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10 Family Change and the Welfare of Children: What Do We Know and What Can We Do about It?

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Western nations are still reeling from nearly three decades of unprecedented family flux. Early indications in the 1980s that the pace of change might be lessening now seem premature. Some areas of spectacular change, such as marital instability, have abated; but rates of cohabitation, delayed marriage, and non-marital childbearing continue to rise, creating a strong impression that the vast transformation of the conjugal-based family is not yet completed. The perception that we are still in a state of demographic free-fall has created an ominous sense in many Western nations that the family is in a state of acute crisis (Davis 1985; Davis *et al.* 1986; Glendon 1989; Popenoe 1988; Skolnick 1991). Almost no one is bullish on the direction of family change these days. As historian Edward Shorter (1975) predicted, the post-modern family seems to be setting a course for the heart of the sun.

Shorter was among the early commentators to claim that the women's liberation movement was helping to destroy the warm and sheltering nest that shielded children from adult pressures and men from the harsh demands of the market economy (see also Lasch 1977). 'The nuclear family is crumbling', and 'women are the main unsettlers of the nest', wrote Shorter (1975, 279). For the past century, as women emerged from domestic seclusion, doubts have been raised about the fidelity of feminists to the central mission of the family, the reproduction and rearing of children (Degler 1980). But the recent gains by women, accompanied by the family changes documented in many studies, have provoked a searching debate inside and outside the feminist community over the responsibilities of women for managing the consequences of family change. A spate of books has appeared in the United States calling for immediate reforms to revitalize the family, and many of them characterize the dilemma as a struggle between women's rights and children's well-being. 'The American family has changed dramatically in the past generation', states one commentator, 'and it is children who have paid the price' (Galston 1991, 40). According to this observer, feminists were largely silent about the destruction of the nest and therefore must assume part of the responsibility for the precari-

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ous condition of children. The theme of this volume resonates with a sober reappraisal of the state of the Western family system at the end of the twentieth century as it bears on the unfinished gender revolution.

I am uncomfortable with formulating the issue of the consequences of family change for children's well-being as a particular dilemma for women. For the same reasons that I have never been entirely easy with the depiction of women as victims of family change, I am also reluctant now to recast women in the role of villains. Later, I will argue that the evidence showing a link between women's changing status and children's welfare is less than compelling. This is not to say that children are better off today than they were earlier in this century, but the link between family change and children's well-being is complex and, as yet, not adequately documented. Furthermore, to the extent that it exists, the deteriorating situation of children has as much to do with the changing domestic roles of men as it does with women's place in the family. After all, as An-Magritt Jensen argues in her chapter of this volume, it is men who have stoutly resisted a renegotiation of the domestic contract.

My first task in this chapter, therefore, is to identify some of the important unanswered questions that clarify the link between changing gender roles and children's well-being. I will then raise, but not resolve, some of the thorny policy issues confronting nations that have experienced large changes in the family as well as countries that are only beginning to confront the revolution in family patterns.

Sorting Out the Facts

The logic for arguing that the revolution in gender roles has jeopardized children's welfare is deeply intertwined with functional explanations for the origin and preservation of marriage and the nuclear family. Every graduate student who studied the family thirty years ago learned that marriage licensed parenthood and established parental, especially paternal, rights and responsibilities (Bell and Vogel 1968; Coser 1964). Men and women's separate roles contributed to the stability of the nuclear unit, establishing a basis of emotional and material exchange (Parsons and Bales 1955). These assumptions now appear almost antiquated, but they help to explain the widespread perception that family change has compromised the interests of children.

Many of the contributions to this volume convincingly demonstrate the disintegration of the nuclear family pattern. The breakdown of the strict gender-based division of labour has exposed the nearly tautological line of reasoning in the functional argument. Janet Saltzman Chavetz convincingly argues that the institution of marriage has weakened as women have been drawn into the labour force. As economic exchange has become less imperative, intimacy and emotional exchange have become the *sine qua non* of

marriage or marriage-like relationships. And so the demands for a satisfactory marriage have been inflated, further eroding the commitment to a lifelong contract.

Ron Lesthaeghe identifies the long-standing cultural shifts that helped to inflate the desire for emotional gratification in marriage, as well as to undermine the sense of obligation to remain in an unrewarding relationship. It is also clear that the growing autonomy of youth that has occurred in virtually all Western nations has eroded the institution of marriage if only by severing the link between sex and matrimony (Modell 1989). The deregulation of sex reduced the incentives to early marriage and must be credited with helping to raise expectations of marital gratification to unrealistic heights.

The more demanding standards for marital contentment have probably contributed to both women's and men's reduced investment in marriage. At the very least, women have become increasingly hesitant about putting all their eggs in the family basket. Some of this hesitancy is the result of a rising demand for female labour and a growing supply of well-educated women. Once in the labour force, women are subjected to the same greedy demands of the market-place as men; work outside the household now competes with family obligations for time and emotional commitment. The contraction of the global economy in the late 1970s imposed further constraints on family investments, especially among the huge baby-boom cohort, who were collectively experiencing downward mobility. The chronically depressed and uncertain state of the economy has led younger people to postpone family commitments, creating a cultural perception of declining investment in the family.

Clearly, then, the changing status of women has contributed to destabilizing the nuclear family—it may even have been a driving force—but I would contend that the family transformation has come about from a configuration of cultural, economic, demographic, and social changes. To credit or charge women as the instigators and primary beneficiaries overlooks the obvious fact that the impetus for change was a response to a new and varied set of conditions.

The Consequences of Family Change for Children: Macro-Level Evidence

As I noted earlier, the implications of these changes for children seem all too obvious to most observers. If marriage and the nuclear family are functional requirements in modern society for the reproduction and protection of children, then it follows that we can expect a rapid decline in birth rates and a rapid deterioration in the welfare of the young. A number of prominent social scientists have argued that the precipitous drop in the birth rate in the 1960s was an inevitable by-product of changes in the conjugal family, especially of the entrance of married women to the workplace (Davis 1985; Davis *et al.* 1986).

The empirical support for the link between family and fertility change is not altogether persuasive. In the first place, many analyses consider fertility trends only since the baby-boom era, ignoring the large secular decline in fertility that was temporarily interrupted in the two decades immediately after World War II. In most nations, fertility had been steadily declining for a half century or more during the period when the gender-based division of labour was still the prototype for all Western nations (Watkins 1991). And in such countries as Italy, Spain, and Portugal, where the traditional nuclear family has remained the prevailing family form, the decline in births has been no less precipitous (Bourgeois-Pichat 1986). Conversely, the countries that have moved furthest from the gender-based division of labour are not consistently those that have seen the sharpest decline in births. Consider, for example, Sweden and the United States, both of which have experienced rises in fertility as family changes have continued apace (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1988). Thus, it is not completely self-evident that the dissolution of the conjugal family threatens the rate of reproduction.

The picture is no less complicated when it comes to assessing the impact of family change on the well-being of children. It has become conventional wisdom that children are worse off today than they were at mid-century and that the deterioration in children's well-being is largely the result of growing family instability (Popenoe 1988; Skolnick 1991). I am almost embarrassed to invite any doubts about the thesis that the health and welfare of children has declined primarily as a result of family change.

A few years ago, Gretchen Condran and I (Furstenberg and Condran 1988) tested a version of this argument advanced by Peter Uhlenberg and David Eggebeen (1986). Relying on data from the United States, Uhlenberg and Eggebeen had tried to show that the well-being of children had declined as a result of increases in maternal employment and marital instability. They cited downward trends over a thirty-year period, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, in a variety of indicators of children's welfare including delinquency, suicide, alcohol and drug use, academic test scores, and sexual conduct. A closer look at the evidence led us to question whether there was a direct link between family change and the selected indicators of well-being (see also Zill and Rogers 1988).

In the first place, many of the trends in specific behaviours began to appear before there were marked changes in the rate of divorce or maternal employment. Second, most of the measures of ill-being crested in the mid- and late 1970s and actually dropped during the 1980s. Since successive cohorts of children continued to be exposed to ever higher levels of maternal employment and family instability throughout the 1980s, we found the correlation between family change and children's welfare to be imperfect, to say the least. Finally, we observed that most of the trends in ill-being, such as suicide, crime, and substance abuse, were not confined to young children but were also evident in the behaviour of young adults. Thus, the timing of the trends

suggested that the children who grew up during the early post-war period, when levels of maternal employment and family instability were relatively low, exhibited the same signs of maladjustment in the 1960s as did later cohorts. Condran and I therefore concluded that the data provided much stronger support for a period than for a cohort effect. Family change did not appear to cause the trends in children's welfare, but instead occurred simultaneously with various indicators of problem behaviour.

Similar inconsistencies appear in the arguments of scholars who have attempted to test the relationship of family change and children's welfare using cross-national data. Perhaps the best known of these is David Popenoe's 1988 study, *Disturbing the Nest*, in which Popenoe surveys family trends in a number of Western nations, showing a universal movement away from the nuclear family form. He observes that the pace of change varies greatly among Western countries and singles out Sweden as the exemplar of the post-modern family, in which the traditional social functions of socialization and protection of children are less adequately performed by kin or have been replaced by other institutions. According to Popenoe, it should follow that the welfare of Swedish children has suffered as a result. By implication, children should exhibit fewer symptoms of problem behaviour in countries where family change has been slower in coming. The evidence provided by Popenoe is not especially convincing, however. No information is presented that compares the status of children across nations with different levels of family change. For example, no evidence is presented showing that children fare better in Switzerland or New Zealand, the outposts of the traditional family, than in Sweden where the post-modern family has taken hold. Moreover, Popenoe is not even able to demonstrate that the well-being of children in Sweden has declined in the past several decades. The evidence supplied is largely anecdotal and impressionistic, and Popenoe acknowledges that other observers who do not share his assumptions might well reach different conclusions about the link between family change and children's welfare. It is possible that future studies will confirm Popenoe's suspicions, but the link between macro-level changes in the family and children's well-being must for the present be regarded as a hypothesis, not an established fact.

The Consequences of Family Change for Children: Micro-Level Evidence

Even if there were a strong correlation between key indicators of family change and indicators of children's well-being, it would still be necessary to establish a direct link between particular family patterns and outcomes for children. Here again, the research support is far from compelling. In the United States there is a veritable industry of researchers who have examined the link between family patterns and developmental outcomes for children (Belsky and Eggebeen 1991; Desai *et al.* 1989; Hoffman 1989; Kamerman and Hayes 1982; Menaghan and Parcel 1990; Vandell 1991). The results of

studies exploring the relationship between maternal employment patterns and children's welfare are, at best, inconsistent and weak. Most summaries of this literature conclude that no direct link exists between patterns of labour force participation among women and the welfare of their children. Working mothers may spend somewhat fewer hours than other mothers in directly supervising their children, but it is not at all evident that children suffer as a result. Moreover, to my knowledge, no research has shown that working mothers are less committed, competent, or caring parents or that their children perceive that they are being short-changed by their mothers' participation in the labour force. A recent national survey of US children, for example, found few differences in the perceptions and behaviour of children of working and non-working mothers (National Commission on Children 1991).

The literature on marital instability shows more consistent evidence of negative consequences for children (Emery 1988; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986). Children who experience family instability are much more likely than other children to spend part or all of their childhood in poverty or near-poverty (Eggebeen and Lichter 1991; Ellwood 1988). Researchers have also shown that marital instability is precipitated by spells of poverty (Bane 1986). Poverty is thus both a cause and consequence of marital instability.

Children exposed to marital instability are more likely than others to experience social and psychological problems. Some of these effects undoubtedly result from the greater impoverishment of children in single-parent families. Even taking into account their poorer economic standing, however, many clinical studies and surveys have documented that children in maritally disrupted families have lower levels of academic achievement, poorer mental health, and experience more symptoms of maladjustment in childhood (e.g. Amato and Keith 1991a, 1991b; Wallerstein 1991). The pervasive effects of divorce on children provide the most tangible indication that family instability directly compromises children's well-being.

Even these results, however, must be interpreted cautiously. In the first place, the effect of divorce for most children is generally transitory (Allison and Furstenberg 1989; Hetherington *et al.* 1989). Although long-term effects do exist, their magnitude appears to be fairly small (Amato and Keith 1991a). Until recently, studies on divorce failed to take account of selectivity—that is, the fact that couples whose marriages dissolve are different in many ways from those who remain stably married. So, too, are their children prior to the divorce event (Block *et al.* 1988). I have been a member of a team of researchers that has examined two large, longitudinal data sets—one from Britain and the other from the United States—containing information on children before and after their parents separated (Cherlin *et al.* 1991). We found that the effects of divorce were substantially diminished when pre-divorce experience was taken into account. In other words, many of the ill-effects of divorce

actually result from parenting patterns or family experience long before parents elect to separate.

My reservations about the facile conclusion that family change is jeopardizing the welfare of children should not be interpreted as a judgement that children have not been affected by high levels of family instability. Quite obviously they have, but I am speculating that the effects have not been so unidirectional or so uniform as is often supposed. Moreover, it remains to be shown which indicators of children's well-being have declined and which have not. And researchers have not adequately specified how particular changes in the family have been implicated in the deterioration of children's status. Nor have we adequately considered the possibility that if the situation of children has worsened in certain or even in many respects, the deterioration may not be due directly to conditions in the family but rather to the same cultural, social, and economic forces that have altered the family. In short, the rhetorical power of the functional argument about family decline has, I believe, led us to assume too much and investigate too little about the changing status of children.

A particularly vivid example of how strongly we subscribe to the belief that family change has compromised the situation of children appears in the results of a recent US public opinion poll on the state of the American family. Virtually everyone surveyed—parents and non-parents alike—felt that American children were worse off today compared with fifteen years ago because families were less stable and parents less caring and competent (National Commission on Children 1991, 9). At the same time, an overwhelming majority of both parents and children furnished extremely positive reports about *their own families*. Evidence of problem behaviour was largely confined to a very small segment of the population, the urban poor. These results do not mean that children have been unaffected by family change. But they underscore the point that the widespread perception of change may not be a reliable indication of how much children have been affected by the family transformation.

Policy Dilemmas

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to undertake a review of how current public policy is reacting to the family changes that have been discussed here. None the less, I want to pursue the question of how much influence we can really exert over the emerging family patterns. I believe the policy options for influencing either the pace or the direction of change are limited and generally ineffectual.

The breakdown of the gender-based division of labour has resulted in a decline of the nuclear family. The family form that was predominant at

mid-century has now splintered, as some would say, or evolved, as others would say, into several distinctively different family types: the symmetrical family, the neo-traditional family, and a variety of alternative family structures.

The symmetrical family, endorsed by but not confined to a growing segment of the upper middle class, is organized on the premiss that men and women contribute more or less equally to economic and domestic activities (Ferree 1990; Hochschild and Machung 1990; Lamb 1987; Pleck 1985). Many observers of this new family form have noted that the symmetrical family is more prevalent as an ideal type than as an actual arrangement. As an ideal type, however, it has become a powerful engine of change. It remains to be seen how accommodating both men and women will be to the paradigm of shared responsibility and power in the workplace and the household (Huber and Spitze 1988).

For the present, most couples continue to dwell in what has been labelled by some as the neo-traditional family—a renovated model of the gender-based division of labour, where women share a greater measure of economic responsibility and men may assume a greater share of domestic chores than was deemed appropriate in previous times. In fact, this modified form is not a novel arrangement. It has long existed as a practical accommodation to women's interest in employment, families' economic needs, and men's desire or willingness to assume responsibility for a portion of child care and domestic duties. The line between the neo-traditional and the symmetrical families is drawn as much by ideology as by common practice. A number of studies have shown that men and women in the same family provide conflicting accounts of their decision-making power, their economic contribution, and, most of all, their household responsibilities (e.g. Bernard 1975; Thompson and Walker 1989). Many of those who purport to adhere to egalitarian routines may actually conform to traditional practices and vice versa.

Men's and women's different world views are a major source of tension in contemporary relationships and, I believe, one source of the fragile state of unions. As a consequence, many individuals are opting or settling for alternative family structures that require limited collaboration between men and women (Dizard and Gadlin 1990). Homosexual relationships, temporary partnerships, and single parenthood are different versions of families that circumscribe dealings between the sexes. Again, it is important to recognize that such arrangements are not creations of the late twentieth century, but have long existed as subterranean family forms. They have become more visible and viable in recent decades, owing in part to the declining hegemony of the nuclear family. It remains to be seen whether alternative family forms will become even more prevalent or more prominent than they are today. With rising rates of non-marital childbearing and high rates of divorce, however, it seems likely that lone-parent families are here to stay (Bumpass 1990; Cherlin 1988).

To what degree should public policy attempt to influence the production of these family types may be the most urgent and interesting question facing social scientists concerned with children and the family. All but the most sanguine would probably agree that regardless of what we think we should do, our ability to engineer family behaviour is limited at best. Even if we could agree on a policy to encourage one family form or discourage another, it is not at all clear that we would know how to achieve that end. And if we did, would we be able to command the political resolve, marshal the economic resources, and direct the cultural institutions necessary to realize our objectives? A certain amount of modesty is therefore called for in discussions of how public policy might shape marriage or family practices.

It is instructive to imagine what would be required to devise a policy to promote or sustain each of the prevailing family forms. What sorts of interventions would be called for and how would they affect the viability of the other family types? And, assuming success, can we be confident that our policies to foster certain family forms would serve the general interests of children?

Three broad instruments are at our disposal that can influence or constrain family decision-making. First, rhetorical means can be mobilized to alter norms and attitudes by means of education or by efforts to influence public opinion. Second, policy-makers can resort to legal procedures designed to control or constrain behaviour. And third, resources in the form of economic incentives and in-kind services can be allocated to encourage or discourage individuals to adhere to certain family behaviours. Obviously, these broad policy instruments are not mutually exclusive and can be packaged together to promote particular family practices.

Let us suppose that we decided that it was desirable to encourage biological parents to form stable unions, holding aside for the moment the question of whether these unions should take the form of symmetrical or neo-traditional relationships. What measures could be taken to mount an effective programme to discourage parents from living apart?

Would we be willing and able to reinstitute draconian measures that would stigmatize non-marital childbearing or children of divorce? Mounting a campaign to restore sanctions by changing public opinion or legal practices towards disadvantaged children of single parents is hardly imaginable in many Western nations that have recently revised legal codes and public policies that discriminated against children not living with both biological parents (Glendon 1989). Indeed, legal and social practices that were widespread a generation or two ago now seem antediluvian.

Milder and more socially acceptable rhetorical measures are available to encourage stable marriage or marriage-like relations among parents. For example, family-life education programmes attempt to instil attitudes about the desirability of family planning, the virtues of stable relationships, and the need to understand members of the opposite sex. Few object to these innocu-

ous programmes, but few believe that they are more than palliatives for fostering stable families. Legal changes that encourage marriage or at least discourage divorce have also been attempted. Slowing down the divorce process and requiring counselling services may have a marginal effect on the stability of unions, but such policies may just as easily discourage couples from entering formal unions as a means of evading public strictures.

Economic incentives to promote stable marriage or marriage-like relationships are equally crude instruments for encouraging marital stability. Providing tax incentives to parents who remain together is problematic for it channels greater resources to families that need them the least. Do we want to use the public purse to favour children in two-parent households at the expense of children living with a single parent or in remarriages? By implication, it is difficult to devise any other incentive system that rewards parents who remain together.

A broad political constituency has endorsed measures that fall short of outright economic favouritism. Claiming that economic aid and supportive services may promote family stability by reducing some of the economic and domestic strains that contribute to conflict between parents, many advocate the provision of child care, employment training, job programmes, more flexible practices at the workplace, and child allowances as means for relieving some of the pressures on parents struggling to manage their work and family roles. But unless we are prepared to restrict such programmes to biological parents, these forms of support are not likely to have much effect in bolstering nuclear families. Parents who want to leave marriages are as likely to benefit from such services as those who want to remain together. Thus, the programmes may help parents and children but probably not by creating greater stability of unions.

The same can be said of efforts to strengthen enforcement of child support for non-residential parents who seek to evade their economic responsibilities. Such policies may have minor effects in discouraging casual childbearing, divorce, and remarriage. Effective enforcement of child-support laws, however, is as likely to permit women to leave unsatisfactory relationships as it is to deter men from changing partners. Again, we should recognize that children may benefit from better child-support enforcement, even though such enforcement may not prevent parents from going their separate ways.

It is difficult, then, to design family-support policies that work exclusively to keep biological parents together without penalizing children who grow up in alternative family circumstances. This is why I believe that we are better off accepting the limits of public policy to strengthen marriage or marriage-like relationships and giving priority to ensuring the economic security of children and their care-givers. In embracing a child-centred policy, I am not unmindful of the importance of family continuity to children's sense of well-being and their actual welfare. But I believe that for both cultural and economic reasons our kinship system has been reconstructed in ways that have fundamentally

weakened the institution of marriage. And I am pessimistic about putting Humpty Dumpty back together again—that is, restoring marital stability as the backbone of our kinship system.

Might not the emerging symmetrical family help to rehabilitate the conjugal family? And if so, should we not hasten its evolution? Though my personal sentiments lead me to favour making the effort, I would argue, for the reasons just mentioned, that we should not expect policies to have more than a modest influence on the growth of symmetrical families. Education, legal changes, and resources aimed at promoting symmetrical families are just as likely to encourage the growth of alternative families. Raising expectations for sharing domestic and economic roles is bound to create marital discontentment when such standards are unrealized. Thus, I expect that one by-product of the symmetrical family ideal will be continued high rates of conjugal instability. It is for this reason that I believe we must accept, albeit reluctantly, that many children are likely to find themselves in more than one type of family in the course of growing up. Undoubtedly, those who are fortunate enough to live in a stable and harmonious family unit will have better prospects than those who experience discord or the loss of a loving parent. The question is, how we can assist children who grow up in less than ideal circumstances? A sensible public policy must, I have argued, be predicated on the principle of serving children rather than preserving the nuclear family. This means that we must be prepared to support families as they are, not as we would wish them to be.

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