

## American Family Decline, 1960–1990: A Review and Appraisal

*Contrary to the view of some academics that the family in America is not declining but just changing, the thesis of this article is that family decline since 1960 has been extraordinarily steep, and its social consequences serious, especially for children. Drawing mainly on U.S. Census data, family trends of the past three decades are reviewed. The evidence for family decline is appraised in three areas: demographic, institutional, and cultural. It is argued that families have lost functions, power, and authority, that familism as a cultural value has diminished, and that people have become less willing to invest time, money, and energy in family life, turning instead to investments in themselves. Recent family decline is more serious than any decline in the past because what is breaking up is the nuclear family, the fundamental unit stripped of relatives and left with two essential functions that cannot be performed better elsewhere: childrearing and the provision to its members of affection and companionship.*

Family decline in America continues to be a debatable issue, especially in academia. Several scholars have recently written widely-distributed trade books reinforcing what has become the establishment position of many family researchers—that family decline is a “myth,” and

that “the family is not declining, it is just changing” (Coontz, 1992; Skolnick, 1991; Stacey, 1990). Many academic books (and dozens of articles) have echoed the same theme, including one outspokenly entitled *The Myth of Family Decline* (Dornbusch & Strober, 1988; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Kain, 1990; Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989). Even Father Andrew Greeley (1991) has weighed in, claiming on the basis of telephone surveys that marriage in America is stronger than ever.

My view is just the opposite. Like the majority of Americans, I see the family as an institution in decline and believe that this should be a cause for alarm—especially as regards the consequences for children. In some sense, of course, the family has been declining since the beginning of recorded history—yet we’ve survived. But often overlooked in the current debate is the fact that recent family decline is unlike historical family change. It is something unique, and much more serious. The argument for this position, and the evidence to support it, are provided below.

### OVERVIEW

At the beginning of this century there was a widespread belief that the childrearing functions of the family, coming to full fruition, would stamp the character of our era. In this century’s first decade, for instance, the famous Swedish feminist Ellen Key (1909) wrote a book called *The Century of the Child*. Translated into several

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languages, it quickly became a European best seller. Key maintained that the twentieth century would be focused on the expansion of children's rights, most importantly the right of the child to have a happy, stable home with devoted parents. The American historian Arthur W. Calhoun (1945) reiterated this theme in the first major history of the American family, published in 1917-1919: "On the whole it cannot be doubted that America has entered upon 'the century of the child'. . . . As befits a civilization with a broadening future, the child is becoming the center of life" (p. 131).

By midcentury a higher proportion of American children were growing up in stable, two-parent families than at any other time in American history (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1988; Modell, Furstenberg, & Strong, 1978). To this degree these early commentators were prescient. Whatever else it may have been, the decade of the 50s was certainly an era of high birthrates, high marriage rates, low divorce rates, and general family "togetherness" and stability. Children were highly valued by their parents and by their culture. It was also, of course, the heyday of the so-called "traditional nuclear family," the family consisting of a heterosexual, monogamous, life-long marriage in which there is a sharp division of labor, with the female as full-time housewife and the male as primary provider and ultimate authority.

But since the 1950s the situation for children, far from being the focus of national concern, has in many ways grown progressively worse. In the past 30 years, with remarkable speed, we have moved ever further from the position of a family, and a culture, that places children at the center of life (National Commission on Children, 1991; Select Committee on Children, Youth, & Families, 1989). As we approach the end of the twentieth century, it appears that early prognosticators of a child-centered society were well wide of the mark.

The abrupt and rapid change in the situation of families and children that began in the 1960s caught most family scholars by surprise. At first there was great reluctance to admit that a dramatic change was underway. But, although they may differ about its meaning and social consequences, scholars of all ideological persuasions now view the change as momentous and profound. The liberal authors of a recent history of the American family put it this way: "What Americans have witnessed since 1960 are fundamental challenges

to the forms, ideals, and role expectations that have defined the family for the last century and a half" (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988, p. 204). A conservative family scholar similarly opined: "The social assumptions that had guided human conduct in this nation for centuries were tossed aside with a casualness and speed that were astonishing" (Carlson, 1987, p. 1).

In what ways has the family in America actually changed over the past 30 years? Below, I sketch out the answer to this question with the help of the latest statistics (from the U.S. Census, unless otherwise indicated) and recent social science findings. Data are presented contrasting the American family situation in the late 1980s and early 1990s with that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period just prior to the time when the massive family changes began to occur. The data support the thesis, I shall argue, that this period has witnessed an unprecedented decline of the family as a social institution. Families have lost functions, social power, and authority over their members. They have grown smaller in size, less stable, and shorter in life span. People have become less willing to invest time, money, and energy in family life, turning instead to investments in themselves.

Moreover, there has been a weakening of child-centeredness in American society and culture. Familism as a cultural value has diminished. The past few decades have witnessed, for the first time in America history, the rise of adult-only communities, the massive voting down of local funds for education, and a growth in the attitude of "no children allowed." Both in the political process and in the market place, children's issues have been ignored.

#### WHAT IS A "FAMILY"?

What, exactly, is the institutional entity that is declining? Answering such a question may seem a spectacularly unexciting way to begin, but the term *family* has been used in so many ambiguous ways in recent years that the explanation of its use has special importance. Indeed, the term has even become controversial. The struggle over how it should be defined, as is now well known, helped to prematurely end the 1980 White House Conference on Families. Some participants wanted the term to refer to the traditional family; others wanted it to include, for example, a homosexual couple living together. How the term is defined for legislative purposes, of course, makes a

significant difference. A unit defined as a family may be in line to receive such special benefits as housing, health care, and sick leave. The controversy over defining the family is very much alive today in classrooms, conferences, and legislatures across the nation.

Family is a “nice” term, one with which we all want to be associated in some way, and therein lies a problem. The term has become a sponge concept, with multiple meanings that can include two friends who live together, the people who work in an office, a local unit of the Mafia, and the family of man. I wish to restrict the term to its most common meaning of a domestic group—a group in which people typically live together in a household and function as a cooperative unit, particularly through the sharing of economic resources, in the pursuit of domestic activities.

Within this meaning of a domestic group, I do not use the term *family* to refer exclusively to parents and their children, as some traditionalists would have it. But neither do I include any two or more people who happen to live together, such as roommates or even adults who merely have an intimate relationship of some kind. I define the family as a relatively small domestic group of kin (or people in a kin-like relationship) consisting of at least one adult and one dependent person. This definition is meant to refer particularly to an intergenerational unit that includes (or once included) children, but handicapped and infirm adults, the elderly, and other dependents also qualify. And it is meant to include single-parent families, stepfamilies, nonmarried and homosexual couples, and all other family types in which dependents are involved.

This definition is not all-purpose, and will not please everyone. Many will doubtless wish that I had included a married couple with no dependents. But it is important to distinguish a mere intimate relationship between adults, no matter how permanent, from the group that results when children or other dependents are present; this is the important point missed by scholars who want us to redefine the family as a sexually bonded or sexually based primary relationship (e.g., Scanzoni et al., 1989). Conservatives will bemoan the fact that the traditional nuclear family is not the focus. Others will object that the definition focuses on a discrete domestic group, arguing that parents need not be living together (as in the case of divorce). And there will be concern that the definition is not broad enough to include many family forms prominent in other cultures, such as

that consisting of several kin groups living in a single, complex household. If the definition were more inclusive, however, it would be less meaningful. The domestic group of kin with dependents is its focus; this lies at the heart of most people’s meaning of family.

Turning from the question of what a family is to what a family does, the domestic kin groups should be thought of as carrying out certain functions (or meeting certain needs) for society. These functions or needs, as spelled out in almost every textbook of marriage and the family, have traditionally included the following: procreation (reproduction) and the socialization of children; the provision to its members of care, affection, and companionship; economic cooperation (the sharing of economic resources, especially shelter, food, and clothing); and sexual regulation (so that sexual activity in a society is not completely permissive and people are made responsible for the consequences of their sexuality.)

Saying that the institution of the family is declining is to say that the domestic kin groups are weakening in carrying out these functions or meeting these societal needs. In other words, for whatever reasons, families are not as successfully meeting the needs of society as they once were (this generalization, of course, does not mean all families). There are many possible reasons for such weakening. It may be that societies are asking less of family members because functions the family has traditionally carried out are no longer as important as they once were, because family members are less motivated to carry out family functions, because other institutions have taken over some of these functions, and so on. These are all matters that must be explored.

#### AMERICAN FAMILY CHANGE, 1960–1990

To put the following family trends in perspective, it is important to keep in mind two points. The first is that many of these trends, such as rising divorce and decreasing fertility, had their inception well before 1960; indeed, some have been evident in industrializing nations for centuries. What happened, beginning in the 1960s, is that they either suddenly accelerated, as in the case of divorce, or suddenly reversed direction, as in the case of fertility. The divorce rate had been going up for 100 years, for example, before it rose so precipitously in the sixties (Cherlin, 1992; Inkeles, 1984).

The second point to consider is that the decade

of the 1950s was an unusual period, and should be used as a baseline for comparative purposes only with caution. It is a period that requires as much explanation as the period that followed it (Cherlin, 1992). The fertility rate, for example, which had been decreasing for more than 100 years, dramatically reversed its direction in the late 1940s, only to dramatically return again, beginning in the 1960s, to the very low fertility levels of the 1930s.

### *The Number of Children*

Although far from being the most important dimension of family decline, the decline in the number of children in the typical family, and in our society as a whole, is assuredly one of the most carefully studied. Of course a family (and a society) that has fewer children can be just as child-centered, and value children just as much, as a family with more children. The issue of quantity versus quality is real and important. One feature of the traditional nuclear family that arose with industrialization and urbanization was that it had fewer children than prior family types precisely because it valued, and wanted to do more for, each child (Zelizer, 1985). At some point, however, quantity does become an issue. A society needs a certain number of children just to continue from generation to generation.

Since the late 1950s, childbearing among American women, both as an ideal and a practice, has rapidly lost popularity. As a practice, there has been a sharp drop in the total fertility rate. In the late 1950s, the average American woman had 3.7 children over the course of her life. Thirty years later this rate had been cut by nearly one-half. In 1990, the average woman had only 1.9 children, below the figure of 2.1 necessary for population replacement and below the relatively low fertility levels found in the first half of the century. (Following the small and probably temporary baby boom of the last few years, the 1992 total fertility rate stood slightly higher, at 2.0).

In the early 1960s, when the trend of lower fertility of the last 3 decades first became evident, the favored interpretation of demographers was that women's desired family size had dropped; also, mainly because women started having their first child later in life, fewer women ever reached their desired family size (Preston, 1986). In other words, it was not that fewer women were having children but that women were having fewer children. Because child postponement has become so

extensive, however, some demographers have predicted that between 20% and 25% of the most recent cohorts will remain completely childless, and that nearly 50% will either be childless or have only one child (Bloom & Trussell, 1984; Westoff, 1986). A far higher percentage of women than this say they want to have children—in fact two children—but the prevailing theory is that they are waiting so long to have them that the desires of many will never be fulfilled (McFalls, 1990). Although the childless estimate of 20% to 25% has recently been lowered to around 15% to 20%, it is clear that a substantial portion of young women today will reach the end of their child-bearing years never having given birth (Bianchi, 1990; Ryder, 1990).

This change is connected with a dramatic, and probably historically unprecedented, decrease in positive feelings toward parenthood and motherhood. Between 1957 and 1976, the percentage of adults who felt positive about parenthood—that is, who viewed parenthood as a role that could fulfill their major values—dropped from 58 to 44 (Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). It has probably dropped still lower today. And between 1970 and 1983, the percentage of women who gave the answer “being a mother, raising a family” to the question, “What do you think are the two or three most enjoyable things about being a woman today?” dropped from 53 to 26 (New York Times Poll, 1983). These attitudinal changes are associated with a remarkable decrease in the stigma associated with childlessness. In less than 2 decades, from 1962 to 1980, the proportion of American mothers who stated that “all couples should have children” declined by nearly half, from 84% to 43% (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987; Thornton, 1989).

For all these reasons, children today make up a much smaller proportion of the American population than ever before (a situation that is accentuated by increased longevity). Whereas, in 1960, children under 18 constituted more than one-third of the population, their proportion has now dropped to only a little over one-quarter. This need not be a cause for concern about the imminent depopulation of America; much of our population growth today comes from immigration, and new immigrants tend to have a higher fertility rate than the native population. Also, in environmental terms, if not economically, it can plausibly be argued that we have become an overpopulated society. Nevertheless, the continuing decline in the number of children has significant ramifications

for the priority our society gives to children, and for the cultural attitudes we hold concerning the importance of children in the overall scheme of life.

### *Marital Roles*

Apart from their declining number, a large percentage of children who are born today grow up in a remarkably different family setting than did their forebears of 30 years ago. Major elements of the traditional nuclear family have almost become a thing of the past. First, and in some ways foremost, the marital roles associated with the traditional nuclear family have altered. As a cultural ideal, the doctrine of separate spheres, in which adult women were expected to be full-time housewife-mothers while their husbands were the breadwinners, has virtually ended. In 1960, 42% of all families had a sole male breadwinner; by 1988, this figure had dropped to 15%. A recent survey found that some 79% of adult Americans agreed that "it takes two paychecks to support a family today." And only 27% favored a return to "at least one parent raising children full-time" (Mass Mutual American Family Values Study, 1989).

Today, mothers are in the labor market to almost the same extent as nonmothers, with the fastest increases occurring for mothers of young children. In 1960, only 19% of married women (husband present) with children under 6 years of age were in the labor force full- or part-time or were looking for work. By 1990, that figure had climbed to 59%. For married women with children 6 to 17 years of age, the change has been equally spectacular. In all, 57% of women were in the labor force in 1990, up from 38% in 1960. (It should be noted that this entry of married women into the labor force has been accompanied by a decline in male labor force participation, especially among older males; between 1960 and 1988, the percentage of males aged 65 and over in the civilian labor force declined from 33 to 16; for males aged 55 to 64, the decline was from 87% to 67%; Wilkie, 1991.)

### *Family Structure and Marital Dissolution*

At the same time that our society has disclaimed the role of wives in the traditional nuclear family, it has also heavily discarded the basic structure of that family type—two natural parents who stay together for life. Put another way, we have not

only rejected the traditional nuclear family but are in the process of rejecting the nuclear family itself—a sort of throwing out of the baby with the bath water. Although the two trends are not necessarily causally related, they have at least been closely associated temporally. In 1960, 88% of children lived with two parents; by 1989, only 73% did so. Even more telling, in 1960, 73% of all children lived with two natural parents both married only once. This figure was projected to drop to 56% by 1990 (Hernandez, 1988).

One family type that has replaced the intact family of biological parents, and currently is the focus of much social research and public discussion, is the stepparent family. But the fastest growing new family type in recent years has been the single-parent family (almost 90% of which are headed by women). In 1960, only 9% of all children under 18 lived with a lone parent. This was about the same percentage as lived with a lone parent in 1900; at that time, however, 27% of the single-parent children lived with their father (Gordon & McLanahan, 1991). By 1990, the proportion of single-parent children had jumped to 24%, or nearly one-quarter of all children in America (the comparable figures for black children only are 22% in 1960 and 55% in 1990.)

The above data refer to a snapshot of the population at a single point in time. More dramatic still are the altered chances that children will live in a single-parent family sometime during their lifetimes. Of children born between 1950 and 1954, only 19% of whites (48% of blacks) had spent some time living in single-parent families by the time they reached age 17. But for white children born in 1980, this figure was projected by one estimate to be 70% (94% for black children). Another way of measuring this phenomenon is the proportion of their childhood that children can be expected to live with both parents. For white children born between 1950 and 1954, that figure is 92% (78% for blacks). For children born in 1980, the figure drops to 69% (41% for blacks) (Hofferth, 1985).

One of the main factors accounting for the increase in single-parent families is the growing incidence and acceptance of divorce, especially divorce involving children. Many different divorce rates are in use, and all show striking increases. In number of divorces per 1000 existing marriages, the United States divorce rate in 1960 was 9. That figure by 1987 had more than doubled to 21. In number of divorced persons in the population per 1000 married persons (with spouse present), the

1960 figure was 35. That figure nearly quadrupled by 1988 to 133.

Perhaps the most widely-discussed divorce rate is the probability that a marriage will end in divorce. For white females, this probability increased from about 20% in 1960 to 45% by 1980, leading to the often heard statement that nearly one out of two marriages contracted today will end in divorce (Espenshade, 1985a; Schoen, 1987). With under-reporting taken into account, and including marital separation along with divorce, other scholars have placed the probability of dissolution of a first marriage contracted today at about 60% (Bumpass, 1990; Martin & Bumpass, 1989).

It is true that divorce has replaced death as a dissolver of marriages. In times past, the early death of one spouse often ended a union in which children were involved, although single-parent families were never so common as they are today. In 1900, for example, only 2% of single-parent children lived with a divorced parent, and 3.4% with a never-married parent (Gordon & McLanahan, 1991). A landmark of sorts was passed in 1974, when for the first year in American history more marriages ended in divorce than in death. According to data for the mid-1980s, death now causes only 78% as many marital dissolutions as divorce (Glick, 1988).

The causes of the rising divorce rate in modern societies are, of course, multiple (Furstenberg, 1990; Kitson, Babri, & Roach, 1985; Phillips, 1988; White, 1990). They include growing affluence that weakens the family's traditional economic bond, higher psychological expectations for marriage today, secularization, and the stress of changing gender roles. To some extent, divorce feeds upon itself. With more divorce occurring, the more normal it becomes, with fewer negative sanctions to oppose it and more potential partners available. One of the significant changes of recent years is the rising acceptance of divorce, especially when children are involved. Divorces in which children are involved used to be in the category of the unthinkable. Today, children are only a minor inhibitor of divorce, although more so when the children are male than female (Heaton, 1990; Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988; Waite & Lillard, 1991). As one measure of the acceptance of divorce involving children, the proportion of persons who disagreed with the statement, "when there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don't get along," jumped from 51% to 82% between 1962 and

1985 (Thornton, 1989). In other words, less than one-fifth of those asked believe that the presence of children should deter parents from breaking up. These data are from a panel study of women born in the Detroit Metropolitan Area; the change in the adult population nationwide could well have been greater.

Another reason for the increase in single-parent families is that many more of today's families start out with just one parent; the children are born out-of-wedlock and the father is absent. In 1960, only 5% of all births (22% of black births) occurred to unmarried mothers. By 1990, the number had climbed to 24%, or nearly a quarter of all children born (62% of black births). This is the highest national rate of out-of-wedlock births ever recorded in the United States; it is related to what has been referred to as "a disappearing act by fathers" (Preston, 1984, p. 443).

Clearly, then, family instability has come to be a dominant characteristic of our time. If childhood experiences and adult risks of marital disruption are taken into account, only a minority of children born today are likely to grow up in an intact, two-parent family, and also, as adults, to form and maintain such a family. And because the children of broken homes, compared to the children of intact families, have a much higher chance as adults of having unstable marriages of their own, the future in this regard does not look bright (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988).

### *Marriage*

A widespread retreat from marriage is another of the major family changes of our time (Espenshade, 1985a, 1985b). In the sense of being postponed, the institution of marriage itself has been in steep decline in recent years. With a median age at first marriage of 24.1 years, young women in 1991 were marrying nearly 4 years later than their mothers (the median age at first marriage was 20.3 in 1960). Thus, between 1960 and 1990, the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 who had never married more than doubled, from 28.4% to 62.8%; for women aged 25 to 29, the increase was even greater—from 10.5% to 31.1%.

The proportion ever marrying has also dropped, but not as substantially. For females born in the period from 1938 to 1942, and thus reaching the marital age around 1960, a remarkable 97% (of those surviving until age 16) could be expected to marry at some time during their lives. For females born in 1983, however, the

chances of ever marrying are calculated to be slightly less than 90% (Schoen, 1987; Schoen, Urton, Woodrow, & Baj, 1985). For certain segments of the population, the proportion expected eventually to marry is even lower: only about 80% for women with a college education, for example, and 75% for black women (Glick, 1984).

It is important to point out that both the median age of marriage and the proportion ever marrying have returned to about where they stood at the end of the last century. The 1950s were, therefore, an anomaly in this respect. Also, the older one's age at marriage, the lower the chances of eventual divorce, at least until about age 30. In this sense, marriage at older ages is beneficial for children and for society. It does not follow, however, that societies with older average ages at marriage have a lower divorce rate. The nation with the oldest average age of marriage today is Sweden, but it also has one of the highest divorce rates (Popenoe, 1987).

The marriage rate is expected to drop further in the future. One reason is that attitudes toward the unmarried adult have changed dramatically in recent decades. In 1957, 80% of the population agreed with the statement, "for a woman to remain unmarried she must be sick, neurotic or immoral;" by 1978, the proportion agreeing had dropped to 25% (Yankelovich, 1981). Still, the proportion of the population that expects to marry remains very high at 90%, and has shown almost no decline since 1960 (Thornton, 1989; Thorton & Freedman, 1982).

The psychological character of the marital relationship has changed substantially over the years (Davis, 1985). Traditionally, marriage has been understood as a social obligation—an institution designed mainly for economic security and procreation. Today, marriage is understood mainly as a path toward self-fulfillment. One's own self-development is seen to require a significant other, and marital partners are picked primarily to be personal companions. Put another way, marriage is becoming deinstitutionalized. No longer comprising a set of norms and social obligations that are widely enforced, marriage today is a voluntary relationship that individuals can make and break at will. As one indicator of this shift, laws regulating marriage and divorce have become increasingly more lax (Glendon, 1989; Jacob, 1988; Sugarman & Kay, 1990).

Apart from the high rate of marital dissolution, there is growing evidence that the quality of married life in America has taken a turn for the

worse. There has always been a strong relationship between being married and being relatively happy in life. But an analysis of survey data over the years between 1972 and 1989 indicates that this relationship is weakening. There is an increasing proportion of reportedly happy never-married men and younger never-married women, and a decreasing proportion of reportedly happy married women (Glenn, 1991; Glenn & Weaver, 1988; Lee, Seccombe, & Shehan, 1991). Thus to be happy, men may not need marriage as much as they once did, and fewer women are finding happiness through marriage.

### *Nonfamily Living*

The retreat from marriage has led to sharp increases in residential independence before marriage and in nonmarital cohabitation. Throughout world history, young people, especially women, have tended to live with their parents until they married. (One historical exception was the Northwestern European family pattern of sending adolescents to live and work in the homes of others [Mitterauer & Sieder, 1982], but that is not the situation today.) A survey of the high school class of 1980 found that 70% planned to move out of the parental home before marriage (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1987). In 1950, only 17% of unmarried women in their late 20s headed their own household; by 1980, this figure had jumped to 60%. The trend is likely to continue, in part because nonintact family living situations during childhood substantially raise the likelihood of leaving home prior to age 18, especially for girls (Aquilino, 1991).

Along with the high divorce rate and the residential independence of the elderly, early home-leaving is a major factor that lies behind the tremendous increase in nonfamily households and nonfamily living. Nonfamily households (defined by the U.S. Census as a household maintained by a person living alone or with one or more persons to whom he or she is not related) amounted to 29% of all households in 1990, compared to just 15% in 1960. About 85% of nonfamily households consist of just one person. The rapid 20-year upward trend of nonfamily households came to a temporary halt in the period from 1986 to 1987 (Waldrop, 1988).

Also on the rise has been nonmarital cohabitation, or unmarried couples of the opposite sex living together. In part, the declining marriage rate has been offset by the increasing cohabitation rate

(Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). While nonmarital couples still make up only a small proportion of all households (3.1% in 1990), their numbers are growing. The 1990 figure of 2,856,000 unmarried couple households is more than 6 times the 1960 figure of 439,000. More importantly, the proportion of first marriages preceded by cohabitation increased from only 8% for marriages in the late 1960s to about 50% for marriages today (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

There is evidence that life for young adults in a nonfamily household may become a self-fulfilling prophecy; not only does it reflect a flight from family life but it may actually promote such a flight. Especially for young women, it has been found that living away from home prior to marriage changes attitudes and plans away from family and toward individual concerns (Waite, Goldscheider, & Witsberger, 1986). Also, living independently may make it more difficult, when marriage finally does take place, to shift from purely individual concerns to a concern for the needs and desires of other family members, especially children (Rossi, 1980). As for nonmarital cohabitation, it has been shown that levels of certainty about the relationship are substantially lower than for marriage (Bumpass et al., 1991).

There is also a growing body of evidence that premarital cohabitation is associated with proneness for divorce (Booth & Johnson, 1988; DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Thompson & Colella, 1992), although the effect may be declining with time (Schoen, 1992). Cohabitation does not seem to serve very well the function of a trial marriage, or of a system that leads to stronger marriages through weeding out those who find that, after living together, they are unsuitable for each other. More likely, a lack of commitment at the beginning may signal a lack of commitment at the end.

Up until the past 30 years, partly due to steadily increasing longevity, Americans had actually spent more years in marriage and as parents with each passing year. But between 1960 and 1980, mainly due to markedly lower fertility and higher divorce rates, the absolute number of years spent in these family statuses declined for the first time in American history. The proportion of adult lives spent as a spouse, a parent, or a member of a conjugal family unit declined even more, reaching the lowest point in history. As early as 1800, the proportion of one's life spent with spouse and children was an estimated 56%; it rose to a high of 62% in 1960, and reached an all-time low of 43% in 1980 (Watkins, Menken, & Bongaarts,

1987). It has been estimated that white women in the period from 1940 to 1945 spent nearly 50% of their lives in a marriage (including both first marriages and remarriages); by the period from 1975 to 1980, this figure had dropped to just 43% (Espenshade, 1985a, 1985b).

#### FAMILY CHANGE AS FAMILY DECLINE

To the average American, the family trends of the last 30 years, summarized above, clearly signal the widespread decline of the institution of the family. For example, fewer persons are marrying and they are marrying later, more marriages are broken by divorce, and those marrying are having fewer children. These demographic trends are, in turn, the product of changes in what is culturally accepted in our society. Many surveys have shown a rapidly growing acceptance of divorce, permanent singleness, and childlessness (Thornton, 1989; Thornton & Freedman, 1982).

Despite such seemingly inexorable trends, it has taken a while for many family scholars to comprehend both the magnitude and the negative consequences of the changes that have occurred. At first, there was widespread resistance to the suggestion that the family was weakening or in any kind of trouble. In the mid-1970s, for example, Mary Jo Bane's (1976) influential and widely-cited book on family trends appeared, entitled *Here to Stay*. As suggested by the title, it was designed to lay to rest the idea that the family in America was disintegrating or even declining and it contained statements such as: "Demographic materials suggest that the decline of the family's role in caring for children is more myth than fact" (p. 19); "The patterns of structural change so often cited as evidence of family decline do not seem to be weakening the bonds between parents and children" (p. 20); and "The kind of marriage that Americans have always known is still a pervasive and enduring institution" (p. 35).

In keeping with the ideas of many sociologists and other family experts of the time, Bane's book was resolutely upbeat about the family: "As I delved further into the data that describe what Americans do and how they live, I became less sure that the family was in trouble. Surprising stabilities showed up, and surprising evidence of the persistence of commitments to family life" (Bane, 1976, p. x). To be fair to the author, one should note that by the early 1970s the momentous family changes begun in the 1960s had not yet fully become evident. Also, Bane tended to compare



the family situation in the early 1970s with that existing at the turn of the twentieth century, when high death rates still caused many families to become broken at an early age.

By the late 1980s, however, this same author took a markedly different and more alarmed tone. In a 1988 article written with a colleague (Bane & Jargowsky, 1988), one finds statements such as: "Family situations of children have changed dramatically since 1970" (p. 222); "The change is astonishing both for its size and for the speed with which it has happened" (p. 222); and "The real force behind family change has been a profound change in people's attitudes about marriage and children" (p. 246).

With the full realization of what has actually happened to the family over the past 30 years now becoming clear, such a change of mind among family scholars has become commonplace. Another example is that of the economist Sar A. Levitan and his colleagues. In their first edition of *What's Happening to the American Family?* (Levitan & Belous, 1981), the authors stressed the family's great resilience; the institution was undergoing "evolution not dissolution," they asserted. "The popular bleak scenario for the family contains a good deal of social instability. Fortunately, a critical analysis of the evidence does not paint such a dire picture, and thus a heartfelt 'hurrah' is in order" (p. 15). They concluded that: "Currently fashionable gloom and doom scenarios miss the essential process of adjustment and change" (p. 190).

In the second edition of this book (Levitan, Belous, & Gallo, 1988), however, the author's complacent mood had strikingly shifted. Now there was apprehensive talk of "radical changes in family structure." "Widespread family breakdown is bound to have a pervasive and debilitating impact not only on the quality of life but on the vitality of the body politic as well" (p. viii). With an apologetic tone, they noted that "the first edition of *What's Happening to the American Family?* envisioned a more sanguine scenario than does the present book . . . [but] the problems contributing to the erosion of the family have not abated in the 1980s" (p. ix).

In 1987, Norval Glenn, then editor of the influential *Journal of Family Issues*, asked a group of 18 prominent family sociologists to put in writing how they felt about what was happening to the family in America (Glenn, 1987). Most were scholars who for years had sought to withhold their personal values and beliefs in the interest of

scholarly objectivity. Nine of the scholars were "concerned" about family change in America, while only three were "sanguine." (The rest, ever faithful to their social science calling despite being asked explicitly to make a "value judgment," were "not classifiable.") Glenn expressed surprise at the outcome, saying he did not realize, based on their writings, that there was this much concern among family sociologists. The main focus of their concern, incidentally, was children.

As noted at the outset of the present article, however, there is still a reluctance among many scholars of the family to admit that the family is declining. The preferred term is *change*, leading to *diversity*. This may seem to be a mere terminological quibble, but it reflects deep ideological differences.

The problem is not only that the family as an institution has declined, but also that a specific family form—the traditional nuclear family—has declined. And therein lies the basis for much ideological conflict. The 1950s hegemony of the traditional nuclear family helped to fuel the modern women's movement. Reacting strongly to the lingering male dominance of this family form, as well as to its separate-sphere removal of women from the labor market, the women's movement came to view the traditional nuclear family in very negative terms (Friedan, 1963). Today, those who believe in less male dominance and greater equality for women—and that includes most academics and other intellectuals, including myself—share the views of the women's movement in favoring an egalitarian family form, with substantial economic independence for wives. From this perspective, the movement away from the traditional nuclear family is regarded as progress, not decline.

Speaking of family decline under these ideological circumstances, therefore, is seen to be implicitly favoring a discredited family form, one that oppresses women. Indeed, the term *decline* has been used most forcefully by those conservatives who tend to view all recent family change as negative, and who have issued a clarion call for a return to the traditional nuclear family (Dobson & Bauer, 1990). But properly used, the term *decline* should not carry such ideological baggage. To conclude empirically that the family as an institution is declining should not automatically link one to a particular ideology of family forms or gender equality. The two facets of decline—the weakening of the traditional form of the family and the weakening of the family as an institution—must

be disaggregated. It is possible after all, at least theoretically, for the family to have become a stronger institution in its shift to a more egalitarian form.

For me, the term decline is important because it provides a "best fit" for many of the changes that have taken place. These changes, in my view, clearly indicate that the family as an institution has weakened. A main cause of this weakening may or may not be the shift of the family away from its traditional nuclear form; that is something requiring further investigation. Those who believe that the family has not declined, on the other hand, must logically hold one of two positions—either that the family has strengthened, or that its institutional power within society has remained unchanged. I believe that one is very hard put, indeed, to find supporting evidence for either of these two positions.

Let us review the evidence supporting the idea of family decline, or weakening. The evidence can be amassed in three broad areas—demographic, institutional, and cultural. In the course of this review I hope that the reader will suspend, for the moment, the automatic reaction of associating decline only with that which is negative. Some of the following aspects of family decline, as discussed below, certainly can be considered beneficial, or positive.

#### *Demographic*

Family groups have declined as a demographic reality. They have decreased in size and become a smaller percentage of all households; they survive as groups for a shorter period of time and they incorporate a smaller percentage of the average person's life course. Family groups are being replaced in people's lives by nonfamily groups—people living alone, without children, with an unrelated individual, in an institution, and so forth.

This trend, of course, is not proof, *ipso facto*, that the family institution is declining. Religion does not necessarily decline with a smaller number of churches and synagogues; education does not necessarily decline with fewer schools. But smaller numbers surely, by the same token, do not help to bolster the belief that the family is strengthening.

#### *Institutional*

There are three key dimensions to the strength of an institution: the institution's cohesion or the

hold which it has over its members, how well it performs its functions, and the power it has in society relative to other institutions. The evidence suggests that the family as an institution has weakened in each of these respects.

First, individual family members have become more autonomous and less bound by the group; the group as a whole, therefore, has become less cohesive. A group or organization is strong (sometimes the phrase used is *highly institutionalized*) when it maintains close coordination over the internal relationships of members and directs their activities toward collective goals. In a strong group, the members are closely bound to the group and largely follow the group's norms and values. Families have clearly become weaker (less institutionalized) in this sense.

With more women in the labor market, for example, the economic interdependence between husbands and wives has been declining. Wives are less dependent on husbands for economic support; more are able, if they so desire, to go it alone. This means that wives are less likely to stay in bad marriages for economic reasons. And, indeed, some scholars have found a positive correlation between wives' income and the propensity to divorce—that is, the higher the wife's income, the greater the likelihood of divorce (Cherlin, 1981). By the same token, if a wife has economic independence (for example, through state welfare support), it is easier for a husband to abandon her if he so chooses. However one looks at it, and unfortunate though it may be, the decline of economic interdependence between husband and wife (primarily the economic dependence of the wife) appears to have led, in the aggregate, to weaker marital units as measured by higher rates of divorce and separation (for a contradictory view, see Greenstein, 1990.)

As the marital tie has weakened in many families, so also has the tie between parents and children. A large part of the history of childhood and adolescence in the twentieth century is the decline of parental influence and authority, and the growth in importance of both the peer group and the mass media (Hawes & Hiner, 1985; Modell, 1989). Typically, the influence of the mass media is conducted through the peer group. There are few parents today who will deny that parental influence over children is on the wane. Similarly, there is much less influence today of the elderly over their own children. For example, the proportion of the elderly seeing a child at least once a week declined by 25% between 1962 and 1984

(Bumpass, 1990).

The second dimension of family institutional decline is that the family is less able—and/or less willing—to carry out its traditional social functions. This is, in part, because it has become a less cohesive unit. The main family functions in recent times have been the procreation and socialization of children, the provision to its members of affection and companionship, sexual regulation, and economic cooperation. With a birthrate that is below the replacement level, it is demonstrably the case that the family has weakened in carrying out the function of procreation. A strong case can also be made that the family has weakened in conducting the function of child socialization. As Samuel Preston, former President of the Population Association of America, has suggested: "Since 1960 the conjugal family has begun to divest itself of care for children in much the same way that it did earlier for the elderly" (Preston, 1984, p. 443). Quantitative measures of such divestiture are the absenteeism rate of fathers, the decline in the amount of time that parents spend with their children, and the growing proportion of a child's life that is spent alone, with peers, in day care, or in school (Hewlitt, 1991; Louv, 1990).

A decline in the provision of affection and companionship among adult family members is more difficult to measure, although some data mentioned above seem to suggest that such a decline has taken place. It is difficult to deny, however, that, in sheer number, social ties to nonrelated friends have gained, while social ties to family members have dropped. Measures of this are late marriage, increased single living, high divorce, and fewer family households.

By almost everyone's reckoning, marriage today is a more fragile institution than ever before precisely because it is based mainly on the provision of affection and companionship. When these attributes are not provided, the marriage often dissolves. The chances of that happening today are near a record high.

A decline of the family regulation of sexual behavior is one of the hallmarks of the past 30 years (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). Against most parents' wishes, young people have increasingly engaged in premarital sex, at ever younger ages. And against virtually all spousal wishes, the amount of sexual infidelity among married couples has seemingly increased. (Solid empirical support for this proposition is difficult to find, but it is certainly the belief of most Americans).

Finally, the function of the family in economic

cooperation has diminished substantially, as noted above. The family is less a pooled bundle of economic resources, and more a business partnership between two adults (and one which, in most states, can unilaterally be broken at any time.) Witness, for example, the decline of joint checking accounts and the rise of prenuptial agreements.

With reference to children, it once was the case that the great majority of households in the nation were family households including children. This meant that most income to households was shared in such a way that children were beneficiaries. Today, households with children make up only 35% of the total, a decline from 49% in 1960. Income to the great majority of households is not shared with children, and therein lies one of the reasons why children are economically falling behind others, and why 40% of the poor in America today are children (Fuchs & Reklis, 1992; Levy & Michel, 1991).

The third dimension of family institutional decline is the loss of power to other institutional groups. In recent centuries, with the decline of agriculture and the rise of industry, the family has lost power to the workplace and, with the rise of mandatory formal education, it has lost power to the school. The largest beneficiary of the transfer of power out of the family in recent years has been the state. State agencies increasingly have the family under surveillance, seeking compliance for increasingly restrictive state laws covering such issues as child abuse and neglect, wife abuse, tax payments, and property maintenance (Lasch, 1977; Peden & Glahe, 1986). The fact that many of these laws are designed to foster the egalitarian treatment of family members, the protection of children, and the advancement of public welfare, should not detract from their denial of power to the family unit.

### *Cultural*

Family decline has also occurred in the sense that familism as a cultural value has weakened in favor of such values as self-fulfillment and egalitarianism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Lasch, 1978; Veroff et al., 1981). In other words, the value placed on the family in our culture, compared to competing values, has diminished. Familism refers to the belief in a strong sense of family identification and loyalty, mutual assistance among family members, a concern for the perpetuation of the family unit, and

the subordination of the interests and personality of individual family members to the interests and welfare of the family group.

It is true that most Americans still loudly proclaim family values, and there is no reason to question their sincerity about this. The family ideal is still out there. Yet apart from the ideal, the value of family has steadily been chipped away. The percentage of Americans who believe that "the family should stay together for the sake of the children" has declined precipitously, for example, as noted above. And fewer Americans believe that it is important to have children, to be married if you do, or even to be married, period. In the words of Larry L. Bumpass, another recent President of the Population Association of America, "Profamilial normative pressures have eroded in all areas of the life course" (Bumpass, 1990, p. 492).

#### EVALUATING FAMILY DECLINE

The net result—or bottom line—of each of these trends is, I submit, that Americans today are less willing than ever before to invest time, money, and energy in family life (Goode, 1984). Most still want to marry and most still want children, but they are turning more to other groups and activities, and are investing much more in themselves. Thus, one can say not only that the family is deinstitutionalizing, but that people are also disinvesting in it. Quite clearly, in this age of the "me-generation," the individual rather than the family increasingly comes first.

The increase in individual rights and opportunities is, of course, one of the great achievements of the modern era. No one wants to go back to the days of the stronger family when the husband owned his wife and could do virtually anything he wanted to her short of murder, when the parents were the sole custodians of their children and could treat them as they wished, when the social status of the family you were born into heavily determined your social status for life, and when the psychosocial interior of the family was often so intense that it was like living in a cocoon. Clearly, if the individual rights of family members are to be respected, and a reasonable measure of self-fulfillment is to be achieved, there is such a thing as a family that is too strong. What, therefore, is wrong with the family weakening of recent decades?

Many scholars have noted that the institution of the family could be said to have been in decline since the beginning of mankind. And people

of almost every era seem to have bemoaned the loss of the family, even suggesting its imminent demise (Popenoe, 1988). Yet we, as human beings, have made some progress over the centuries. Why, therefore, should we be unduly alarmed about the family decline of our generation? This question is a good one and demands an answer.

Family decline of the past has been of two kinds—functional and structural. Once the only social institution in existence, the family over time has lost functions to such institutions as organized religion, education, work, and government (Lanski & Lanski, 1987). These nonfamily institutions, specialized in certain tasks, have been found to be necessary to the efficient and orderly conduct of human affairs in all but the most isolated and preliterate of social settings. Education and work are the latest functions to be split off from the family unit, the split having occurred for the most part over the past two centuries. Few parents regret that we have public schools, rather than having to teach children themselves. And most are pleased about the higher standard of material living that has resulted, in part, from work being carried out in separate organizations that are better suited to the task. Thus, family decline in this sense—the functional decline that has surely left the family as an institution weaker vis-à-vis other institutions—is not something that is held in disfavor.

From its earliest incarnation as a multifunctional unit, the streamlined family of today is left with just two principal functions: childrearing, and the provision to its members of affection and companionship. Both family functions have become greatly magnified over the years. Once subsidiary functions of the family, they have now become the family's *raison d'être*.

Turning from function to structure, the family has evolved in a cyclical manner (van den Berghe, 1979). Once presumably organized in terms of nuclear units in nomadic, preliterate groups, the family developed in many cultures over the centuries to become a complex unit consisting of several nuclear families and several generations living together, the so-called "extended family." Although in Northwestern Europe and North America the extended family was never as large or as complex as in much of the rest of the world, nevertheless today's small nuclear family can be thought of as a diminutive form of the larger and more complex households of the past (Kertzer, 1991).

There are more regrets about this structural

loss than about the functional changes, and for the most part the structural loss has been a focus of those claiming that there is family crisis. In this view, the nuclear family is becoming too isolated from relatives and left to its own devices; the generations are splitting up. For those who place a strong value on generational continuity, there is a real loss here. Yet few adults today wish to have their parents, their uncles and aunts, and their cousins, move back in with them. On the contrary, the movement is in the other direction (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991).

The structural change about which there has been the greatest concern historically, a change associated with both functional decline and the decline of the complex family, is the decline of family authority. In the complex family, authority over members was almost invariably held by the eldest male—the patriarch. Almost all of the family decline alarmists over the years have been males, and their concern has been the decline of male authority in the home. Yet there is obviously another side to this. In the patriarchal family, women by definition were subservient—sometimes highly subservient. The decline of patriarchal authority has not only brought a general decline of authority, but also a rise in the status of women—from being wholly owned appendages of their fathers, husbands, or some other male relative, to being full citizens with equal rights. In this sense, the decline of male authority has meant the rise of female equality. Again, this is a form of family decline about which, to say the least, most members of society today are not very worried (and many no doubt believe, for this reason, that the term *decline* is a highly inappropriate one to use).

So what kind of family decline is underway today that we should be concerned about? There are two dimensions of today's family decline that make it both unique and alarming. The first is that it is not the extended family that is breaking up but the nuclear family. The nuclear family can be thought of as the last vestige of the traditional family unit; all other adult members have been stripped away, leaving but two—the husband and wife. The nuclear unit—man, woman, and child—is called that for good reason: It is the fundamental and most basic unit of the family. Breaking up the nucleus of anything is a serious matter.

The second dimension of real concern regards what has been happening to the two principal functions—childrearing, and the provision to its

members of affection and companionship—with which the family has been left. It is not difficult to argue that the functions that have already been taken from the family—government, formal education, and so on—can in fact be better performed by other institutions. It is far more debatable, however, whether the same applies to childrearing and the provision of affection and companionship. There is strong reason to believe, in fact, that the family is by far the best institution to carry out these functions, and that insofar as these functions are shifted to other institutions, they will not be carried out as well.

Discussion of the consequences for children of recent family decline—a cause for alarm—lies beyond the bounds of this paper. On this issue briefly, however, one can do no better than to quote the final report of the bipartisan National Commission on Children (1991) headed by Senator John D. Rockefeller IV:

Dramatic social, demographic, and economic changes during the past 30 years have transformed the American family. For many children and parents the experiences of family life are different today than a generation ago. Families are smaller. More children live with only one parent, usually their mothers, and many lack consistent involvement and support of their fathers. More mothers as well as fathers hold jobs and go to work each day. Yet children are now the poorest group in America, and if they live only with their mother and she is not employed, they are almost certain to be poor. Moreover, many of the routines of family life have changed; regardless of family income, parents and children spend less time together (p. 15-16).

By now these changes are quite familiar. . . . Although their causes and consequences are still not fully understood, it is clear that they have had profound effects on family roles and on relationships between fathers, mothers, and children and between families and the communities in which they live. Observers from many quarters worry that these changes have had largely deleterious effects on family life and have caused a dramatic decline in the quality of life for many American children (p. 16).

Substantial evidence suggests that the quality of life for many of America's children has declined. As the nation looks ahead to the twenty-first century, the fundamental challenge facing us is how to fashion responses that support and strengthen families as the once and future domain for raising children (p. 37).

## CONCLUSION

My argument, in summary, is that the family decline of the past three decades is something special—very special. It is “end-of-the-line” family decline. Historically, the family has been stripped down to its bare essentials—just two adults and two main functions. The weakening of this unit is much more problematic than any prior family change. People today, most of all children, dearly want families in their lives. They long for that special, and hopefully life-long, social and emotional bond that family membership brings. Adults can perhaps live much of their lives, with some success, apart from families. The problem is that children, if we wish them to become successful adults, cannot. (In fact, most young children, other things equal, would probably prefer to live in the large, complex families of old). Adults for their own good purposes, most recently self-fulfillment, have stripped the family down to its nucleus. But any further reduction—either in functions or in number of members—will likely have adverse consequences for children, and thus for generations to come.

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## A Plea for Objective Assessment of the Notion of Family Decline

Much of the article by David Popenoe is a reiteration of points made in his influential book *Disturbing the Nest*, but it goes beyond the book by concentrating on the United States rather than on Sweden, bringing the evidence for family decline in the United States up to date, and making explicit an important point that is not so clearly developed in the book. That point is that the family decline of the past 3 decades is end-of-the-line decline—something quite different from earlier family changes that have been labeled decline. Those changes stripped the family of its peripheral functions and of persons outside the conjugal unit, leaving it a highly specialized institution with only two core functions—childrearing and

the provision of affection and companionship to its members. Until recently, almost all family social scientists considered the more specialized family to be better equipped to perform its core functions than was the unspecialized, traditional family. Popenoe apparently agrees that the trend to specialization was beneficial up to a point, but he maintains that, instead of stabilizing as a specialized and well-functioning institution, the family has continued to decline and has changed in ways that threaten its "bare essentials." Although he does not state his thesis in these words, its essence seems to be that the family is becoming less able to perform its core functions and that there are no adequate functional alternatives to



the family for performing them.

Many reactions to Popenoe's notion of family decline have been quite negative, some authors' rejection of it being stated with a vehemence uncharacteristic of most intellectual and academic debate. The reason for such reactions is not readily apparent. Although one can quarrel with details of Popenoe's description of recent demographic and institutional changes in the family, the general accuracy of that part of his account is not in doubt. The evidence for his description of "cultural family decline" is softer and more ambiguous, but a great deal of it strongly suggests that, indeed, familism as a cultural value has weakened relative to such competing values as self-fulfillment and egalitarianism. The most controversial portion of the paper is the strong implication that the core functions of the family are not being performed as well as they were in the recent past; but, again, a great deal of evidence—much of which Popenoe does not cite—is consistent with that view.

In other words, much of Popenoe's account of family decline is undeniably correct, and most, if not all, of the rest of it is well enough supported empirically and logically that it should be seriously considered. However, his similar account in his book has been dismissed without serious consideration by a number of critics, several of whom have done little more in rebuttal than to invoke the cliché that negative evaluations of recent family change reflect a nostalgia for a family system that never existed. Their argument by assertion and use of a hackneyed argument suggest that the critics have not been open to the possibility that the criticized point of view might be correct and have not carefully assessed the evidence relating to it.

Popenoe hints at why there has been so much opposition to the notion of family decline among social scientists, but explaining that opposition is not a major focus of his paper. It is, however, an important and interesting issue that needs to be addressed.

One major reason is probably simply that most social scientists are liberals, and concern about family decline is associated with conservatism. (George Yancey, a graduate student in my department, recently found that, in a sample of members of the American Sociological Association, only 6% identified themselves as conservatives or reactionaries while 87% said they were liberals or radicals.) Being human, most of us, when we write, are not motivated solely by devotion to

truth and accuracy; we are also concerned with gaining and keeping the approval of those whose evaluations of us matter. And for family social scientists, those persons are generally liberals. I suspect that some of the sharper but less well-supported attacks on the notion of family decline are largely motivated, consciously or unconsciously, by the persons' desire to affirm, to themselves and to others, that they are good liberals.

A related reason is that some feminists view any negative evaluation of recent family trends as an attack on, or at least potentially damaging to, the women's movement and recent improvements in the status of women. Such persons view changes in the family and in the status of women as parts of the same bundle, so that to negatively evaluate one is to denigrate the other. In extreme cases, the fear that critics of family change want to put women back in the kitchen and keep them barefoot and pregnant borders on paranoia. To a few extremists, any expressed concern about the health of the family is nothing more than a manifestation of a patriarchal plot to keep women subordinated. There is, however, a rational basis for concern that attempts to "put the family back together" may tend to erase recent feminist gains, since some conservatives do believe that improving family life requires reconstitution of traditional gender roles and are working to accomplish that end.

Therefore, the wariness with which many feminists view discussions of family decline is understandable, but it is unlikely to help their cause. The fact that a view of reality is held by a disliked political faction or that it can be used to the detriment of a cause one supports does not make it incorrect, and feminists are unlikely to be able to work effectively for their goals if they do not accurately perceive reality. If some recent family changes are having negative consequences for the quality of life and for the socialization of children, denial of this reality will not help feminists bring about the kind of society for which they strive, especially if, as much evidence suggests, negative consequences of recent family change have fallen disproportionately on women and especially on children, almost half of whom are the women of the future.

If Popenoe is correct, feminists should try both to reverse the negative family changes and to preserve the gains women have made, and that is not an unrealistic goal. Although improvements in the status of women and recent family changes are in a sense one bundle, it is one in which the different

sticks are not inextricably tied together. The different changes may be causally interrelated, but there is no evidence that they bear a determinative relationship to one another. For instance, increased labor force participation of married women has probably contributed to marital instability, primarily through the "independence effect," but possibly also by increasing the likelihood that marriages will turn sour. However, the evidence for this causal link is rather tenuous, and, at most, women's working outside the home is only one of several reasons for the increase in divorce. Therefore, it is unlikely that married women must retreat from the labor force in order for marriages to become more stable and for the probability of marital success to increase.

This is not to say that feminist goals and efforts to strengthen families will not in some respects come into conflict, at least in the short run; there is almost always some tension between different desiderata. When such conflict occurs, to always give priority to feminist goals would be ill-considered, unless functional alternatives to the family can be devised to provide for basic human needs. Male-female equality in a society in which the quality of life is mediocre for everyone is hardly anyone's idea of utopia.

Some criticism of the notion of family decline seems to be based on a misreading of those who believe family decline has occurred or on an attribution to those authors of views they do not espouse. For instance, some critics dwell at length on how trends such as increased longevity and affluence have made life better than it was a century or so ago. How this is supposed to be relevant to the thesis of family decline is not entirely clear, but the authors apparently believe that the thesis is inextricably linked with a general nostalgia for an idealized past.

A few extreme conservatives may believe that, in general, life is poorer today than it was a century or so ago, but Popenoe and most other proponents of the family decline thesis with whom I am familiar do not believe that, and such a view does not logically follow from a belief in family de-

cline or a belief that some recent family changes have had negative consequences. A recent decrease in how well the family is performing its core functions would not preclude an overall improvement in the quality of life since the 1950s (although there is scant evidence for that) or some family changes with positive consequences in the past few decades. Popenoe's being correct would only mean that the quality of American life and the prospects for the future of the society are not as good as they would be if some of the recent changes he describes had not occurred.

My point is not that Popenoe's thesis is necessarily correct in all respects; the relevant evidence is inconsistent and ambiguous enough to leave room for considerable disagreement among those who assess the thesis objectively and with sound reasoning. Rather, my plea is for commentators to base their assessment on the evidence and to keep it as free as possible from ideological bias and irrelevant arguments. I do not claim that it is possible to keep one's perception of reality completely free from ideological distortion, but the fact that the ideal of complete objectivity is unattainable does not make its pursuit any less important. To reject the ideal of objectivity, as is now fashionable in some intellectual circles, makes no more sense than to reject the ideal of justice because its perfect attainment is impossible.

The crucial question is whether or not the performance of the core functions of the family has recently deteriorated. If the answer to that question is yes, other questions need to be addressed, such as what, if anything, can be done to reverse the deterioration without sacrificing other important values. It is in the interest of everyone concerned about the future of American society that these questions be answered as accurately as possible.

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## Good Riddance to “The Family”: A Response to David Popenoe

On election eve, I made a guest appearance in a seminar on contemporary family debates taught by one of my colleagues at the University of California, Davis. His class was comparing my (1990) book, *Brave New Families*, with *Disturbing the Nest* by David Popenoe (1988). Indulging a rare surge of optimism, I predicted that our national family wars were about to abate. The depth and irreversibility of family change, assisted by Murphy Brown and the Year of the Woman, were vanquishing the family values brigades, I claimed, while “the economy, stupid” was luring many “profamily” Reagan Democrats back from their costly supply-side fling.

Imagine my chagrin 2 months later, when Popenoe (1992), in a *New York Times* Op-Ed, “The Controversial Truth: Two-Parent Families Are Better,” served public notice that I had personally rattled his nest. Reviving the dogeared family debates, Popenoe drew me directly into the fray. By quoting out of context from *Brave New Families*, he portrayed me as an antifamily extremist and misrepresented my conviction that nostalgia for an idealized fifties sitcom image of “the family” has harmful effects on most contemporary children, whose familial arrangements are increasingly diverse. Because responding to Popenoe’s family polemics in newsprint and on the airwaves seems to have become my moonlight second shift ever since, I welcome this opportunity for more serious engagement with the substantial differences in our understandings of the sources and meaning of contemporary family change.

A careful reading of “American Family Decline, 1960-1990: A Review and Appraisal” clarifies the significance of Popenoe’s misreading of the intentionally polemical lines from my conclusion to *Brave New Families*, which he quoted in his *New York Times* Op-Ed: “The family” is

not here to stay. Nor should we wish it were. On the contrary, I believe that all democratic people, whatever their kinship preferences, should work to hasten its demise” (p. 269).

What “American Family Decline” makes clear is that Popenoe and I agree that “the family” is in decline, but we conceptualize “the family” in fundamentally incompatible ways. For Popenoe, the family is a positivist, empirical institution, amenable to a structural-functional definition. Popenoe struggles, with little consistency or success, to expand the conventional structural-functional definition of the nuclear family to accommodate critiques made by feminists and gay liberationists of the gender and sexual oppression in that family form. Thus, in order to encompass single-parent families, stepfamilies, cohabitants and homosexuals, he defines the family as “a relatively small domestic group of kin (or people in a kin-like relationship) consisting of at least one adult and one dependent person”(p. 529).

In contrast, I believe that no positivist definition of the family, however revisionist, is viable. Anthropological and historical studies convince me that the family is not an institution, but an ideological, symbolic construct that has a history and a politics. In the United States, as Popenoe concedes, this concept has been employed primarily to signify a heterosexual, conjugal, nuclear, domestic unit, ideally one with a male primary breadwinner, a female primary homemaker, and their dependent offspring. This unitary, normative definition of legitimate domestic arrangements is what my book identifies as ephemeral, and with little regret, because of the race, class, gender, and sexual diversity it has occluded and the inequities it has exacerbated.

Family values rhetoric, in my view, serves as a sanitized decoy for these less reputable prejudices. Thus, I read Dan Quayle’s now infamous

attack on Murphy Brown as an ill-fated attempt to play the Willie Horton card in whiteface. Without resorting to overt racist rhetoric, the image conjured up frightening hordes of African American welfare mothers rearing infant fodder for sex, drugs, and videotaped rebellions, such as had just erupted in Los Angeles. Likewise, when in January of 1993, Republicans attempted to scuttle passage of the Family Leave Act, the new President Clinton's own first family values offering, they did so through appeals to homophobia. To his credit, Popenoe attempts to distinguish his version of family values rhetoric from these reactionary ones, but the weaknesses in his effort demonstrate the inherently flawed, and conservative, character of a structural-functionalist approach to family sociology.

Three systematic errors in Popenoe's analysis of family decline suggest the weaknesses of such an approach. First, Popenoe's latter-day coda of the tired "loss of family functions" lament rests upon a flawed history and anthropology of kinship. It is simply anthropologically incorrect to claim that the family was "once the only social institution in existence" (p. 538). When and where was this ever so? Certainly never in the recorded history of the U.S., nor in that of the many cultures from which our ethnically and racially diverse population derives. If Popenoe means, by this, that kinship organization was the dominant form of social organization in the distant anthropological past, then he is using "the family" in a tautological, and ahistorical sense, with little relevance for his argument about family decline since 1960.

Secondly, Popenoe's more proximate historical framework is equally flawed. Although he concedes that the 1950s were a demographically and culturally anomalous decade in U.S. family history, nonetheless, he proceeds to use it as his baseline for assessing subsequent decline. The most serious consequence of this decision is not that it exaggerates recent "family decline," but that it distorts crucial historical sources of the past few decades of domestic upheaval. Thus, Popenoe fails to analyze the postindustrial economic transformations that have eroded occupations that once paid a family wage to male breadwinners at the same time that opportunities and necessities for female employment have expanded. Feminist critiques of the nuclear family, as I have argued, were as much responses to, and scapegoats for, such developments as they were catalysts to further family change.

Finally, Popenoe offers an incomplete assessment of the alternatives to his view that "the family as an institution" has declined. Illogically, he claims that those who dissent "must logically hold one of two positions—either that the family has strengthened, or that its institutional power within society has remained unchanged" (p. 536). But this is only true if one accepts, as I do not, his institutional definition of the family. I fully agree with Popenoe that, since the 1950s, the Ozzie and Harriet form of family structure and ideology has suffered irremediable defeats, accompanied by the collapse of cultural and statistical consensus on a normative family ideology. That is why I call the present situation of domestic diversity and politicized family contest the postmodern family condition.

Furthermore, I agree with Popenoe that women's capacity to survive outside marriage, however meagerly, has been a central factor in the escalating rates of divorce and single motherhood of recent decades, and that marriage has become increasingly fragile as it has become less obligatory, particularly for women. In my view, however, these developments expose the inequity and coercion that always lay at the vortex of the supposedly voluntary companionate marriage of the "traditional nuclear family." It strikes me as a sad, revealing commentary on the benefits to women of the traditional nuclear family that, even in a period when women retain primary responsibility for maintaining children and other kin, when most women continue to earn substantially less than men with equivalent cultural capital, and when women and their children suffer substantial economic decline after divorce, so many regard divorce as the lesser of evils.

Although I interpret the sources and meaning of contemporary processes of family reconstruction quite differently from Popenoe, I share his concern about the grim prospects confronting most of our nation's children. Not even a wild-eyed antifamily extremist, of the sort Popenoe's Op-Ed made me out to be, could deny that far too many children today suffer serious deprivations or that most children (and their relatives) could benefit from massive infusions of the loving attention, economic and social security, and innocence and optimism that Ozzie and Harriet families have come to symbolize. However, I believe that Popenoe, and especially the more reactionary representatives of the family values crowd, consistently confuse symbol with reality and misdiagnose the social sources of contemporary family distress. The nostalgia for the family that they

peddle is singularly unhelpful to children or to a social policy arena that has been criminally slow to respond to profound family transformations.

Moreover, Popenoe's well-intentioned attempt to distinguish his stance from that of Falwell, Buchanan, and Quayle by expanding the definition of the traditional nuclear family to accommodate a tepid norm of gender equality strikes me as myopic and ill-fated. It fails to confront a disturbing contradiction at the heart of a fully volitional marriage system. Certainly under present conditions of political, economic, social, and sexual inequality, truly egalitarian marriage is not possible for the majority. One can only conjecture whether a fully egalitarian marriage system would be compatible with lifelong commitments to dyadic intimacy under utopian conditions of gender, sexual, racial, and economic justice. If, as many feminists have begun to suspect, a stable marriage system depends upon systemic forms of inequality, it will take more than thought reform or moralistic jeremiads about family decline to stanch our contemporary marital hemorrhage. Recent proposals by "communitarians," like Popenoe, to restrict access to divorce implicitly recognize, but fail to address, this unpleasant contradiction, one which poses a serious dilemma for a democracy.

This bleaker view of the roots of contemporary marital fragility has profound implications for childrearing which must be faced more honestly than they yet have been in the political arena. Without coercion, divorce and single motherhood rates will remain high. Certainly the consequences of divorce for children are not trivial, but divorce, in and of itself, does not harm the young nearly so much as Popenoe and others have claimed. Most of the studies upon which alarmist views rely conflate the negative economic, geographic, and social consequences that children now unjustly suffer after many divorces with the psychological effects of marital rupture. Yet the most careful studies suggest that it is not the loss of a parent, but a hostile emotional environment preceding this loss that causes most of the emotional damage to children (see, e.g., Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Cherlin, 1991; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991).

Short of exhorting or coercing people to enter or remain in unequal, hostile marriages, family decline critics offer few social proposals to address children's pressing needs. Further stigmatizing the increasing numbers who live in "nontraditional" families is surely no help. Rather, family sociologists should be directing public attention to legal, economic, and social policy reforms that

could mitigate the unnecessarily injurious effects of divorce and single parenthood on the fourth of our nation's children who now suffer these. Restructuring work schedules and benefit policies to accommodate familial responsibilities, redistributing work opportunities to reduce unemployment rates that destroy spirits and families, enacting comparable worth standards of pay equity to enable women as well as men to earn a family wage, providing universal health, prenatal, and child care, and sex education and reproductive rights to make it possible to choose to parent with responsibility, revitalizing public education, passing and enforcing strict gun control laws, and rectifying the economic inequities of present divorce property and income dispositions are among the many genuinely child-friendly profamily measures we should be advocating.

The election of a President who was reared, as was George Washington, by a single parent provides an excellent opportunity to end the scapegoating of unconventional families and to begin rebuilding public responsibility for all of our children, and for their kin. Solvent, secure, publicly respected families provide better hope for a democratic future than do impoverished, distraught, stigmatized ones. Family sociologists should take the lead in burying the ideology of "the family" and in rebuilding a social environment in which diverse family forms can sustain themselves with dignity and mutual respect.

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## The Sky *Is* Falling, But Popenoe's Analysis Won't Help Us Do Anything About It

David Popenoe argues that we have much to worry about when we look at what has happened to American families in the last half of the twentieth century. During the past 4 decades, the age of marriage has risen and the rate of marriage has declined, fewer children are being born, many more mothers of young children are in the labor force, and the divorce rate has gone up dramatically. Increasing numbers of Americans, then, are less likely to have children, and those who do are more likely to rear them in small, unstable households and families, isolated from loving kin and caring neighbors. Some of the basic functions of the family (procreation, socialization of young children, provision of care, affection, and companionship, economic cooperation, and sexual regulation) are not being performed, or not being performed well. As a result, the structure of the family is under siege.

Unlike Henny Penny, whose insistent warning that the sky is falling was based on a misunderstanding, Popenoe has good reason to be worried. In fact, I believe that he could make an even stronger case for concern if he ventured beyond his focus on the family as an institution and examined in more detail the widespread incidence of violence, drug abuse, mental illness, general emotional dysregulation, and loneliness that constitute the daily lives of too many adults and children in contemporary American families. To his apparent surprise, Popenoe's claim that the institution of the family is seriously ill or dying has been met by passionate counter claims that he is suffering from a nostalgia for what never was, or that the family is alive and well, or at least not any sicker than it was 4 decades ago. I will join other critics (e.g., Skolnick, 1991; Stacy, 1990) in arguing that Popenoe's analysis of family trends is seriously awry, but I urge family researchers

not to ignore the message because the messenger makes them angry. I worry that the heated debate about whether the American family is alive or dead is distracting family scholars from devoting their energies to answer three far more important questions about the difficulties experienced by families as they make the trek toward the twenty-first century:

1. How do we understand the causes of the changes that Popenoe documents in the structure and function of contemporary family life? I will argue that it is possible to reject his causal analysis but to accept his conclusion that there is much that is troubling across the American family landscape.

2. Are the changes that Popenoe describes inevitably deleterious for family members? What can we learn about individual and family resilience from the vast numbers of families who continue to flourish despite the societal trends that Popenoe catalogs?

3. What can be done to reduce the prevalence of family distress and increase the adaptive functioning of contemporary families? The assumption that scholars ought to be concerned with family intervention is controversial, I realize, but I agree wholeheartedly with Arlene Skolnick's (1991) tart observation that "we need less hand-wringing and more social ingenuity to help the families we do have work better" (p. 201).

### THE CAUSES OF CHANGE IN FAMILY STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

It is possible to treat patients without understanding the causes of their illness. It is never possible to mount preventive programs to reduce the incidence and prevalence of problems in families without understanding the factors that create these

problems in the first place. Although Popenoe did not set out explicitly to undertake a causal analysis of the demographic and psychological changes in family life, each section of his paper contains one or more speculative paragraphs devoted to how the current state of American family decline, as he characterizes it, has come to pass.

Popenoe asserts that current decline in family size to fewer than two children per family (fewer than needed to replace the population) is associated with "a dramatic, and probably historically unprecedented, decrease in positive feelings toward parenthood and motherhood" and "a remarkable decrease in the stigma associated with childlessness" (pp. 6-7). He attributes the increased divorce rate during this century to a combination of a rejection of traditional roles by wives, the stress of changing gender roles, unrealistic expectations of marriage, and a more recent "me-generation" trend toward self-fulfillment instead of responsibility as a central preoccupation of adulthood.

Why do these attitudes constitute a problem? According to Popenoe, "with more women in the labor market . . . the economic interdependence between husbands and wives has been declining. Wives are less dependent on husbands for economic support; more are able, if they so desire, to go it alone. This means that wives are less likely to stay on in bad marriages for economic reasons . . . . As the marital tie has weakened in many families, so also has the tie between parents and children" (p. 536).

I interpret Popenoe's conclusions about the causes of family disintegration as consistently blaming the victim and ignoring the synergy of social forces that place American families at risk. The family is disintegrating, Popenoe tells us, because men and women in the childbearing age range have become self-focused, unwilling to put up with bad marriages, uninterested in having children, unwilling to persevere for the children's sake or to share their precious psychological and financial resources with the young. This litany of "explanations" is bound to raise the hackles of feminist family scholars. But his analysis should trouble all family scholars of whatever ideological persuasion because it is fundamentally flawed, scientifically and logically, in its inferences from data on family trends.

First, chroniclers of societal trends should be forced to repeat before each day's writing session: "Correlation does not establish proof of causation." Because, for example, a decline in family size occurs during the same time period as an in-

crease in negative attitudes toward children, we can neither conclude that these attitudes bear a causal relation to family size, nor evaluate the role that they might play in determining fertility decisions. At the very least, we would need data on individual differences between families, showing that men and women with the most negative attitudes toward children tend to have smaller families. Another example: Before evaluating Popenoe's notion that the divorce rate is heightened by "me-generation" attitudes, we need to know whether such attitudes actually predict which couples divorce or stay together, and how such attitudes are causally linked with marital quality and stability.

A second major flaw in Popenoe's analytic strategy is his failure to consider alternative causal hypotheses, especially those at levels of analysis other than antichild and antifamily values. He does not, for example, consider the role of the revolution in birth control technology. The reduction in family size may not reflect a dislike of children, but a growing ability to regulate and space children in order to provide a better quality of family life. In accounting for the shifting role of women in the family and workplace, Popenoe does not consider the worldwide economic upheaval that makes it necessary for two parents to work; he does not wonder whether it is the strain of this economic pressure rather than (or in addition to) the fact of two parents working outside the home that may be weakening the marital bond.

Unaccountably, to me, Popenoe does not take seriously the fact that, while new solutions to family distress often bring new problems, the old solutions often worked to the disadvantage of at least some members of a family. Popenoe mentions the profound inequalities in earlier family arrangements, especially for women, and the fact that economic independence for women is beneficial in allowing them a choice about whether to continue in a difficult marriage. He does not, however, consider the argument that some of the negative consequences for women of what are now called traditional family arrangements might legitimately lead to a cautious approach to marriage and having children, or to a move toward divorce when marital life is intolerable. That is, so-called "traditional values" and family arrangements, rather than me-generation family attitudes, may play a causal role in motivating the family changes he decries.

Popenoe's critical picture of both parents and

childless couples does not square with the message that I have been hearing from several dozen couples who have decided not to have children and from more than 200 Northern California families with young children that Carolyn Pape Cowan and I have been studying intensively over the past 20 years (cf. Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Cowan, Heming, & Shuck, 1993). The parents whom we and our staff have interviewed, observed, and deluged with questionnaires, do express occasional trapped feelings and frayed tempers. The vast majority, however, are passionate about being the best parents that they can be to their children. Most are working beyond their limits to provide for their children, both psychologically and financially, to make family life better than the way it was in the families in which they grew up.

Most of the nonparent couples we interviewed have concluded that their choice to remain childless has been shaped by concern for the children they might have. Believing for a variety of reasons that they will not make good enough parents, they have decided, sometimes with great reluctance, to remain childless. Only the rare individual seeks to be "childfree" because raising children would interfere with his or her personal growth, career, or marriage—some of the me-generation attitudes that Popenoe suggests are pervasive. Based on our contact with the members of real families studied in depth, rather than analyses of national statistical trends, I find a remarkable absence of the general characterization of negative attitudes toward children and families that Popenoe describes as the new norm.

In contrast to Popenoe's one-note explanation that family decline is caused by a decline in "family values," I have suggested several alternative sources of the current weakening of the family as an institution. An additional critical factor, I believe, is the unconscionable neglect of family policy by politicians in both political parties in the United States over the last 50 years. Until early in 1993, there was no Family Leave Policy for parents of young children. Now we have minimal provisions for enabling parents to care for their own children and not lose their jobs if they work in a business with at least 50 employees. Many have no medical coverage, social services, public health visiting nurses, or mental health services available unless they are in poverty and already experiencing problems that are impossible to resolve on their own. Rather than lack of interest in the process of family making, I see men and

women struggling hard not only to make decent families, but to do it in spite of great political, economic, and social barriers to the creation of a child- and family-focused life.

Here is where disagreements about the causes of weakness in the structure and function of the family are important. Popenoe's belief that American family attitudes are to blame for the current plight of the family leads to a sermonizing approach that, in essence, urges adults of child-bearing age to "pull up their socks" and act more responsibly. But this exhortation does little good for men and women who cannot afford to buy socks and have no access to mending materials when the fabric inevitably wears thin. Family scholars and family members who are not convinced that (a) the old ways were better and that (b) family members are to blame for their current plight, must look elsewhere for potential explanations of the prevalence of distress in modern families so that social service agencies and political decision makers will know where to target their interventions.

#### CONSEQUENCES

Having endorsed Popenoe's concerns about the state of contemporary family life, I feel compelled to point out that, in its present form, Popenoe's article presents an undifferentiated picture of the consequences of social change for family adaptation. A major problem is that the negative consequences for children of what Popenoe describes as family decline are assumed rather than demonstrated. He provides only one supporting quote about the negative impact on children from Senator John D. Rockefeller IV's report for the National Commission on Children (1991). With all due respect to the Senator, we need more systematic evidence.

The fact that many mothers of young children are in the labor force is assumed by Popenoe to be problematic. In fact, there is some evidence that, when mothers of young children work outside the home, they are less depressed than stay-at-home mothers (Cowan & Cowan, 1992) and that they may be providing role models that stimulate their daughters' development (Hoffman, 1986; Moorehouse, 1992). The evidence on this complex topic is far from definitive, but it certainly does not support the automatic assumption that when mothers work outside the home there are negative consequences for the quality of family life and children's development (Kline & Cowan,



1988).

Popenoe seems to assume that divorce is inevitably detrimental to children. He does not mention a body of new research suggesting that, while divorce often has at least a short-term negative impact on children's well-being, there are equally negative consequences for children whose parents stay together but engage in high levels of unresolved marital conflict (Emery, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

The point I want to make here may get me into trouble with my colleagues in sociology. Historical social trend analyses on the macro-level are essential to provide a context for understanding past and present family life. Nevertheless, it is both bad logic and bad science to draw causal conclusions about the consequences of family risk factors without a more detailed look at the patterns and processes that link risks and outcomes. We need to take a lesson from the risk and resilience paradigm emerging in the subfield of developmental psychopathology within the study of mental health (see Cowan, Cowan, & Schulz, in press). Until very recently, investigators identified individuals in various high-risk or diagnostic categories, compared them with low-risk or nondiagnosed subjects, and looked for differences in concurrent or previously occurring biological, psychological, or social "causes" of distress or dysfunction. The problem with this approach is that one can *never* determine causation from "follow-back studies." Even if twice as many children of divorced parents have problems with aggression, we cannot conclude anything about the role of divorce in affecting children's aggression until we follow families forward over time. We need to see how many children of divorced parents do not turn out to be unduly aggressive and how many children of nondivorced parents become aggressive to parents and peers. This approach, at the center of developmental psychopathology (Cowan, 1988; Rutter & Garmezzy, 1983) forces us to adopt much more sophisticated explanatory models of how risks for individual or family dysfunction are linked with both negative and positive outcomes.

The reason for my argument here for the developmental psychopathology approach is that I believe it is central to accomplishing the task that Popenoe and others have begun, but which has gotten sidetracked into an endless discussion between the Henny Pennys and the Turkey Lurkeys about whether the sky is really falling. This debate is ultimately unresolvable. The central ques-

tion is, how do we understand the causes *and* the consequences of changes in various family structures and patterns of interaction? In addition to addressing this question directly, the developmental psychopathology research paradigm has the added advantage of directing our attention to the multitudes of families doing well in spite of the apparent risks. These families have a great deal to teach us. For example, we could learn a lot from looking at the other side of the coin from the one Popenoe emphasized in his paper. How do we explain the fact that, despite the prevalence of what he claims are antifamily values and negative attitudes toward children, the vast majority of adults get married, have children, and at least half of them stay married for life? Turning the question on its end not only provides a more differentiated picture of what makes for adaptation and dysfunction in families, it also helps us re-examine our middle-class assumptions about what works and what doesn't work in specific family constellations.

#### WHAT IS THE ROLE OF FAMILY SCHOLARS AND RESEARCHERS IN FOSTERING FAMILY ADAPTATION?

I noted earlier that Popenoe's description of imminent family decline provides a warning but no guidance about what to do if the sky should really fall. The ability to make accurate prophecies may result in family scholars being awarded front row seats at the millennium, basking in recognition by their colleagues as having been right all along. My concern is that we need to find out more about what can be done for families before the millennium arrives.

Does Popenoe have a responsibility to help us avoid what he clearly views as a potential "end of the line" for families? Not all family scholars and researchers are interested in intervention. Not all are competent to design political policies or to suggest social services that might increase the stability and richness of family life. But all of us who study families and who turn to empirical data on families to support our conclusions about contemporary family life need to make certain that the research studies we do—the questions we ask and the methods we use—adequately address the complexity of contemporary family life. The result, I believe, will provide a more substantial foundation for the conceptualization and planning of corrective or preventive interventions by others, even if that is not the researcher's primary goal.

The kind of research I am hoping for will require many family scholars, not just Popenoe, to rethink their research agendas. To stimulate some of this rethinking, a group of colleagues and I have offered a few "immodest proposals," which I summarize here, for reshaping family research agendas as we approach the twenty-first century (Cowan, Field, Hansen, Skolnick, & Swanson, 1992).

1. We need to be more aware of the fact that within every descriptive account of families are implicit values and prescriptions about the way families ought to be. Popenoe's hidden values, rather than his explicit descriptions, have elicited the strong negative response from his critics. It is time for all of us to stop hiding behind the objective mask of science. Scholars and researchers who make their values explicit will help enrich both scientific and public policy debate about changes that could strengthen the family as an institution and improve the quality of family life.

2. We must reconsider our definitions of families and what they do. In Popenoe's paper, and in many other family studies, only the researcher gets to define the family and describe the legitimate functions of family life. We need to listen more to family members themselves, and to discover how different kinds of families fulfill different familial functions.

3. We must develop more sophisticated theoretical models to study the processes linking societal, familial, and individual functioning. Popenoe is not alone in his tendency to make sweeping generalizations about how societal change affects families and family members. In fact, none of the academic and professional disciplines concerned with families does a convincing job of tracking the paths by which changing social forces affect families, and changing families affect the fabric of society.

4. New and more differentiated family models require a different approach to research methods. We must move beyond the methodological imperialism that has dominated family research in this century to gather data from multiple perspectives and sources using a variety of techniques: macro and micro, qualitative and quantitative, self-report and observation, group trends and case studies, historical and contemporary, within-culture and across-culture. It is in the attempt to integrate information from these often disparate and conflicting sources that an adequately complex view of families will emerge.

5. We must pay attention to the role of gender

in shaping the quality of life inside and outside the boundaries of the nuclear family. Popenoe and other family scholars may not understand why feminist critiques of their work are so heated. But, until the analysis of what is good for families pays specific attention to what is good and what is harmful for women as well as men, girls as well as boys, these critiques will recur.

If nothing else, the passion surrounding the arguments between Popenoe and his critics should convince us that concern about the family is alive and well within the ranks of family scholars. I believe that it is flourishing among the families that Popenoe is most concerned about. It seems to me that despite strong disagreements, family scholars and the families that they study are united in a belief that my colleagues and I found everywhere we looked and listened (Cowan et al., 1992): "Families mattered in the past; they continue to matter in the present; and they will matter still, in the uncertain years of our future" (p. 481).

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#### NOTE

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## The National Family Wars

Our "national family wars," as Judith Stacey puts it, are as good an example as any of how far the social sciences have departed from empirical analysis and drifted into the realm of ideological disputes. In their drift toward ideology, and especially in the way they are handling ideological disputes, the social sciences are becoming ever less true to their calling.

This exchange of views over my article on family decline, manifestly a part of the "national family wars," is a case in point. For ideological reasons, even though the empirical data to support the trend are now overwhelming, the notion of "family decline" remains steeped in controversy. The controversy does not seem about to end. Norval Glenn provides some reasons for this, but I will go a step further.

Resolving ideological disputes is a much more difficult task than settling empirical disagreements; unlike empirical disagreements, ideological disputes can seldom be resolved with empirical evidence. Ideological disputes can only be logically debated, one hopes with continuing reference to empirical reality. Indeed, dispassionate discourse about ideology is supposed to be the stock in trade of the academic community.

Also, ideological disputes are inevitably more

heated than empirical disagreements. Ideology, after all, concerns the basic values and ideals that each of us holds. But in academia today, I fear, the heat generated in ideological disputes has gone beyond the boiling point. Dispassionate discourse has fallen by the wayside. Academia has become overwhelmed by a cultural mentality of "political correctness." If the ideological dispute happens to involve disagreement with a politically correct position, as many now do, the dissenter is exposed to ferocious denunciation and even ostracism.

The simple conflict of values in ideological disputes can be seen in Judith Stacey's piece: The value differences between Judith Stacey and myself seem profound. Everyone in this business has personal values that to some extent guide their work, at least in what they choose to study. Philip Cowan says that my values are "hidden." But I have always tried to put them right up front. In my (1988) book, *Disturbing the Nest*, I wrote in the introduction, "to me the family is primarily a social instrument for child rearing, and I value 'strong families' for that reason. I hold to the old ideal of parents living together and sharing responsibility for their children, and for each other" (p. viii). This ideal, by the way, was held until re-

cent decades by virtually all Americans.

Judith Stacey comes from a different value perspective. She is less interested in trying to maintain two-parent families “for the sake of the children,” for example, than she is in mitigating “the unnecessarily injurious effects of divorce and single parenthood on the fourth of our nation’s children who now suffer these,” and in not stigmatizing “the increasing numbers who live in ‘nontraditional’ families.” She seems to prefer the “postmodern family condition,” made up not of two-parent families but of “diverse family forms.” She even hints that the two-parent family may be an impossibility (“a stable marriage system depends upon systemic forms of inequality”). These are fundamental disagreements, and I would love to debate them with her sometime. My main thought about her “postmodern family condition” is, what child wants to live in a “non-traditional” family?

The problematic aspect of today’s ideological disputes is not value disagreements, however, but the intrusion of political correctness and the escalation of animosities that has been generated. As Norval Glenn has noted, my notion of family decline has often been rejected “with a vehemence uncharacteristic of most intellectual and academic debate.” Cowan’s article is a prime example. The sheer intensity with which Cowan denounces me, including his repeated use of the “Henny Penny,” “sky is falling,” style of belittling mockery, can only be explained in terms of the current academic climate. Cowan’s assertion that my “sermonizing” empirical analysis “is seriously awry,” and “fundamentally flawed, scientifically and logically,” is heavily underlined with the animosities and ideological overkill of political correctness. His animosity is all the more surprising since, by his own admission, he has “endorsed Popenoe’s concerns about the state of contemporary family life.” He probably even agrees with my basic values, although he doesn’t say so.

Political correctness can mean many things, but it generally is used to refer to a “correct” ideological position on matters of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. If one differs from the correct position, one is not just “incorrect,” but almost an infidel, and therefore subject to scorn, denunciation, and reproach. Judith Stacey suggests, for example, that to talk of “family values” is to be a racist, sexist, classist, and homophobe! Now, these happen to be industrial-strength terms of derision. I believe strongly in family values, so does that make me . . . ?

Among my many politically-incorrect indiscretions, the main one seems to involve sexism. I suspect that the politically-correct position, the challenge to which made by my work most concerns critics like Cowan, is this: “There are no negative family consequences associated with maternal employment.” Cowan returns to this issue more than any other.

In my work, I have never given special prominence to maternal employment; I see it as but one of many possible causes of family decline. Indeed, for the past year I have been working on a book about “fatherlessness,” which I consider a much more serious problem for children. I support many feminist goals and I do not favor a return to the pre-women’s liberation era, as I have stated endlessly in my writings. Personally, I have one daughter who is a pediatrician, another who is an anthropologist, and my wife is an educational administrator; I have never, ever, voted for a Republican! But in the current ideological climate of academia, none of this is of the slightest importance. For raising problematic aspects of maternal employment, I might as well be a rabid, reactionary, right-wing sexist. Let me just say that, with all due respect to working mothers, it is a sad day for the social sciences when a family scholar cannot discuss, without being denounced, some possible problems connected with what has been one of the most dramatic social changes of the past three decades.

This is not the time nor place to answer all of the substantive charges raised by the critics. My article was much more about description than explanation of trends; it was not meant to be a theory of family decline. For that, see my book (Popenoe, 1988). It is easy to denounce the few explanatory hypotheses that I proposed—to accuse me, for example, of “confusing correlation with causation,” and of “blaming the victim.” These have become almost stock social-science debating responses. It is just as easy for me to denounce the Cowan alternative: making generalizations about America from the information gleaned from his few dozen (how selected?) Northern California couples who decided not to have children, plus his couple of hundred couples with young children. I do have to express my incredulity at Cowan’s conclusion about the childless couples: that there is a remarkable absence of negative attitudes toward children among these couples; they merely have chosen to remain childless out of a deeply-felt concern for the children they might have had!

Both Stacey and Cowan take me to task for not making proposals about how to improve the situation. But this is surely an unfair criticism. I have frequently addressed that issue elsewhere; the article under discussion, already too long, was focused on family trends. Also unfair, for precisely the same reason, is Cowan's suggestion that I should have dealt more fully with the consequences of family decline.

Let me end on the bright side. That neither Judith Stacey nor Philip Cowan seriously challenge the trend data is a sign of progress. Stacey claims that I have my interpretations wrong, and Cowan claims that I have both my causes and my interpretations wrong, but they nevertheless let the data stand. Norval Glenn, of course, is also in agreement with the empirical evidence. Several years back, I am sure, this exchange would have been much more about data. Thus we are seeing a new agreement on the basic, empirical family trend of our time which was, after all, the fundamental focus of my article. You see, empirical disagreements *can* be resolved. And perhaps, because of this, the national family wars are a step further toward resolution.

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