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Family Change and Family Diversity

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Abstract
Future historians of the family will undoubtedly look upon the final decades of the twentieth century as a time of upheaval, when a major shift occurred in the form and function of the Western family. During the last third of the century, the nuclear family built around durable conjugal ties and a distinct division of labor based on gender has given way to a multiplicity of kinship types. This new (or some would argue renewed) diversity of family forms has provoked considerable commentary and controversy on the consequences of these changes for producing basic civic values required for social order.

In this paper I first examine the transformation that has taken place and the reasons why it came about. Then I consider some implications of the changes in family structure for the quality of family life, especially as viewed from the vantage point of children. I shall explore, though surely not resolve, the question of whether the deterioration of the nuclear family form is compromising the future stability of American society, as so many observers believe to be the case. This issue cannot be addressed without considering the roiling public debate over family values that has been generated by political and policy differences over how to address the "problems" created by the decline of marriage, or at least the decline of marriage "as we have known it."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, JR.

INTRODUCTION

FUTURE HISTORIANS of the family will undoubtedly look upon the final decades of the twentieth century as a time of upheaval, when a major shift occurred in the form and function of the Western family. During the last third of the century, the nuclear family built around durable conjugal ties and a distinct division of labor based on gender has given way to a multiplicity of kinship types. This new (or some would argue renewed) diversity of family forms has provoked considerable commentary and controversy on the consequences of these changes for producing basic civic values required for social order.

In this paper I first examine the transformation that has taken place and the reasons why it came about. Then I consider some implications of the changes in family structure for the quality of family life, especially as viewed from the vantage point of children. I shall explore, though surely not resolve, the question of whether the deterioration of the nuclear family form is compromising the future stability of American society, as so many observers believe to be the case. This issue cannot be addressed without considering the roiling public debate over family values that has been generated by political and policy differences over how to address the "problems" created by the decline of marriage, or at least the decline of marriage "as we have known it."

WHAT HAS CHANGED

By any historical standard, the changes that have occurred in the family over the past several decades have been truly remarkable. It can be fairly said that in no comparable era outside of wartime have we seen such a rapid shift in the shape of households and in the behavior of families. No doubt, these changes are highlighted by the fact that several decades ago one family type predominated as never before: the vast majority of Americans were living or aspired to live in nuclear families, a form of the family that now ironically is referred to as the "traditional" American family. In some sense this attribution is not inappropriate, because American families had always assumed a nuclear form; it nonetheless rings hollow to those able to recall that when this family form was in its heyday, many observers were bemoaning the disappearance of more ex-

tended and complex family forms and fearing that the nuclear family was becoming isolated from the network of kin and the larger community.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, before the revolution in gender roles occurred, complaints were commonly voiced about the headlong rush to early marriage, the segregation of women in the suburbs, the excessive dependency of children on their parents, the overindulgence of the young, and the number of marriages empty of emotion (Bell and Vogel 1968; Coser 1964; Winch 1963). These features of the nuclear family were said to contribute to the growing problem of delinquency, premarital sex, and school dropout among youth. When the revolution did occur, the emotionally charged character of the nuclear family was said to be a contributor to the discontents of youth in the late 1960s and 1970s (Flacks 1971; Slater 1970). These criticisms of the family seem almost quaint by contemporary standards, but they were experienced as very real by scholars and social critics at the time. Whether or not the complaints had merit, the hegemony of the nuclear family was viewed as a mixed blessing and was associated with many of the problems of growing up in American society (Friedan 1983; Friedenberg 1964; Goodman 1960).[1]

As we now know, the nuclear family in the 1950s was poised to become the "postmodern" family in the next several decades or, as Edward Shorter (1975) stated in his widely read book *The Making of the Modern Family,* to chart a course "straight for the heart of the sun." The term *postmodern family* has no precise meaning but generally designates a movement away from or delegitimation of patriarchal authority and a growing emphasis on personal autonomy of household members. Indeed, the term *family* itself is now culturally contested, a process that Peter and Brigitte Berger (1983/84) referred to as "the family wars." More than a few scholars have suggested that *family* as a singular is no longer appropriate; instead, by pluralizing the word to speak of American families, we encompass the new realities of American kinship. At least several well-known family sociologists have taken an even stronger position and advocate abandoning the word in scientific discourse altogether (Scanzoni et al. 1989). I do not think that semantic debates are likely to resolve the issues, though as I will point out later, the discussions of what constitutes family have important ramifications for family law and public policy.

How we conceive of marriage, family, and kinship has been reshaped or perhaps even shattered by a configuration of economic and social changes that broke apart a tightly prescribed pattern of kinship (Farber 1973; Goode 1963; Parsons 1951; Schneider 1980). In a matter of thirty years, we have gone from a time when nearly everyone married, usually in late adolescence or early adulthood, to a time when a growing minority will never wed, and most postpone marriage until their midtwenties or later. Marriage is no longer the master event that orchestrates the onset of sexual relations, parenthood, the departure from home, or even the establishment of a household. These events have become more independent of one another—discrete moments in the life course (Modell 1989; Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg 1976; Furstenberg 1982).

Many family scholars have pointed out that we are not so much creating a

new life course as reclaiming a former one that prevailed until the twentieth century. It is certainly true that in the past, family careers were disorderly; events such as severe economic downturns that disrupted the supply of eligible partners, migration patterns that produced unbalanced sex ratios, or disabling diseases and death that removed partners and parents created family instability. Sharp regional, class, and ethnic differences distinguished patterns of family formation (Coale and Watkins 1985; Hareven 1981). Until well into the twentieth century, no standard form of "the American family" existed even though Americans always preferred to live in independent family units and were committed to strong conjugal bonds: however, the boundaries of family membership were highly permeable and often included related kin, servants, and boarders. Home life was often more chaotic than we frequently imagined it to have been. In all but the small stratum of wealthy families, children were required to justify their existence by economic production or were required to seek employment elsewhere. It was not uncommon for parents to give their children up to orphanages, foster care, or employment as a means of managing precarious economic circumstances (Bellingham 1988).

In a recent book, John Gillis (1996) argues that the family as a sacred and protected institution is a relatively recent cultural invention. Notions of privacy, intimacy, and elaborate family rituals emerged only because religious and local community institutions receded, yielding greater symbolic power to the family. And the nationalization of these standards occurred only during the middle of this century in the postwar era, when family life became more accessible and affordable to all.

The era of high domesticity was brief, and its demise swift. Between 1965 and 1995, marriage became both less accessible and less affordable to a growing number of Americans. Working-class Americans who frequently had been propelled into marriage by a pregnancy at midcentury began to consider options other than a shotgun wedding. Middle-class youth who confidently married and began families in or shortly after college extended their educational careers. Women stayed in school and entered the labor force, expecting to work for a period before parenthood. Men became less confident that they could sustain a middle-class life on their earnings alone.

Rising rates of divorce shattered the ideal of life-long monogamy. The premium placed on marital satisfaction rose, creating higher standards for intimacy, sexual gratification, and shared domestic duties. Individuals viewed marriage as ever more daunting and hesitated to make permanent commitments so lightly. Temporary partnerships and cohabitation became alternatives to early marriage and, for a small minority, to matrimony itself (Bumpass 1990; Cherlin 1992).

These patterns were not evenly distributed in American society. African Americans experienced a virtual collapse of early marriage beginning in the early 1960s as a growing number of pregnant teenagers who would have married chose instead to become single parents. No doubt, some also resorted to abortion, but its legal availability was still a decade away. Despite the greater

selectivity of those blacks who entered wedlock, black marriages also became less stable (Cherlin 1992). By 1970, only 42% of black women in the population were married compared with 60% of white women (Espenshade 1985).

In part because these changes were so dramatic and because patterns of family formation among whites were slower to change, social scientists believed that changes in the black family were anomalous and distinctive (Rainwater and Yancey 1967). However, it seems increasingly evident that many of these changes were not confined to African Americans. Puerto Ricans have experienced almost identical patterns, and recently it appears that a growing proportion of lower-income white Americans are retreating from marriage as well (Farley 1995).

WHY THE CHANGES OCCURRED

It seems almost pointless to determine whether these changes resulted from economic events, social transformations, or cultural shifts in the importance placed on marriage. Large institutional changes rarely occur unless a confluence of conditions takes place. Individuals begin to reconsider their options when old solutions become unworkable. Tolerance for alternatives grows as more individuals engage in novel forms of behavior. Sanctions are weakened and new patterns become accepted even though they may be deemed less desirable accomodations to current realities (Gerson 1985). So it was with the rise of premarital sex, cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and divorce. The model of the nuclear family became less attainable—not so much because people believed in it less, but because more and more people were unable to fulfill the demands required for behaving in the familiar way.

"Value stretch" is the term one sociologist used to describe how lower-class individuals begin to depart from mainstream practices (Rodman 1963). It is an appropriate way of understanding how individuals come to behave in ways that at least initially they do not entirely believe in or even actively disapprove of. As values are stretched, sanctions lose their grip, and more people talk openly about behaving in ways that were previously thought unacceptable. So it was with a host of family behaviors in the 1960s and 1970s. To be sure, people had for some time engaged in sexual relationships before marriage, lived together in informal arrangements, and had children outside of wedlock, but such events were not discussed in polite company—much less paraded in newspapers or television without the distinct scent of scandal. Publicizing such actions was an occasion to deplore them, and so these not-so-uncommon behaviors were carried out underground. The 1960s and 1970s broke down this state of "pluralistic ignorance."

Ironically, just before this transformation, a leading authority on family, William J. Goode (1963), described the sweeping changes in family systems that were occurring worldwide and predicted that the "conjugal based" family of the West would become more widespread. Goode's prediction was based on the

idea that family and economy must "fit" for effective production and reproduction. Goode argued that the nuclear family was ideally suited to the demands of an industrial economy, with the requirements of a flexible labor market demanding geographic mobility, gender specialization, and autonomous youth loosely attached to the household.

In retrospect, an argument could have been made just as easily for the bad fit of the conjugal family with the industrial economy, especially as it began to draw women into the labor force. The ideal of a close-knit small family unit anchored by a strong and enduring marriage became increasingly difficult to achieve as the gender-based division of labor rapidly gave way to a dual-worker family system. Gender specialization within the family began to make less sense as women moved from being homemakers to paid workers in the economy. The model of marriage that prevailed at midcentury—two joining together as one—became less persuasive as a design for ordering relations between men and women. Moreover, the highly differentiated patterns of parenting became less appropriate as well. The absent father—whether inside or outside the home—came to be seen as a problem not just for women who were bearing a disproportionate share of the household load but also for children who, it seems, missed the presence of males as caregivers and role models.

Throughout the 1970s, the ideal of the nuclear family was attacked by many feminists, progressives, gays, and scholars of color who promoted the viability, if not the superiority, of alternative kinship arrangements. The rhetoric assault perhaps reached a peak in 1978 when the Carter administration was forced to cancel the White House Conference on the Family because it threatened to be politically embarrassing to the president if the deep ideological divisions over the family were permitted to surface. The public discussion actually contributed to the changes that were taking place concurrently (Lasch 1977; Tufte and Myerhoff 1979). No doubt it helped rationalize and perhaps legitimate the growth of varied family forms. Nonetheless, it seems likely that most of the change would have taken place had public discussion focused exclusively on the demise of the family and the costs to children, as it has in the 1990s. Indeed, the changes that have occurred from the 1980s to the present have taken place in a very conservative political climate. At least from the early Reagan years (and some might say starting with the Carter administration), calls for restoring family values were issued with increasing volume. However, the effect of these appeals appears to be quite limited, at least judging from demographic trends over the past two decades.

Sexual behavior among the young continued to increase during the 1980s despite a "just say no" campaign for premarital chastity promoted by the Reagan administration. Trends in teenage childbearing seem similarly unaffected by a continuous stream of public information campaigns to discourage young men and women from having children early in life or prior to marriage (Hayes 1987; Luker 1996). Cohabitation has been steadily on the rise and has become virtually institutionalized as a stage of courtship or, for some, a de facto marriage (Bumpass 1990).

Efforts to curb divorce and single parenthood have been equally unsuccessful. As far back as the middle 1980s, scholars began to sound the alarm that high rates of marital dissolution were jeopardizing the welfare of children and the stability of society (Blankenhorn, Bayme, and Elshtain 1990; Popenoe 1988; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1989). Today, there are widespread calls for the tightening of divorce regulations. In fact, divorce rates have not risen since the late 1970s. What has occurred is a widespread postponement of marriage in favor of informal unions or solo living. These trends are largely responsible for the sharp growth of nonmarital childbearing (Morgan 1996). Fertility has risen among unmarried women, no doubt in part due to the declining attractiveness of marriage as a solution to prenuptial conception. Evidence suggests that the Murphy Browns—middle-class women who deliberately plan to become single parents—are still relatively rare (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994). The ranks of never-married solo parents are largely filled by women who inadvertently become pregnant, reject the option of abortion, and see little gain to entering a union that is perceived to be fragile from the start (Furstenberg 1995a).

Marriage remains a privileged status. By this I mean that most Americans regard marriage as a preferred arrangement, especially when children are involved. However, couples frequently delay marriage as a hedge against the possibility that the union will not survive. Thus, marriage has increasingly become less the pledge of permanent commitment than a conditional commitment to remain together so long as both parties are willing and able. This cultural understanding has been reluctantly incorporated in the law and even in marriage rituals that speak less of permanent bonds and more of the importance of equality, mutual respect, and intimacy—the cornerstones of a contemporary relationship.

The meaning of marriage has also changed with the shifting of gender roles occasioned by women's entrance into the labor force—especially married women with children. In the course of several decades, labor force participation of married women with preschool children went from being a rarity (18.6% in 1960) to being the prevailing pattern (61.7% in 1994). Little wonder that observers began to notice the disappearance of the Ozzie and Harriet form of the family (Blankenhorn, Bayme, and Elshtain 1990). In fact, no prevailing form of the family exists today that represents the typical family such as existed in the middle of this century when radio listeners and then television viewers were introduced to Ozzie and Harriet, Leave It to Beaver, and Father Knows Best.

As I stated earlier, the tightly orchestrated movement into marriage and childbearing with its highly segregated roles for men and women has all but collapsed. Individuals now typically live in many different families during the life course (Buchman 1989). A couple may cohabit, marry with both partners working, raise children while the wife works part-time, separate and co-parent before one or both remarry—themselves forming new families and perhaps beginning a cycle of further differentiation. Previously, it was relatively easy to distinguish between people who were doing it the right way (even if they cheated a little by having sex and perhaps getting pregnant prior to marriage)

and those who were not—those living in sin, unmarried mothers, or divorcees. Now with family forms so diverse, it is nearly impossible to draw such sharp distinctions between the right and wrong ways of organizing families. In this sense as Judith Stacey (1993) argues, "the" family as a hegemonic cultural construct has been delegitimized.

A good deal of public opinion data support Stacey's argument. Although individuals continue to think that living in formal and durable marriages is ideal, most Americans tolerate, if not endorse, alternative family forms (Chadwick and Heaton 1992). To be sure, Americans continue to disagree—often heatedly—over these questions, as evidenced by the cultural wars openly waged at the 1992 Republican Convention and by the controversy over gay marriage that has surfaced since Hawaii began to consider changing its marriage statutes to permit members of the same sex to form legal unions. Nonetheless, the very discussion of these values would not and probably could not have occurred several decades ago. Divided opinion on what constitutes legitimate forms of the family itself represents a remarkable social fact.

Whether this division of opinion necessarily implies that "family practices"—how we live in families—have been weakened, particularly in ways that compromise the interests of children, remains an open question. I realize that for many observers and even for many social scientists, this matter seems settled: most believe the family has become less important and less effective during the final third of this century (Popenoe 1988; Uhlenberg and Eggebeen 1986). However, part of the evidence cited for the decline of the family typically refers to the demographic data on the deinstitutionalization of marriage and increases in nonmarital fertility. In a certain sense, that evidence begs the question because it neatly sidesteps the issue of whether variation in the kinship forms represents a weakening of the family (Condran and Furstenberg 1994).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF FAMILY CHANGE

Have Americans become less committed to the importance of family? This is not an easy question to answer with the available data. The family continues to remain the institution most highly valued by Americans (National Commission on Children 1991). To be sure, Americans worry about family disintegration, but they remain committed to families and convinced that their own families are in good shape. I can find no evidence to suggest that parents are sacrificing less for their children. Indeed, a strong case can be made that parents feel more compelled than ever before to invest in their children's welfare—in both their material and psychological well-being (Furstenberg 1995b).

Admittedly, the data are sparse, but I suspect that were we able to monitor private household expenditures, investment per child is probably rising. The flow of resources that once went from children to parents has virtually stopped except perhaps in the parents' extreme old age. Many parents continue to sup-

port their children well into early adulthood by providing allowances and housing supplements (Lye 1996).

A great deal of data suggests that children continue to rely on their parents' advice and respect their opinions as they move through adolescence and into early adulthood (Modell 1989; National Commission on Children 1991). True, fathers who have lived apart from their children typically play an ancillary and often marginal role in these continuing patterns of support. This has certainly harmed children's interests. Step- and surrogate fathers have taken up some of the slack, but most research suggests that while stepparents may improve children's material position, on average children do not benefit by their presence in the home (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; White 1993).

It is also not easy to assemble evidence on time investment by parents. Clearly, the entrance of women into the labor force has meant less time available to spend with children in the home (Larson and Richards 1994; Rossi and Rossi 1990). Yet, comparisons over time frequently ignore the number of children in the household and competing obligations of parents in earlier times. At least some time studies suggest that monitoring and care of children has not decreased over the past half century even if mothers spend less time in the household (Robinson 1990). Again, the data are more ambiguous for fathers. When present in the home, it appears that they spend more time providing direct child care, but a higher proportion live apart from their children.

Grandparents remain a strong presence in children's lives. Fewer children grow up residing with grandparents in the home, but a greater number have contact with more of their grandparents. Because of increasing longevity of grandparents and modern means of transportation and communication, the older generation can often enjoy closer contact with their children and grandchildren than was possible earlier in this century. Moreover, declining rates of fertility imply that fewer children will receive the attentions of a greater number of grandparents. Indeed, most children report extensive contact with at least some of their grandparents. The attenuation of paternal links with children means that children are more likely to maintain contact with their mothers' kin, giving a slight matrilineal tilt to our kinship system (Johnson 1988). Yet, it also appears that to some extent stepgrandparents may pick up the slack (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1986).

I conclude two broad lessons from the admittedly incomplete evidence on kinship patterns. First, children may be less exposed to the continuous and stable influence of two parents. Nonetheless, kinship bonds remain strong and omnipresent for most children. Second, greater variability exists in the kinship system than was present at midcentury. The absence of standardized patterns may be destabilizing the family, but it may also signify a realignment of kinship away from the conjugal patterns toward greater reliance on lineage, especially matrilineage.

It is essential to keep in mind the centrality of the "isolated" nuclear family is a relatively recent development in Western history (Parsons 1951). Some scholars argue that we may be returning to the status quo ante when children were

less exclusively supervised by parents and were more the shared responsibility of extended kin and members of the community. If this shift is indeed occurring, it is not surprising that Americans, especially, would find this change disturbing. By international standards, this nation has always been committed to a highly privatized nuclear family system (Bellah et al. 1985). American families, it has been said, were born modern: that is, from colonial times, our culture has promoted a conjugal family form.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, foreign travelers took note of the strength of the domestic unit, the relative intimacy of marital relationships, the absence of hierarchy, and the democratic quality of parent–child relationships in American families (Furstenberg 1966; Hiner and Hawes 1985). The shrewdest of these observers, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), noted that American families, buttressed by local institutions—religious and voluntary community organizations—helped protect individuals from possible intrusions of the state. An ample supply of farmland and a distant frontier also contributed to the flourishing of independent households and strong conjugal ties. Far earlier than citizens of other nations, Americans embraced the importance of "romantic love" as a basis for marriage and egalitarian family relationships (Rothman 1984). And compared with people of other Western nations, Americans married exceptionally young and were more geographically mobile. Community and extended kinship ties remained strong throughout the nineteenth century but were probably less accentuated than in Europe. Both economic conditions and a strong political distrust of state powers helped foster the ideal of the conjugal family and probably hindered the growth of the welfare state.

Moreover, this view of the family as a protector against state interference, a "haven in the heartless world," (Lasch 1977) is an idea that grew in response to the harsh demands of early industrialization and continues even today as economic institutions exert control over family life (Coser 1964). The relegation of women and then children into the domestic sphere helped foster the notion that working men could find refuge and relief from excessive work demands at home. This belief created a common understanding in American culture that a household consisting of a working father and a nonworking mother is the most "natural" way of raising children, a concept that would elude many cultures in the world (Murdock 1949; Schneider 1980). In the 1950s and early 1960s, a good deal of the sociology of the family was devoted to explaining how this form of the family arose from functional requirements of societies, especially advanced industrialized societies (Bell and Vogel 1968). For a relatively short span of time—from the end of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century—it thus became "natural" for women to specialize in domestic and child care and for men to work outside the home. The single-wage-earner family went out of style fairly quickly but not without a certain amount of cultural resistance. Married women, who had first entered the labor force during the Depression from necessity and during World War II out of patriotism, were pressured to return to the home to make room for the returning vets. The huge government subsidies provided for education, housing, and employment helped

sustain the single-wage-earner family throughout the 1950s and promoted an era of domestic mass production. However, the pressures of supporting the children of the baby boom enticed married women back into the labor force in steadily increasing numbers. At the same time, rising levels of divorce pushed mothers with young children to seek employment even when they preferred to remain at home. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the number of working mothers steadily increased, and the age at which women returned to the labor force declined. By 1980 a majority of married women with dependent children were gainfully employed outside the home, and by 1990 a majority of those with children under age six held jobs outside the home (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996: 399).

Public opinion clearly favored keeping mothers in the home, and only as change occurred in the gender composition of the work force did views begin to shift and even then only reluctantly (Virginia Slims 1995). Again, it seems likely that the behavior of families stretched social norms in ways that legitimated the practices post facto. In the 1960s social scientists were divided on the effects of working mothers on children's development, but fairly soon a consensus emerged that the general impact was negligible. Many Americans continue to believe that children are better off if mothers remain in the home (National Commission on Children 1991; Virginia Slims 1995). Nonetheless, as the 1996 Welfare Reform Act attests, public support for mothers working in their households—at least if they are poor—has largely evaporated (Skocpol and Wilson 1994).

A spate of research linking employment patterns of mothers to the development and well-being of children searched in vain for evidence demonstrating the superiority of families with full-time housewives (Belsky and Eggebeen 1991; Menaghan and Parcel 1990; National Research Council 1993). The results of these studies have been quite consistent in showing no overall differences based on the working status of mothers. Employment, it seems, affects child rearing patterns differently depending on how parents regard their jobs and the desirability of working as well as what kinds of support exists for working parents and their children. By now most investigators have stopped looking for a general effect of employment and have begun to ask more sophisticated questions about how work is managed by families involving both the link between workplace and home, the availability and quality of child care, and the internal routines that arise inside the family in response to work demands. It is widely assumed that influences of work on children operate indirectly through these sorts of mechanisms but that it is difficult to identify any "direct" effects of work on children's welfare because so much variation exists in work patterns and their consequences for family life.

Interestingly, researchers often resist adopting a similar logic when it comes to assessing the impact of other features of family change discussed earlier in this paper. For example, many investigations of the effects of divorce and nonmarital childbearing continue to focus on the dichotomy between nuclear and nonnuclear families rather than trying to understand when and under what circumstances the family's form affects children. The broad comparisons between

two-biological-parent households and other arrangements has diverted attention away from how parents successfully manage the demands of childbearing and childrearing whatever their marital status. It is as if parents who live together are more or less assured success, and those who do not are guaranteed to fail despite the considerable evidence to the contrary (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

Most studies show that children are more likely to thrive when they receive continuous care from parents, when parents invest in the relationship by providing time and material resources, when parents provide appropriate control of the child's impulses and actions according to his or her age, and when parents display warmth, concern, and confidence in the child's ability. All these qualities, no doubt, benefit from the presence of two parents. Whether these parents need be biological parents is still unsettled. We do not know whether adopted parents, gay parents, or a single parent and grandmother or a single parent by him or herself does as well as two biological parents when such arrangements come with stability, material resources, and skillful practices.

The presence of more than one parent generally confers added benefits to children for reasons other than the obvious ones of providing more time and resources. When they share common values and concerns, parents can reinforce each other's practices and monitor their results. In effect, the family as a cohesive social system generates social capital by creating a common culture and routines. Family-based social capital will arise when parents successfully collaborate and when they are embedded in a larger network of kin (Bott 1971). Relatively little research has addressed how social capital within the family is built and sustained or, for that matter, how it may be dissipated by conflict within the household or across the generations. It seems also likely that divorce and remarriage are events that can destroy existing social capital if it has not already been dissipated by marital conflict.

Parents—whether residing together or apart—can ally with other institutions outside the family as ways of garnering social capital that may enforce their standards. Beyond the circle of kinship, they are most likely to rely on religious institutions to embed their children in a community of like-minded individuals. A long tradition of research has shown that religiosity is associated both with family stability and successful outcomes for children (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992). Of course, more than one reason may explain this result, including self-selection. However, it seems likely that immersion in religious institutions builds social capital, as Coleman (1988) and others have argued.

Arguing as I do that children will generally do better when they have two (or perhaps more) parents does not lead me to conclude that such arrangements are invariably preferable or that most children cannot thrive in single-parent families. The evidence suggests otherwise. Family structure explains a relatively small amount of the variation in key outcomes of success such as educational attainment, mental health, or problem behavior, especially when single-parenthood does not expose children to poverty, conflict, and instability. Yet, we cannot gainsay the fact that in American society, where economic and social sup-

port for families of all types is meager, children are more likely to be disadvantaged when they grow up in a single-parent household. The reverse is just as true: children are more likely to grow up in a single-parent household when they are disadvantaged. Mounting evidence suggests that disadvantage breeds family instability by undermining confidence in marriage, necessitating improvised and impermanent arrangements, and restricting access to good neighborhoods, schools, and social services.

This circular causality has been at the center of policy debates about welfare, family structure, and the well-being of children, with conservatives claiming that economic incentives have made single parenthood more attractive than work, and liberals insisting that the absence of work is to blame for the erosion of marriage and family life. Chicken or egg?—both arguments oversimplify the transformation in the family; neither prescription—eliminating welfare or creating jobs—is likely to reverse the trends of the twentieth century, which have their roots in multiple and interrelated cultural, political, demographic, and economic forces. The ideological conflicts that dominate public discussion about family values are curiously reminiscent of other moments of social dislocation in American history. We are no more likely to restore the conjugal family rooted in the ideal of premarital sexual chastity, early and lifelong monogamy, and a sharply drawn division of labor between men and women than we are to bring back the family farm.

Yet, the presumption that families can and should be self-sufficient remains a powerful image in American society—so much so that even the African proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child" has become a source of controversy when employed by Hillary Rodham Clinton (1996) to generate public support for children. Although safeguarding the ecological system is a well-accepted policy premise when it comes to the natural environment, the idea of extending this notion to children and families continues to be politically contentious, suggesting as it does that the family is not completely self-sufficient and that parents are not entirely autonomous.

As mentioned earlier, Americans, when compared with citizens of other nations with advanced economies, are committed to a highly privatized notion of the family. We are inclined to regard efforts to build supportive institutions that share child-care responsibilities with parents as state intrusions upon the natural rights of parents. Over the past several years, "parents' rights" legislation has been introduced in many states as a corrective to what its proponents believe are efforts to undermine the authority of parents. Although most Americans do not subscribe to such an extreme idea of parental autonomy, we distrust state institutions and favor voluntary, local systems of support. Tocqueville understood America political culture well when he identified the central importance of mediating institutions that reduce the power of the government over individuals, and foremost among these mediating institutions was the democratic family.

When Tocqueville visited America, we were still an agrarian nation and remained so throughout the nineteenth century. The agrarian ideal of a largely

self-sufficient family supported by local civic institutions has survived this century, though its credibility is being stretched to the breaking point as we head into the next century. We continue to rely on the family as the major, if not exclusive, mechanism for allocating resources to children, knowing full well that it generates extreme inequalities in income and opportunities, not to mention cultural and social capital. Correcting these inequalities remains a major challenge if American society is to adhere to its tenets of equality of opportunity and meritocracy.

Parents increasingly share the responsibility for preparing their children for economic and civic roles with other institutions, but parents are granted authority for "subcontracting" training to those institutions: schools, churches, voluntary organizations, and the like. Management or oversight of the child's involvement in these institutions has become a major activity of parents, probably of no less importance to the child's success in later life than in-home child-rearing practices. Yet, many parents differ enormously in their knowledge and access to institutions outside the home that affect the child's life chances. Differences by class, race, and ethnicity compound and magnify parents' individual differences in ability to manage the external world. No doubt, too, these status differences could be linked as well to parents' belief in their capacities to invest in institutions outside the home. And whatever their sense of "personal efficacy," a large number of parents simply do not have the means to live in the right neighborhoods, send their children to the right schools, or pay for quality child care, afterschool activities, and summer camp.

Our commitment to helping parents remains largely rhetorical in the form of exhorting parents to spend more time with their children and take better care of them. This rhetoric is not without its effect. The vast majority of citizens believe that American parents spend too little time with their children, are lax in their discipline, and are less willing to make sacrifices in their behalf. However when queried about the state of their own families, parents are much more upbeat in their evaluations. While feeling pinched for time, most parents are very positive about the quality of their family life. Moreover, children generally concur with their parents' assessments though, not surprisingly, adolescents are slightly more critical of parental practices. Still, it is obvious that most families think that it is the other folks who are not living up to their end of the bargain (Furstenberg 1995b).

This belief is likely to be especially pronounced when the other folks are the poor and minorities. Despite evidence to the contrary, most Americans believe that the poor hold different aspirations for their children and are less capable and competent parents. Ethnic minorities regardless of class, perhaps blacks especially, are likely to engender similar suspicions from the public at large, and these suspicions have been unscrupulously exploited by elected officials. Diversity has increasingly become a codeword to many Euro-Americans for a challenge to the American way of life, including the so-called traditional family.

Americans, and perhaps social scientists as well, may overestimate the signif-

icance of family change in accounting for changes in the well-being of children. Although rising levels of family instability surely contribute to the ill-being of children, they are not the exclusive and probably not the primary explanation for changes in the welfare of children. I come to this judgment for several reasons: First, the vast research literature on the immediate and long-term effects of marital disruption on children provides a consistent view that divorce has moderate to large effects in many realms of behavior. However, some portion of that effect is due to the family environment before disruption occurs and to the types of individuals who are predisposed to divorce or to single-parenthood. After taking account of these differences, the impact of the single-parenthood itself is reduced.

Second, macrolevel trends in children's ill-being as measured by such indicators as school dropout, drug use, delinquency, and teenage childbearing do not track well with trends in family change as measured by either the level of single-parenthood or women in the labor force. The latter have risen more or less continuously, whereas the former have fluctuated from decade to decade. Children's welfare appears to reflect what demographers refer to as period effects, that is, immediate temporal influences resulting more from economic, political, and cultural conditions or exposure to media than from cohort effects that birth groups carry with them over a lifetime. This observation is supported by international data as well: there seems to be little correlation between levels of problem behavior and the amount of family change. Northern European nations have witnessed astoundingly high levels of family change in the past several decades with no large apparent impact on levels of problem behavior among youth. At least at a superficial level changes in the family and the conditions of youth seem to be weakly correlated if they are correlated at all.

Interestingly, too, the rhetoric of a decline in family values is much more pronounced in Anglo than in northern European countries. This may reflect the greater or more exclusive role that the family is expected to play in determining the child's fate in these nations. Of course, in the Scandinavian countries, the welfare state also plays a more prominent role in mitigating the impact of family change by allocating resources to children according to their needs, rather than relying on the family as the main source of material well-being or institutional access. Thus, it seems that appeals to strengthening family values are likely to be sounded in nations that regard the family as a protective institution against the potential intrusion of the state.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

I have discussed several interconnected themes that have implications for the future of the family. First, I argued that the direction of change in the family that has produced a weaker conjugal system and destabilized the ideal of the nuclear family has not resulted, strictly speaking, from a shift in cultural preferences but a host of concurrent trends undermining the viability of this kinship

arrangement. These trends have occurred in nearly all highly developed economies. In virtually all Western nations, women have been brought into the job economy, marriage occurs later, fertility has declined, and divorce and single-parenthood have increased. These patterns are not likely to disappear in the near future or to be altered by rhetoric appeals to traditional values.

Class and ethnic differences, in the short run at least, are likely to grow rather than diminish, exacerbating the differences between the preferred family patterns of the affluent and the adaptive kinship arrangements of the dispossessed. It is entirely possible that in another quarter of a century we may look back on the family of today nostalgically. Family systems are likely, even for the well-off, to become more complex and less predictable, as they have over the past several decades. This means that many more children are likely to grow up with more rather than less family instability. Even stable two-parent families will continue to feel the pinch of balancing work and domestic responsibilities.

This condition puts a demand on the state to pick up some of the slack by providing child care, medical insurance, preschool programs, afterschool services, summer activities, and so on to ease the burdens placed on parents who do not have the means to arrange for these services privately. As we have seen in the past two decades, Americans have become ever more resistant to using public funds to support the family, presumably because we are reluctant to intrude on "parents' rights." Our commitment to the privatized family, sheltered from state interference, arouses fears of government intrusion in this country more than in most other industrialized nations. "Socializing" children, in theory, is up to parents, not to state-supported, let alone state-run, institutions and services. But this ideology protects the privileged and conceals the obvious fact that parents cannot shoulder so much of the burden of investing human capital in children. The arrangement that worked well enough in an agrarian economy and in the early stages of industrialization is simply insufficient to equip children for the twenty-first-century economy. To take an obvious example, we cannot rely on the family to expose children to computer literacy, a skill that is becoming increasingly important to children in the educational system.

Our cherished notions of the family may be getting in the way of providing adequately for children who do not have the benefit of family resources. No doubt we would be better off if all children were able to grow up in stable and harmonious two-parent families. However, this prospect is unrealistic. In any event, this expectation still places an increasingly high burden on low- and middle-income parents who cannot provide adequately for the growing requirement of college and beyond. Privately, many families have accommodated by greater personal sacrifice. As one low-income parent told me: "It really requires four jobs to achieve a decent standard of living." However, this same woman admitted that she and her partner rarely saw each other and had contemplated splitting up. The paradox is that we seem to be undermining families that we purport to protect by our peculiarly American-style relationship between the family and state. We need to think intelligently about a way of resolving this

public/private dilemma lest we undermine the family in the interests of saving it and put our nation's children in even greater jeopardy in the future.

NOTE

1. For excellent commentaries see the recent histories of the 1950s by May (1988), Modell (1989), Skolnick (1991), Coontz (1992), etc.

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