

COMING OF AGE IN A CHANGING FAMILY SYSTEM

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The assumption that adolescent experience is shaped in important ways by family experience is widely embraced by developmentalists. While researchers appreciate the family's powerful impact on children's success in negotiating the period of adolescence, how that passage is linked to specific features of family structure and dynamics has not been adequately studied. Complicating the examination of this process are the profound changes that have been occurring in the family over the past several decades.

Most developmentalists are well aware of the findings of demographic and sociological researchers who have been charting the transformation of the American family. Still, the implications of these changes for adolescent development are just beginning to be recognized. In addition, the family is too often portrayed in broad brush strokes that miss the sharp variations across racial and social-class groupings (45). No children in the United States are untouched by the sweeping changes that have occurred in the family, but minorities and economically disadvantaged youth have been especially affected by certain features of the recent transformation (24, 78).

The aim of this chapter is to consider the implications of this transformation for adolescent development. What do the enormous changes in the timing of family events, the diverse organization of the family, and the emerging structure of kinship portend for the well-being of today's youth? This question is too broad for a single chapter. I intend to be selective, concentrating on topics that are relatively rich in empirical research, such as the timing of parenthood, and family disruption and reconstitution. In particular, the effects of these changes on disadvantaged and minority children will be highlighted. My disciplinary grounding will inevitably lead me to give more attention to the historical and sociological

conditions that have altered the family form than the resulting internal dynamics within the family system. (Chapter 10 will deal with this latter theme more explicitly. Chapter 16 also pursues some related themes on youthful deviance.)

The first section of this chapter discusses some of the most conspicuous changes that have occurred in the American family over the past several decades. This serves as a prelude for considering how these changes have altered the typical experience of the later years of childhood and the early years of adolescence. I then assemble some of the evidence on whether and how these changes are affecting the subsequent adjustment of youths and young adults. This question has led troubled observers of the family to issue rather extravagant statements about the link between family change and adolescent well-being. The chapter concludes with an assessment of these claims as well as a discussion of some of the pressing policy questions raised by efforts to improve the circumstances of American families.

What Has Happened to the American Family?

Until the recent spate of historical research on the family, it was often assumed that family patterns in the United States and elsewhere were more or less stable until the industrial period. This notion has been thoroughly discredited by countless studies showing continuous changes in the family in earlier historical times (19, 20, 77). Also, it appears that there was no singular or common response to the onset of industrialization (42). Some patterns (romantic love, premarital sexual behavior, close affective bonds between parents and children, and the absence of multigeneration family units) that were once believed to be products of economic developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries existed well before the industrial revolution (41).

Family historians have been unable to identify a period in America's past when family life was untroubled (20). Most are skeptical that the traditional family—what William Goode has labeled “the classical family of Western nostalgia” (40, p. 6)—ever existed in the form in which it is sometimes portrayed today: a stable, harmonious, well-functioning, supportive unit in which children were tenderly and skillfully guided into adulthood. Historical accounts provide abundant evidence that family life was often stressful, fractious, and repressive (73). Throughout the nineteenth century many children and youths were ill cared for and unsupervised. Mortality, morbidity, and extreme poverty often produced high rates of family instability. Uhlenberg estimates that survival rates of children to age 15 rose from .79 in 1900 to .98 in 1979 (81). The probability of a

child's losing one or both parents has similarly declined from .24 to .05 during roughly the same period. In fact, conditions for children and families probably improved markedly and family life became *more* stable and *more* intimate in the twentieth century as mortality and morbidity declined and children became, in Viviana Zelizer's phrase, "emotionally priceless" (89).

We have much better empirical evidence to chart the course of family change during the twentieth century. Yet, as we shall see in the next section of this chapter, this change has not always occurred in a simple linear fashion, nor is it necessarily irreversible. Despite the need for interpreting even long-range trends with some degree of caution, I believe it is possible to reach some general conclusions about how transformations in our kinship system—marriage in particular—are reshaping the life course of children, thus altering our notions of adolescent development within the family.

Many observers contend that during the twentieth century the family—both the nuclear unit and the network of extended kin—has become an increasingly less prominent institution in the lives of children (18). Some would go further and contend that the influence of the family as a socializing agency for children has been seriously weakened. Such broad conclusions are usually rooted in a particular vision of "the good family" (80). Critics frequently respond that the family is a constellation of individuals who often have competing interests and conflicting agendas (74). From whose vantage point should we assess the changes that have taken place? Quite possibly the position of women in the family has improved while the position of men has not (40).

My concern in this chapter is to assess how family changes in the recent past have affected the situation of *children*, specifically those in the adolescent years. Is there reason to believe that family life has become more precarious for teenagers? Let us consider some of the trends in family life that may be altering the experience of growing up.

Recent Trends

It is possible to see quite different patterns of family change depending on the periods that are contrasted. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, certain major trends in family structure are apparent, especially if we bracket the anomalous period after the Second World War—the baby boom years—when the average marriage age suddenly dropped, fertility soared, and marital disruption slowed for a time. This era of domestic mass production was short-lived. The 1970s and 1980s saw a resumption of

long-standing patterns (both in this country and in most Western European nations) in the way that families are formed, in the roles of men and women within families, and in the stability of family units (15, 51, 59). Let us consider each of these patterns in turn, and their relevance for the situation of adolescents.

Marriage Patterns and Family Formation

In previous centuries it was not uncommon for some women to marry quite young, especially in certain regions of the United States, but typically women married in their early 20s and men a few years later (9). Over time, the age variability in marriage patterns has diminished. During the twentieth century young people began to behave more like one another, perhaps because of the extension of education and the delayed entrance of youth into the labor market (62).

After the Second World War the marriage age dropped precipitously. In the 1950s well over two-fifths of all 19-year-olds were married, many after conceiving a child (67). Whether a rise in sexual activity drove down the age of marriage or whether the anticipation of abundant jobs and housing led young people to move more quickly into adulthood is a matter of some speculation (62). Whatever the causes of this "marriage rush," it lasted only briefly (12). The trend reversed by the 1960s; by the late 1970s the marriage age had returned to the level of a hundred years earlier; and by the late 1980s it stood at a twentieth-century high for women. In 1988 just 14% of all 19-year-olds had ever been married, compared to 40% in 1960 (84).

The postponement of marriage has contributed to the growing acceptability of premarital sexual activity during adolescence. No doubt the widespread availability of the contraceptive pill also affected attitudes and behavior toward premarital intercourse. By the late 1970s the once-strong link between sex and marriage had been severed, making the transition from virginity a central event for adolescents (43). Typically, the sexual debut now occurs many years before marriage; the gap between the two events has been steadily widening as the age at onset of sexual activity has dropped and age at marriage has risen. As a result, many more teenagers are exposed to the risk of pregnancy and childbearing outside of marriage (33, 90).

During the past several decades, while marital childbearing has decreased steadily and sharply, nonmarital childbearing has increased dramatically for adolescents. While teenage parenthood is not more common, *single* parenthood among teenagers is (50). In 1985, 13% of all babies were

born to teenagers, of whom about three-fifths were unmarried (63). The birthrate among unmarried adult women has also increased rapidly as a growing number of baby boomers have reached their 20s and 30s. In 1986, 23% of all children were born out of wedlock, compared to just 5% in 1960 (64). This dramatic statistic is one reason why many demographers argue that the institution of marriage has weakened since the middle of the twentieth century (13, 18). Whether or not one accepts this characterization, the prevalence of early and nonmarital childbearing has had unmistakable consequences for the economic and social situation of children, a matter I shall discuss in detail in the next section.

The erosion of marriage is especially evident among African-Americans. Up until the 1950s blacks married as early as whites and were nearly as likely to wed overall. Blacks had higher rates of marital instability, but the racial disparity was not huge. Over the past several decades, however, black and white marriage patterns have diverged sharply (12, 24). Blacks are now much more likely than before to postpone marriage—increasingly, it seems, indefinitely. In 1987 only 12% of white women in their early 30s had never been married, in comparison to 34% of blacks (83). When marriage does occur, blacks experience much higher rates of disruption. Black women on the average spend only 22% of their lives in marriage, compared to 43% for whites (23). As we shall see, this disparity has profound effects on the family experiences of black adolescents.

Marriage statistics are not generally reported by socioeconomic status. Analysis of census data, however, reveals sharp differences in patterns of family formation among different social strata (78). The more education one has, the more one is likely to defer marriage, though not substantially less likely ever to marry. Despite the apprehensions of educated never-married women in their late 20s, most women (more than 85%) are likely to marry. But the postponement of marriage, often until careers are launched, means a growing proportion of college-educated women will not begin childbearing until their 30s. In 1985 women 30 and older accounted for a quarter of all births, the largest fraction since 1964. Some of this increase is simply due to the growing size of this baby boom cohort, but much of the increase is attributed to a rising proportion of first births to women in their 30s (63). The potential consequences for children of this emerging pattern of delayed childbearing are enormous, although the trend is sufficiently novel that not much is known as yet (3). Rossi has discussed some of the possible costs and benefits of delayed childbearing on the relationship of mothers to their adolescent children (72), and Parke has speculated similarly on the way that the timing of fatherhood might work to children's advantage (68).

Since later marriage and delayed childbearing reduce fertility, family size has become smaller, especially in contrast to the baby boom era. Fewer children are growing up in large families, and a growing number are only children. Among more recent childbearing cohorts the average number of siblings has dropped considerably (75). No agreement exists among researchers on the implications for adolescent development of growing up in small families, although most researchers would argue that having fewer children should permit parents to make a greater investment of both time and material resources in the children they do have (5).

The Reconfiguration of Marital Roles

Many family scholars believe that the driving force behind the dramatic shifts in the timing of marriage and fertility is the changing status of women outside the family. The entrance of women into the labor force, of course, began long before the 1960s, particularly for blacks (4). But the reconfiguration of work and family roles has been nothing short of spectacular in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Between 1960 and 1987 the proportion of married women in their child-bearing years who were in the labor market doubled. Those with children under 6 rose from 19% to 57% during the same period (83). In a short span of years it has become normal, if not normative, for women with children, even those with young children, to work. Many such women work only part-time, but large increases have occurred among full-time workers as well. Changes in working status among separated and divorced women with children have been more modest since the 1960s, in large part because these groups already had high levels of gainful employment. Female heads of household are now only slightly less likely to be in the labor force than male household heads.

While women have greatly increased their participation in the labor force, it is not so apparent that men have assumed a greater share of domestic chores. Cross-sectional studies of time use among family members indicate that husbands have been reluctant to take on household responsibilities, including child care. For all the talk about the greater involvement of fathers in child rearing, it is difficult to produce much hard evidence that parental responsibilities have become more widely shared (57). Perhaps it is too soon to detect a trend toward more symmetrical parenting, but most comparisons over time show that fathers still play a minor role in day-to-day family responsibilities. Unfortunately, most of the available data from household time budgets and surveys is not detailed enough to show whether fathers increase their commitments to child

rearing as children enter adolescence. Elsewhere I have argued that a bifurcation is occurring in the involvement of fathers in the family, with some becoming more involved while others are retreating from any paternal involvement by avoiding marriage altogether (34).

There is a dearth of information on how the new division of labor within the family is affecting the exercise of parental responsibilities. One area that has been examined is the sexual socialization of children—what children learn about sex and birth control from their parents (26, 61). If this area is at all typical of the division of labor between mothers and fathers, we are forced to conclude that the socializing role of fathers is small compared to that of mothers. Even for boys, fathers are much less active in communicating sexual information than mothers, although they may have a considerable indirect influence on their sons' attitudes and values (50). Later in this chapter I return to the question of how family processes have been affected by the reorganization of family roles.

Marital Disruption and Conjugal Succession

Historians looking back on the twentieth-century family will undoubtedly debate how the rising incidence of marital disruption contributed to shifts in the timing of marriage, rates of fertility, and the breakdown of a gender-based division of labor. Elsewhere I have argued that the institutionalization of divorce and remarriage—the pattern of conjugal succession—is an intrinsic part of a broad configuration of changes in the kinship system that are rooted in cultural movements and economic conditions that began long before the twentieth century (29). Throughout Western Europe and North America family relations have become more discretionary; a greater premium is placed on emotional gratification and a lower value on obligation and authority. When it comes to forming and dissolving families, individuals have been granted more power to make personal choices (59).

Voluntary marital dissolution was still a rare event at the start of the twentieth century; by midcentury it was more common though still widely censured; today it is regarded as an unfortunate but inescapable risk of matrimony. It is well known that at least half of all marriages will end in divorce. Few couples entering marriage today are committed to remaining in an unhappy relationship, even for the sake of the children (79). The great majority of adults disagree with the view that couples should stay married because their children might be harmed by divorce.

Many children now spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent family (8, 35, 48). As I noted earlier, more than a fifth (14% of

whites and 60% of blacks) are now being born to unmarried parents. By age 16 close to half of those whose parents are married will see the dissolution of that marriage—a little less than two-fifths of the whites and three-quarters of the blacks (10). Rates of both nonmarital childbearing and marital disruption increase as education decreases (66, 78). More than two-thirds of the children of mothers who do not complete high school will spend time in a single-parent family, as compared to slightly more than a third of those whose mothers are college graduates (10).

The duration of single parenthood is a substantial fraction of most children's lives. Five years will elapse for nearly half before their mothers remarry. Since the interval between first and second marriage has been growing and the period of single parenthood is thus lengthening, many children are unlikely to see their mothers remarry before they reach adolescence (7). Thus it is safe to conclude that increasing numbers of teenagers are facing the complex task of negotiating stepfamily life.

Black children are more likely than whites to be raised by a single parent. Their parents are more inclined than whites not to marry at all and, when they do wed, to experience more marital disruption and to have a lower incidence of remarriage. Not only are black women less likely to remarry than white women, but those who do remarry are slower to do so than whites (66). Thus, in 1986 only two-fifths (39%) of black children under 18 were living with two parents, in comparison to two-thirds (66%) of Hispanic and more than three-quarters (79%) of non-Hispanic white children (84).

Even though white children are less likely than nonwhites to live with a single parent, those who do often encounter complex family situations. Since their parents are more likely than blacks to remarry quickly, many risk living through the dissolution of a second marriage. Close to half of all white children whose parents remarry will see the breakup of their stepfamily before they are out of their teens. The children of less-educated parents experience somewhat higher rates of stepfamily dissolution. Overall, at least one child in ten growing up today will undergo this sequence of events; and this does not include the growing number of children living in even more temporary arrangements resulting from informal unions (28).

When stepfamilies are formed, children acquire a complex set of relations. Somewhere between two-fifths and half of these children will have a stepsibling, although most will not typically live with him or her. And for more than a quarter, a half-sibling will be born within four years (7). Thus, about two-thirds of children living in stepfamilies will have either half-siblings or stepsiblings. Little is known about the impact of these relations on the functioning of the family, but studies are currently under

way to probe the significance of stepfamily life on the development of children (47). Certainly the difficulties of managing rivalries, establishing trusting and supportive relationships, and restraining sexual attraction all become heightened issues in complex family systems (69).

Another consequence of the growing pattern of conjugal succession is the wider network of kin created by divorce and remarriage (36, 52). A large number of children growing up today will have more than two sets of grandparents and accordingly be connected to more than two extended families. The few studies on the importance of steprelations as emotional supports or sponsors are not terribly informative. It remains to be discovered how often these potential kinship ties become influential in children's lives. One study indicates that young children are often quickly assimilated into the wider kinship network of their stepfamilies, while adolescents are only occasionally integrated into their stepparents' families (35). No study has yet examined the meaning of these stepfamily ties throughout the course of childhood, adolescence, and later adulthood.

A growing number of children whose parents never marry or marry only briefly may, by contrast, be experiencing a shrinking family world. Typically, children raised by a single parent have limited contact with the extended kin of their noncustodial parent (usually their father's family). Divorce has the effect of strengthening the maternal line at the expense of the paternal line, unless the noncustodial father maintains an active presence in the child's life. In a study of grandparenthood, Cherlin and I discovered that relations between children and their maternal grandparents intensified following divorce (assuming maternal custody), while paternal grandparents maintained only ritual relations with their grandchildren (14). For adolescents, who often see less of their grandparents than younger children, marital disruption had the effect of severely curtailing intergenerational ties.

This matrilineal tilt evident in the society at large is especially marked among black children, whose contact with biological fathers is frequently episodic or nonexistent. Persistently high rates of nonmarital childbearing and marital disruption, combined with a low incidence of remarriage, produce an imbalance in the kinship network, limiting the flow of resources to black children from their father's family (76). Whether this factor adds to the disadvantages of black youth in attaining higher education or entering the labor market has not been adequately examined. Several studies of the long-term consequences of disruption on the educational attainment of young people suggest that the contribution of resources, both economic and psychological, from fathers may be a key contributing factor in the educational achievement of young adults (37,

46, 60). High rates of disruption among less-well-educated whites and Hispanics may restrict the flow of kinship resources through the paternal line, thus reducing social mobility. But limited contributions of middle-class fathers to their children's support may also heighten the risk of downward social mobility (1, 87).

Family Change and Adolescent Well-Being: Macro-Level Studies

We have seen evidence of a transformation in the family which suggests that the changes that have occurred are part of a new kinship complex, sometimes referred to as the postmodern family. Higher rates of employment among women have encouraged the postponement of marriage, driven down fertility, forced some realignment of marital roles, and permitted divorce. These changes have in turn promoted increased participation by females in the labor force. A common thread linking all these changes is reinforcement of personal choice and gratification as a primary principle governing family relations.

I have only hinted at what these changes might imply for the well-being of children and youth, if indeed well-being is linked to the stability of the family. This is a matter of some dispute. There are those who believe that a direct link exists between family change and the incidence of adolescent problem behavior. The assertion that family disintegration is the principal cause of rising rates of academic failure, delinquency, suicide, substance abuse, and sexual license strikes a familiar note. Throughout American history observers have perceived the declining strength of family ties as a source of youthful misbehavior. Even during the 1950s, in the heyday of domestic tranquillity, this theme was popular. In the 1960s family breakdown was widely blamed for the rise of youthful protest and deviance (25, 55). More recently some demographers and sociologists, citing macro-level trends in family stability, have asserted that the restructuring of the American family may be jeopardizing the welfare of teenagers.

This argument is forcefully advanced by Uhlenberg and Eggebeen, who contend that family changes, most notably marital disruption and the entrance of mothers into the labor force, may explain the decline of adolescent well-being as measured by a wide array of problem behaviors during the period from 1960 to 1980 (82). Uhlenberg and Eggebeen cite familiar statistics to show that school dropout rates, a decline in SAT scores, and a rise in substance abuse, delinquency, homicide, suicide, motor vehicle accidents, abortion, and nonmarital childbearing among teenagers all occurred over the same twenty-year period when parental

involvement in child rearing was waning. They suggest that the loosening of parental control and commitment has resulted in the rise of adolescent problem behavior.

At first glance the coincidence of these trends in family change and the welfare of youth seems striking. A closer look at the data, however, undermines much of the Uhlenberg-Eggebeen thesis (32). First of all, most of the indicators of problem behavior began to improve in the late 1970s, yet more children than ever before were exposed to marital instability and maternal employment in the 1980s. Second, black youths experience different trends from whites, confounding the simple link between problem behavior and the strength of family ties. Despite the proliferation of single-parent families among blacks, black adolescents have been showing improvement on many of the indicators (academic performance and delinquency rates, among others) for more than a decade. Finally, problem behavior among adults under 40 closely parallels the adolescent trends. Strong historical effects were operating during the 1960s and 1970s that were felt by both teenagers and young adults. It is implausible to trace the sources of fluctuating rates of problem behaviors directly to changes in family structure that were taking place at the same time. An adequate explanation must account for period effects that seem to have shaped the behavior of a broad spectrum of age groups.

Historians may argue that some of these changes can be explained by the political and cultural shock of the Vietnam War and the Watergate era. The questioning of authority, the loosening of social controls, and the support for experimentation and innovation were part of the zeitgeist of this era, which may have stimulated both changes in the family and risk-taking behavior. In short, the weakening of cultural and social constraints created an environment that tolerated both institutional innovation and personal exploration.

Demographers add another dimension to this historical and cultural account. The rapid increase in the size of the youthful population strained the resources of institutions organized to regulate and serve the population of teenagers and young adults. The inability of schools and the labor market to incorporate what Norman Ryder called "the barbarian horde of youth" created discontent and alienation (16, p. 45). Preston has shown that economic resources shifted from children and youth to the elderly during this same period (71). He argues that the decline in welfare of the young over the past several decades has been matched by an improvement in health and social advantages among the elderly. He contends that lower fertility rates ultimately weakened the political position of families with

children, while the growing electoral power of the elderly has resulted in their receiving a larger piece of the public pie, thus diminishing the share available to children and adolescents.

There are those, however, who believe that family trends may not have uniformly worked to the disadvantage of children. Zill and Rogers report that many trends for adolescents, especially in health and education, have shown steady improvement. And the most marked changes for the better have occurred among minorities. They point out that increased parental education, smaller family size, and the improved economic status of women may produce benefits for children that offset some of the negative effects of family instability. As they conclude in a paper describing the changing well-being of children: "Many people in the United States believe that: the institution of the family is falling apart; the condition of children is deteriorating; and, changes in the family, especially increases in divorce, single parenthood, and maternal employment, are the principal causes of the ills of children. But all three of these assumptions are challenged by the trend data reviewed [here]" (91, p. 95).

Family Change and Adolescent Well-Being: Micro-Level Studies

The broad correlation between family trends and adolescent well-being provides at best mixed support for the view that adolescent behavior is being adversely affected by changes within the family. This macro-level analysis, however, does not directly address the question of whether changes in the form and function of the family are affecting the socialization process and the welfare of children. A more searching test of this proposition requires a micro-level inspection.

On some topics, notably teenage childbearing and marital disruption, quite a bit of research has been carried out. The consequences for children's well-being of maternal employment and shifting gender roles within the family has been less extensively studied, but a body of research does exist on these topics (44, 56, 72). Far less is known about the implications of delayed childbearing, although a little has been written on the effect of maternal age on child-rearing patterns (3, 17).

It is not my intention to review in detail the substantive findings from any of these bodies of research (see Chapter 10 in this volume). Instead, I want to comment on the problem of drawing general conclusions from available studies about the effects of family changes on adolescent development. Very few studies actually establish a convincing link between family environment and the socialization of children. Finally, I also want

to provide some impressions of the contribution of family changes to the socialization process of young people today.

The Impact on Children of Early Childbearing

The vast literature on teenage childbearing focuses for the most part on the effects of premature parenthood on the mother and, to a lesser extent, on the adolescent father. Not until the last decade or so has equal attention been given to the children of young parents (2, 30, 50), and just a handful of studies actually examine the special problems the offspring of teenage parents have in negotiating their own adolescence. Nonetheless, there seems to be good reason to suspect that these children tend to have more problems in academic achievement and general behavior, and may themselves be more prone to early parenthood, than the offspring of more mature parents. (It is not so clear that postponing parenthood beyond the 20s confers any advantages for children.)

The Baltimore study of children of teenage parents, with which I have been associated, shows, for example, a high incidence of problem behaviors ranging from school failure, substance abuse, running away, delinquency, anxiety and depression, and early parenthood among the offspring of teenage mothers (31). Comparisons with national data confirm the impression that children born to adolescent parents are at high risk for these problems (31, 49). Many investigators have concluded accordingly that early childbearing may pose special risks for children because teenage parents are less competent care givers, possess fewer material resources, offer a less stable family environment, are less desirable role models, or experience more competing demands on their time. Yet the evidence demonstrating any of these specific links is tentative at best.

Researchers have shown that children of early childbearers differ on a variety of outcome measures from children of later childbearers. A "state" (early childbearing) is associated with a difference in "rate" of behavior (for example, infrequent vocalization among infants, a high incidence of temper tantrums among toddlers, or the early initiation of sexual activity among young adolescents). This states-and-rates approach provides little insight into the mechanisms that might account for the differences it reports. Moreover, it tends to exaggerate the differences between the two populations by ignoring the overlap across groups or the variation within groups. While the risk of school failure or delinquency is two to three times higher among the children of teenage mothers, the majority of these youngsters do complete high school and manage to avoid serious problems with the law (31).

In tracing the links from family structure to family process to outcomes, we encounter another problem familiar to some developmentalists: teenagers who become mothers are different in a variety of ways from those who delay parenthood. To the extent that they antedate the child's birth, these preexisting differences (selective recruitment) may account to some extent for the outcomes. Let me illustrate. We know that teenage mothers are often less academically able and motivated than their peers who are not parents. To what extent would these differences in academic competence and commitment affect children born to these mothers regardless of the timing of the birth? Since we cannot randomly assign some mothers to begin childbearing early or late, we are compelled to use indirect statistical techniques to sort out the *selection bias* from the special environmental effects directly linked to the experience of being a premature parent.

Even if selection bias can be estimated, we still need to identify the particular mechanisms that explain why certain children are disadvantaged by having a teenage mother and others are not. Studies of children at risk who succeed offer a promising strategy for isolating the conditions in children and families that amplify or mitigate the impact of early childbearing. In the longitudinal study of adolescent mothers and their offspring in Baltimore, it was possible to identify the presence or absence of specific resources that influenced the impact of premature parenthood on children's success in adolescence (31). The offspring of teenage mothers fared better in their own teenage years if their mothers had received family support during the early stages of parenthood; if educational and family planning services were provided; and if their mothers had managed to return to school, enter stable marriages, and restrict further childbearing. In short, the mothers' access to resources and their ability to manage the transition to parenthood mediated the conditions under which their offspring flourished or floundered.

Tracing the processes by which events in the parents' lives improved or undermined their child-rearing skills identifies only some of the reasons why certain children fare better than others. Differences among the children themselves obviously account for a good part of the variation as well. The Baltimore study found, for example, that vocabulary test scores and data on behavior problems collected in the preschool years were strongly related to school performance and risk-taking behavior in adolescence. It seems likely that differences in temperament and cognitive skills condition the effect of early childbearing, although little data has been collected on the types of children who are prone to experiencing problems in later life.

In all likelihood a certain amount of turnover occurs among the children with problems linked to early childbearing. That is, some children

start out exhibiting difficulties that subsequently subside over time as their mothers' lives improve or their family circumstances change. For instance, although close to half of the teenagers studied had failed a grade by high school, by the time they were between the ages of 19 and 21, two-thirds had graduated and another sixth were close to completing high school. Almost all the youngsters in the study were sexually active by middle adolescence, but only a third became parents as teenagers. Many children seem to alter the trajectory of their lives from their early to their later teens, but we know relatively little about how this shift in the life course is negotiated. Examining these discontinuities provides one way of exploring the socialization processes linking family events and outcomes for children.

Delayed Childbearing and Its Effects on Children

As I reported earlier, a growing number of parents, men and women alike, are postponing childbearing until their 30s or even later. For the same reason that teenage parenthood is thought to be a disadvantage, delayed childbearing may benefit children if it means that parents possess greater resources when they launch a family (68). The available evidence is insufficient to draw any lessons about how socialization is affected when parenthood is delayed, although some tantalizing findings appear in Rossi's comparative study of the management of adolescent children by older and younger parents, which found that the two groups of parents may have different perspectives on problem behavior (72). Yet an unpublished thesis by Nord reviewing the literature on the effects of parental age at birth indicates no strong evidence favoring the children of older parents (65). Her analysis of the National Survey of Children also failed to produce results showing that the children of delayed childbearers experience fewer problems as adolescents. The skimpy literature on this topic will, no doubt, be augmented in the future as the growing number of later childbearers stimulates interest in this topic.

The Impact of Marital Disruption on Children

There is no lack of literature on the consequences of marital disruption. Over the past decade or so hundreds of studies have been carried out to determine the effects on children of divorce, as well as other forms of marital disruption such as separation, death of a parent, and single parenthood. Several excellent summary reviews have tried to extract some general conclusions. These reviews suggest that children of divorce are at

higher risk for experiencing a variety of developmental problems during late childhood and early adolescence, including school failure, delinquency, precocious sexual behavior, and substance abuse (11, 22).

Both clinical and short-term longitudinal studies provide substantial evidence that almost all children experience some degree of trauma when their parents separate (86). For some the difficulty continues or even grows over time (85). Most children seem to recover from the initial distress in a period of several years, although there is some evidence that the delayed effects of divorce appear in late adolescence or early adulthood as young people begin to establish permanent relationships and form families of their own (11, 38). The most striking question for developmental researchers is how to explain these divergent patterns by identifying processes that can be traced to differences among individual children, their immediate family environments, their peer relations, or the larger social world of school and neighborhood.

The most sustained research on this topic has looked at gender and age effects that may mediate the impact of divorce. A number of investigators, following the early leads of Hetherington and her colleagues (11) and the clinical team of Wallerstein and Kelly (86), have compared the responses of boys and girls to family disruption. Boys are presumed to be at greater risk when contact with the father is curtailed. A 1987 review of this body of studies suggests, however, that the early results of clear-cut gender differences in response to divorce may not hold up in the findings of large-scale studies that have looked at a wide range of outcomes (88). Divorce may well produce negative effects for boys that are later offset when their mothers remarry. There is some evidence that girls may find their mother's remarriage more stressful than boys. The differential response of boys and girls to the disappearance of fathers and the appearance of stepfathers is a promising hypothesis, but it may still be too crude to distinguish when outcomes will be favorable or unfavorable for children. To tease out gender differences in response to divorce, it may, for example, be necessary to examine in finer detail the circumstances surrounding the loss of a father or the acquisition of a stepfather, such as how parents prepare children for family change, how former spouses handle their relations and their respective child-rearing responsibilities, and so on. I suspect this same lesson applies to the search for age effects. A number of researchers have tried to establish differences in response to divorce depending on the child's age at the time of disruption. A number of investigations have, in fact, shown that preschool children do experience more intense and more lasting effects from a parental separation than children in later childhood or early adolescence (22, 86), although Wallerstein and Blakeslee report a reversal of these earlier findings (85). Several competing hypotheses may explain

these outcomes. Younger children may simply be more vulnerable to the effects of divorce; they may be exposed to less competent caretaking after a divorce; or couples who divorce early might themselves be different. Until the various theoretical implications of age have been examined directly, it will not be possible to say just how much age matters or why it may matter for some children and not others.

In addition to examining gender and age, researchers have pointed to a wide range of other possible mediating factors that may explain why some children seem to recover from the initial trauma of divorce while the condition of others worsens over time. Without summarizing in great detail the results of the studies, I have listed some of the circumstances that may alter the outcome of divorce for children.

Personal characteristics of the child. There is good reason to suspect that preexisting differences among children may explain some of the apparent effects of divorce. The interaction of temperament and stressful family conditions surrounding the marital breakup could account for divergent patterns of adjustment. Exploring this hypothesis requires longitudinal study. One of the few that have examined children's characteristics prior to divorce reveals that the children most affected by a divorce were already troubled prior to the dissolution (6). This finding raises the possibility that problem children may intensify family conflict, increasing the risk of divorce. Thus, some of the effects of divorce on children may result from selective processes that put troubled children at greater risk of experiencing their parents' divorce in the first place. It would be especially promising to examine this hypothesis during adolescence, a period when many families undergo elevated levels of stress.

Characteristics of parents who divorce. Parents differ in their ability to manage a divorce successfully. Most go through a period of depression, grief, and anger following a divorce. How quickly they recover and how much these feelings interfere with their child-rearing patterns is an open question. A number of studies have shown that parental skill in protecting children following a divorce may be a vital asset to the children (86).

The varying capacities of parents to cope with marital disruption again points to the need to distinguish the influence of preexisting patterns from influences that result directly from marital disruption. If parents who divorce are different to begin with from those who stay married—and we know that they are—then we must be aware that different outcomes for children that seem to be related to divorce could be the result of what I referred to earlier as selective recruitment. Again, longitudinal studies will help us sort out the effects of prior differences in parents, child-rearing patterns, and other family processes that may be associated with divorce.

The process of divorce. Many investigators have speculated that family

conflict produces more adverse effects on children than divorce itself (70). A number of studies comparing children exposed to chronic conflict in intact families with the children of divorce reveal similar levels of problem behavior. These results suggest that conflict leading up to divorce may be one of the most potent factors in children's subsequent well-being. Conflict generally subsides following divorce, which may account for why children's adjustment improves over time. But what about children exposed to continuous conflict owing to litigation or lack of cooperation between their parents in the aftermath of the divorce? More research is needed on the long-term consequences of the way that parents continue to collaborate after they are no longer married. Some manage to share parental responsibility successfully, but most do not. The prevailing pattern is that fathers decrease their involvement in child rearing over time. A large proportion have little or no contact with their adolescent children, and those who do rarely take an active role in supervising them. This relatively low level of involvement may explain why researchers have had difficulty establishing a strong link between paternal contact and behavior during late childhood and early adolescence (34).

The economic effects of divorce. One of the major results of divorce is that it impoverishes children, at least for a time. Close to nine out of ten children reside with their mothers following a divorce. Most women do not earn enough to support a family, and the contributions of fathers living apart from their children are generally meager. As a result, many children experience a drastic decline in their living standard.

Many investigators have attempted to study the economic effects of divorce by treating income as an exogenous factor; that is, they often control for the effects of economic status while examining social and psychological processes. But the impact of reduced living standards on children in single-parent families deserves further examination. Loss of income often results in residential moves, school changes, shifts in child-care arrangements, curtailed recreational opportunities, and a variety of other changes in life-style for both mother and child. We have yet to learn how these changes are perceived and responded to by children. The low level of child support may help explain differences in educational attainment between children from disrupted families and those from stable marriages. Most states do not even require child support for children over the age of 18, and fathers are often unwilling to provide economic assistance to college-age adolescents.

Remarriage and stepfamily life. Many children whose parents divorce will acquire a stepparent before they reach adulthood, most often during adolescence. As I mentioned earlier, researchers often confound the experi-

ence of divorce with the subsequent involvement in stepfamilies. In fact, children may adjust well to divorce and poorly to their parents' remarriage or vice versa. Few generalizations can be made about how stepfamily experience affects development, although some girls may experience greater difficulties around the time of their mother's remarriage than boys (88). Stepfamilies pose special problems for adolescents who are in the process of sexual decision making. Some research suggests that parents' dating and cohabitation practices may influence the initiation of sexual behavior in their adolescent children, especially girls (11). But evidence is not yet sufficient to conclude whether it is remarriage or divorce that most affects adolescent sexual experience.

Long-Term Consequences of Marital Disruption

Much of the research on marital disruption examines the short-term effects of divorce and remarriage on children. A growing number of investigators, however, have begun to look at the impact on the transition to adulthood and adjustment in later life. Mounting evidence reveals that marital disruption seems to affect later patterns of family formation and attitudes about marriage and childbearing. Even though they report fairly conservative attitudes toward divorce, children who have grown up in single-parent families are more likely than those from intact marriages to have children early in life, to marry while they are young, and to divorce (38, 60).

As I have indicated, serious methodological problems plague many of the studies that have been done to date on the effects of divorce and remarriage on children. It remains to be seen how much the process of disruption or its aftermath affects children directly and how much of the presumed effects of divorce are really the result of preexisting differences that would lead to the same outcomes whether or not divorce occurred. With careful longitudinal investigations we are likely to make some headway on determining the effects of divorce as well as on the more important issue of how, why, and when divorce or remarriage is harmful to children's development.

At present we may be overestimating to some extent the impact of divorce on children by not taking selection bias into account. But it is equally plausible that our studies underreport the effects of divorce by measuring only visible and easily detectable outcomes or by failing to trace long-term consequences that show up only in adulthood. While almost all studies suggest that divorce is a critical event for children, it still remains unclear how much it shapes their subsequent life course. I suspect that we

are likely to conclude that the lifelong significance of divorce is likely to change depending on subsequent events and their interpretation. Marital disruption sets off a chain of experiences, but these are sufficiently variable that, by itself, the impact of disruption may be only a modest predictor of later outcomes.

Work Roles and the Well-Being of Children

Suffice it to say that the various conceptual and methodological problems plaguing the literature on early childbearing and marital disruption apply just as well to other areas of family change. The voluminous research seeking to measure the impact of maternal employment on child development has suffered from the same sorts of limitations. Efforts to identify the consequences initially treated maternal employment as a discrete event rather than a transition that initiated a complex chain of events in family organization. By now many researchers have concluded that mothers' employment per se does not have any powerful or uniform direct effects on children (44, 56).

This does not mean that the breakdown of the gender-based division of labor in the family and the reorganization of family roles has had no consequences for the course of children's development. But assessing these consequences requires a careful consideration of such mediating conditions as the mother's (and father's) response to work, the demands of the job, the father's willingness to participate in child care, the availability of high-quality care outside the home, and a myriad of other factors that determine the meaning of maternal employment for different family members (58). Of course, many of these conditions are not specific to particular families but are defined by cultural and social conditions outside the family. These are subject to continual change and redefinition as public attitudes about women's work evolve and as institutional support for working women grows.

How can we generalize about the current effects of women's work on children using data from the 1960s or early 1970s, a time when relatively few women with young children were employed full-time? The answer is that we cannot. Our research must be more historically and culturally specific, taking into full account the changing external and internal conditions that specify the meaning of family change for all family members (80).

One final caveat should be mentioned for researchers trying to trace the effects of changing family circumstances on the socialization process or for policy makers trying to interpret the impact of these changes on the well-

being of children. Often we look for a single "bottom line": Is a working mother good or bad for children? What are the negative effects of marital disruption for adolescents? Will late childbearing improve or worsen the life chances of children? The search for a summary answer is understandable, but it may not be completely informative. Family changes may not only have dissimilar effects on different children but may also produce mixed outcomes for the same child. Maternal employment can produce children who are independent and resourceful but others who are deprived and neglected. Characteristics of the child, the parents' responses, and the options available to children produce varying results that overwhelm any general effect of maternal employment. Moreover, even if a general response were to be identified, it would be subject to change as cultural and political conditions adapt to a new division of labor within the family.

Family Change and Public Policy

The evidence that changes in the family have generally compromised the health and welfare of youth is mixed at best. Certain family changes have probably produced net benefits: later age at marriage and delayed childbearing have promoted higher educational attainment and lower fertility among parents. It is difficult to show any general effect of women's participation in the labor force on the well-being of children and adolescents, which is not to deny that particular types of children in certain circumstances may either profit or suffer from having mothers who work. It is more certain that early, nonmarital childbearing and marital disruption affect some children adversely, if only because single-parent families are often economically insecure and live in a disadvantaged social environment.

I have discussed a number of problems in establishing causal pathways between events such as early childbearing or marital dissolution and specific behavioral outcomes for children. It seems likely, however, that investigators will continue to find that single parents, especially teenagers, have greater difficulties managing the responsibilities of child rearing, particularly if they reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods with inadequate child care, poor schools, limited recreational opportunities, and an active street culture that offers young people opportunities for illegal activity.

Should we and could we deter nonmarital childbearing and discourage marital dissolution? Disagreement exists over the advisability of using public policies as a tool to favor certain forms of family structure. At the margins there is probably general agreement that it is appropriate to

discourage early childbearing. While delaying childbearing would not eliminate most nonmarital parenthood, it probably would reduce the amount of public funds required to support children born to single mothers by guaranteeing that more single parents would be educated and employed by the time their children were born.

Thus far, programs to prevent premature parenthood have not been notably successful. As we have seen, rates for teenage parenthood outside of marriage have risen for whites and remained at a high level for African-Americans in the past decade. In part this trend has been caused by a sharp increase in early sexual intercourse and a sluggish and ambivalent response to pregnancy prevention through public education and contraceptive services (43). As is well known by now, the United States has a much higher rate of teenage parenthood than other Western nations, at least in part because educational and family-planning services are less readily available here (53). It is probably not too optimistic to believe that a more realistic approach to managing youthful sexual behavior might ultimately reduce the number of early, unplanned births, substantially benefiting minority children, especially African-Americans.

But teenage parenthood is only one aspect of single parenthood. Even if early childbearing were eliminated altogether, it would decrease the proportion of children who spend part of their childhood in single-parent families by only 10% to 20%. The problem is created predominantly by marital dissolution, a condition that may be less easily prevented. Most Western nations have seen a tremendous increase in divorce over the past two decades, although by international standards the U.S. divorce rate remains exceptionally high (13).

While we are able to identify some of the sources of the rising rates of divorce, it is far more difficult to imagine policy solutions for reversing the trend. Divorce, as I have argued elsewhere, appears to have become an intrinsic feature of the American kinship system (29). While we may not be able to reduce substantially the incidence of divorce by public policy measures, we might devise means of mitigating some of the obvious economic disadvantages created by marital disruption (and, incidentally, nonmarital childbearing as well).

The amount of child support paid by noncustodial fathers is abysmally small. Compared to fathers in other Western nations, American males contribute little income to their children, and far fewer men pay anything at all. The legal and cultural sanctions for coaxing fathers to furnish support are apparently much more effective in Europe (54). Our more privatized family system permits fathers to abrogate their parental obligations. The idea of garnishing fathers' wages, long practiced in some

European countries, has only recently been tried in this country. A highly discretionary system that requires single mothers to establish and enforce support agreements is gradually being replaced with a more standardized system of enforcement. If fathers knew that they would have to pay to raise their offspring, both nonmarital childbearing and marital disruption might be deterred to some extent. At the very least, a more effective system of child support would reduce (though certainly not eliminate) the degree of disadvantage for children in single-parent families (37).

Should we do more to offset the disadvantages of growing up in a single-parent family? In his book on reducing the rate of poverty in families with children, Ellwood argues that a multipronged strategy will be necessary (21). Assurance of child support through federal and state programs that replace Aid for Dependent Children by guaranteeing a minimum payment regardless of the amount provided by the nonresidential father is an attractive proposal that is under experimentation in several states. If child support were supplemented by an increased minimum wage and guaranteed employment for single mothers, most families might be pushed above the poverty level.

Ellwood's strategy for assisting single parents is to upgrade the economic programs that reach the broadest strata of impoverished families. He advocates general, noncategorical programs, an idea that might have broad political appeal. This plan might be extended to social services as well. General programs—child care, preschool education, and medical insurance—that are partially or fully subsidized for single-parent families have the best chance of reaching the greatest number of children in need. While single-parent households do have special problems, these problems may be addressed by providing services to both one-parent and two-parent families. Noncategorical assistance for all low-income households avoids the pitfall, perceived by many conservatives, of creating incentives for nonmarital childbearing and divorce.

Raising the economic level of single-parent families will help mitigate some of the disadvantages associated with marital disruption and nonmarital childbearing. But even if economic parity existed between two-parent and one-parent families, children living with a single biological parent are not likely to fare as well as those who are raised by both parents (37). If, as some researchers suspect, the ability of single parents to supervise their children is diminished, a parent's capacity to manage may be augmented by training, by assistance from other adults, and by strong support from child-care programs, schools, and youth services. To date we know relatively little about the extent to which effective supports reduce the incidence of problem behavior among children from single-parent

families. Studies evaluating such programs could have policy import and contribute to our knowledge about social conditions that mediate the impact of family change on children.

The Future of the American Family

Social scientists have never had great success in projecting family trends. In the 1940s no one foresaw the emerging marriage rush and baby boom. Then in the early 1960s few if any demographers anticipated the incredibly rapid reversal of these trends, the accelerated entrance of mothers into the labor force, the rise of nonmarital childbearing, and the spectacular increases in the divorce rate. This failure should give pause to those who read the demographic tea leaves looking for signs of family change. Almost anything is possible, if recent history serves as a guide.

Some experts are predicting a swing back to the traditional family—a lowering of the marriage age, a reduction in the number of working mothers, a decrease in divorce, and so on. My own best guess is that we could, and perhaps already do, see minor fluctuations that might oppose some of the most dramatic trends, but I suspect it is equally likely that we are in store for more cohabitation, higher rates of nonmarital childbearing, later marriage, and further postponement of parenthood. I believe that family diversity is here to stay. This means that many, if not most, children will have to cope with unpredictable family experiences. If we are going to provide some measure of certainty and security, we must be prepared to lend greater social and economic support to families in transition. If we are creative in rendering this assistance, it will strengthen rather than undermine the role of the family in the child's life.

At the Threshold

THE DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT

EDITED BY S. SHIRLEY FELDMAN
AND GLEN R. ELLIOTT

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