, and as sometimes used even lodgers or boarders". Around 1660s, the word meant "parents with their children, residing together or not". In the same period, it also meant persons who were in blood relations including uncle, aunts and cousins. From 1753, the meaning took a shift to a scientific classification, between genus and order. (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.)

The word 'family values' was first recorded on 1966. From 1809, the word 'family circle' appeared. In 1809, the word 'family man' would mean "a man devoted to wife and children, man inclined to lead a domestic life". As mentioned in Century Dictionary, in 1902, the word 'happy family' would mean "an assemblage of animals of diverse habits and propensities living amicably, or at least quietly, together in one cage". (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.) We cannot find a meaning for the word 'family' which is universal and natural. From the point of view of

sociologists, this word is defined by humans just like any other social aspect of humans. Considering the recent social history of US, we can see that related by blood and married as a spouse are the two ways to be counted as one's 'family'. Sociologists say that this definition can change anytime over the course of time as the definition came from human conceptions. (Grollman, 2010)

There is no doubt that the meaning of 'family' has changed over the years. The change has cultural, historic and social implications. Some famous sociologists tried to find out the evolution and change in the meaning of the word 'family' in their book, *Counted Out: Same-Sex Relations and Americans' Definitions of 'family'*. The study included surveys that contained at least 2300 participants.  The study revealed interesting facts about people's conceptions on the word. Participants were asked whether heterosexual couples with or without children, same sex couples with or without children etc were counted as families within its definition. In the current socio-cultural settings in the United states, the one and only one definition of 'family', that most of the participants endorsed is that of a married heterosexual couple with children. About 92 % counted such couples without children also as ''family''. As per the research results, the sociologists team concluded that the two important criteria required for defining 'family' are marriage and children. (Grollman, 2010)

In this modern times, we can see our own perspective towards the definition of the word 'family' has experienced a gradual shift. We are seeing the families of lesbian, gay and transgenders. So, our surviving definition of 'family' itself is undergoing change. (Grollman, 2010). In the united states, same sex couples are increasingly getting accepted in the society. The number of people who have an LGBT friend or a 'family' member is on the rise. More and more Americans tend to believe that genetics determine sexual orientation rather than other factors like

God's will, peers influence or parenting style. As per a 2006 survey, 30% of Americans would not consider same-sex couples as families though they count pets as 'family'. (Grollman, 2010).

In a recent mention by the Church of England's Children's Society, the institution defined the meaning of 'family' as "an emotionally supportive network of adults and children, some of whom live together or have lived together". The liberal statement seems to be a mismatch from this traditional institution. However, when considering the historic and social evolution of the word, we can see that the statement is in good match with what the word meant in older years. (World Wide Words, 1998)

The historic evolution of the word 'family' may be a bit difficult for common people to understand as we can only imagine how the meaning and definition could have evolved from 'household servants' to the so called ''family'' which usually consists of parents and their children. However, we can easily understand how the definition and meaning may have changed over a period of time considering the cultural and social factors. The families of gay men and lesbian women set out as example for us in that regard.

References

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