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Arlene Skolnik

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THE POLITICS OF FAMILY STRUCTURE

Arlene Skolnik*

The family trend of our time is the deinstitutionalization of marriage and the steady disintegration of the mother-father child raising unit. This trend of family fragmentation is reflected primarily in the high rate of divorce among parents and the growing prevalence of parents who do not marry. No domestic trend is more threatening to the well-being of our children and to our long-term national security.¹

According to pundits and politicians across the political spectrum, the major danger to the future of the country is the growing number of children being raised in one-parent families. This is said to be especially true in those families where the mother was never married. The two-parent family structure is now hailed as both an anti-poverty program, as well as the only reliable route to children's success and emotional well-being. Moreover, the growth of one-parent families is widely thought to be the cause of the nation's most serious problems including crime, drugs, gangs, violence and failing schools.

In addition, there are two other peculiarities of the current debate about the family. First, family discourse is rarely linked to discussions of the economy. Discussions of the underclass, for example, typically deal with declining values, rather than the decline of blue-collar jobs or the social consequences of prolonged unemployment.

Second, although the entire Western World has experienced similar changes in family life since 1965 (i.e. increasing numbers of women in the workplace, steeply rising divorce rates, etc.), virtually every country except the United States has adapted to them through family support policies. These policies include parental leave, child care, and family

* Associate Research Psychologist, Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley.

1. NATIONAL COMMISSION ON AMERICA'S URBAN FAMILIES, *FAMILIES FIRST* 19 (1993).

allowances. The assumption in these countries has long been that shifting family patterns are a response to large economic and social forces. We are the only country in which government policy has been aimed at reversing the tide of family change, rather than mitigating its effects.²

At times, it has appeared that the American public is ready to accept the realities of late twentieth century family life, and reconcile old family values with the new family patterns. The new consensus against single motherhood, and its roots in old norms, is a recent development.

After the 1992 election, the family values issue seemed to fade. Dan Quayle's attack on Murphy Brown's single motherhood backfired. The public clearly preferred candidate Clinton's focus on the economy and his more inclusive version of the family theme: "family values" means "valuing families," no matter what their form.

Murphy Brown seemed to have had the last word. The first show of the 1992-1993 season was an extended rebuke towards Dan Quayle, including clips of his then infamous speech attacking the single mother character. Welcoming a group of real one-parent families to the show, she proclaimed:

I'd like to introduce you to some people who might not fit into the Vice President's vision of the family, but they consider themselves families nonetheless. They work, they struggle, they hope for the kind of life for their children that we all want for our children, and these are the kind of people we should be paying attention to.³

Vice President Quayle also watched the show with a group of single mothers, trying to show that he was not attacking them when he criticized Murphy Brown.

This brief era of good will to families of all shapes and sizes was quickly followed by a new, bipartisan crusade focused on family structure that included divorce as well as single parenthood. The conservative right has for years equated family values with the traditional nuclear family. This new crusade against the one-parent family, as noted earlier, drew support from across the political spectrum including Demo-

2. ARLENE S. SKOLNICK, *EMBATTLED PARADISE: AMERICAN FAMILIES IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY* (1991). See also Arlene S. Skolnick & Stacey Rosencrantz, *The New Crusade for the Old Family*, AM. PROSPECT, Summer 1994, at 59.

3. JOHN FISKE, *MEDIA MATTERS: EVERYDAY CULTURE AND POLITICAL CHANGE* 73 (1994).

crats, liberals and communitarians. Over the succeeding months, the crusade gathered momentum. Eventually, even President Clinton joined in, remarking that he had reread Quayle's speech, and had found a lot of good things in it.

The new family restorationists have proposed a number of new policies aimed at discouraging divorce and the formation of one-parent families. After the elections of 1994, the newly elected House of Representatives proposed a series of draconian measures aimed at reducing the number of single mothers. These include ending welfare support for teenage mothers under the age of eighteen, and doing away with payments for additional children born to a mother already on welfare.

While not all family restorationists go along with such drastic legislation, they generally use a language of moral failure and cultural decline to account for family change. They all seek to revive the stigma that used to surround divorce and single motherhood. To change the cultural climate, they call for government and media campaigns like those that have been successful against smoking and drinking. They also propose a number of policy changes, including making divorce harder, or even outlawing it, for parents with minor children. Some have also advocated restrictions on AFDC benefits to unmarried mothers.

The well-being of American children should be an urgent concern of policymakers. Focusing our national attention on the needs and problems of families raising children could be enormously positive. However, the current family structure crusade is playing by the family values scripts of the 1980's. The result is that the issue is framed, "Are you for or against the two-parent family?" This approach paints critics into an anti-family corner. This approach of stigmatizing single parents, cutting off welfare, and restricting access to divorce may harm large numbers of children and deepen the very social ills they are trying to remedy.

There is nothing new in blaming social problems on the breakdown of the family, nor in the figure of the fallen woman and her bastard child as objects of scorn and pity. Throughout our history, public policies made divorce difficult to obtain and penalized unwed parents and often their illegitimate children as well. However, by the 1960's and 1970's, public opinion in the United States and other Western coun-

tries had become more tolerant of formerly stigmatized family patterns. Further, legal systems throughout the Western World became less willing to brand some children as illegitimate and deprive them of rights given to others. We are now being told that the new tolerance is a mistake, and we should revive the old stigmas and constraints.

Most Americans, including those committed to greater equality between men and women, are deeply uneasy about the family changes of recent decades. They are also worried about crime and violence. The new movement for family structure owes much of its persuasive power to its reinforcement of public anxiety concerning the authority of social science. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, of the Institute for American Values, describes so-called family diversity in the form of divorce and one-parent families as damaging both the children and the social fabric of our society. Karl Zinsmeister, of the American Enterprise Institute, also refers to a mountain of evidence showing that children of divorce end up intellectually, physically, and emotionally scarred.

Despite the strong claims of scientific backing by the most vocal advocates of family structuralism, the research literature is far more complicated than these simplistic portrayals. The use of social science is selective and misleading. As some scholars admit, the debate about family structure is not simply about scientific evidence. It is also a debate about values.

Few would deny that the divorce of one's parents is a painful experience, and that children blessed with two good parents generally have an easier time growing up than others. In addition, few people would challenge the reality that raising a child from infancy to successful adulthood can be a daunting task even for two people. However, in order to decide whether family structure should be the focus of major policy initiatives, it is necessary to establish answers to a number of preliminary questions.

First, are children of divorce or one-parent homes markedly worse off than those who live with both parents? Second, if such children are so disadvantaged, is the source of their problems the family structure itself, or some factor that may have existed earlier or have been associated with it? Third, can public policies intended to stigmatize and reduce or prevent divorce or single parenthood do so without unintended

negative consequences for children's well-being? Additionally, would positive measures such as support for one-parent families or reducing the stress that accompanies marital disruption be of more benefit to children?

Finally, there is the issue that has helped to fuel the backlash against single parents: the supposed direct link between family structure and what a *Newsweek* writer called a "nauseating buffet" of social pathologies, especially crime, violence, and drugs. Dan Quayle tried to link the family values issue with the equally explosive issues of crime and violence in his *Murphy Brown* speech. In the wake of the Los Angeles riots, Quayle argued that it was not poverty per se, but a poverty of values that had led to the breakdown of families in the inner city, which in turn was responsible for the violence. The one sentence about *Murphy Brown* in his speech caused the national outrage which overshadowed the rest of the message.

Charles Murray has been more successful at linking family values with fear of crime. He warned that because of rising white illegitimacy rates, a coming white underclass will engulf the rest of society in the kind of anarchy found in the inner cities. What is the evidence for this incendiary claim? Why is it that countries with similar trends in family structure do not suffer from the social deterioration that plagues us?

The family restorationists do not provide clear answers to these questions. The answers found in the research literature do not lend much support to their extreme statements about the importance of family structure or to some of the drastic policies they propose to change it. It is true that the research does not show that one-parent families are the same as two-parent families. Without a father's contributions to parenting and family support, single mothers face added burdens, responsibilities, and stresses.⁴

Some of these advocates seem to misunderstand the research enterprise in fundamental ways. For example, they trumpet findings about correlations between family structure and poverty, or lower academic achievement, or behavior problems, as proof for their arguments. However, doing so

4. ALAN C. ACOCK & DAVID H. DEMO, FAMILY DIVERSITY AND WELL-BEING (1994).

ignores the principle taught in elementary statistics that correlation does not equal causation.

Every beginning student learns a few textbook examples of misleading correlations. For example, suppose someone finds that increased ice cream consumption is linked to increases in drownings and auto accidents. The cause is not ice cream, but the weather. People swim more, drive more, and eat more ice cream in the summer. Similarly, single parenthood may be part of a package of social problems. It is also important to know that causality can and often does go in two directions at once. Poor women are more likely to have out-of-wedlock babies than others, but having the child may impede them from moving out of poverty. In short, finding a correlation between two variables is only a starting point for further analysis.

Some of the shortcomings of the family structuralists are in the research literature itself. Studies of divorce, for example, have been plagued by methodological problems which make them hard to interpret or apply. Many of the studies have been based on relatively small samples of white families. Some of the studies are based on families seeking clinical help or embroiled in legal conflict.

It is often hard to compare studies with one another because they use different measures, different ages of children, and different time spans since divorce. Some studies, including one of the most widely cited on the harm of divorce, use no comparison groups at all. Other studies compare divorced families with intact ones, when the more appropriate comparison groups are children in happily and unhappily married families.

Further, the family structuralists, along with some researchers, lump together children of divorce with those whose parents never married. Yet, these kinds of families tend to have different characteristics and different needs. For example, never-married mothers tend to be younger, poorer, and less educated than divorced mothers. There are also significant differences in the well-being and development of the two groups of children.

It is important to look first at the evidence on divorce. The impact of divorce on children should be taken seriously, but the family structuralists paint a far darker and more simplistic picture than the research literature suggests. Re-

searchers agree that around the time their parents separate, almost all children go through a period of distress. Within two to three years, most children have recovered. The great majority of children of divorce are not impaired in their development. It is important to keep in mind that findings can be statistically significant without necessarily making a large difference in real life terms.

In fact, a meta-analysis of divorce findings published in 1991 reported very small differences between children from divorced and children from intact families in such measures of well-being as school achievement, psychological adjustment, self concept, relations with parents and relations with peers. Furthermore, the more methodologically sophisticated studies — those that controlled for other variables such as income and parental conflict — reported the smallest differences.

In general, those researchers who interview or observe children of divorce report more findings of distress than those who use data from large sample surveys. Yet, even in those kinds of studies, the great majority of the children develop normally. One point researchers agree on is that children vary greatly in response to divorce, depending on circumstances, their age, and their own psychological traits and temperament.

To the extent that children of divorce differ from those in stable two-parent families, the differences may not be due to the divorce itself but to circumstances before, during, and after the actual legal undoing of the marital bond. Most researchers now view divorce not as a single event in itself, but as a process unfolding through time. The child will usually endure parental conflict, estrangement, emotional turmoil, separation from one parent and economic deprivation. Often, divorce means moving away from home, neighbors and schools.

Researchers have known for some time that children from intact homes with high conflict between parents often have similar or even worse problems than children of divorced parents. Recent studies in this country, as well as in Australia and Sweden, confirm that marital discord between the parents is a major influence on children's well being, whether or not a divorce has occurred.

Some of the family structuralists recognize that children in high-conflict families might be better off if their parents divorced than if they stayed together. But, they want to discourage or limit divorce for parents who are not in the high-conflict category or may simply be bored or unfulfilled. The problem is how to draw the line between the two, and who should do the drawing.

It is hard for outsiders to really know what goes on inside a marriage. High-conflict marriages are not necessarily violent or even dramatically quarrelsome. By the time friends and relatives hear about marital troubles or plans for divorce, the couple has usually been coming apart for a long time. Further, a number of recent studies show that even moderate levels of marital dissatisfaction that affect the parents' own emotional state can have a detrimental effect on the quality of parenting.

The most critical factor in a child's well-being in any form of family is a close, nurturing relationship with at least one parent. For most children of divorce, this means the mother. Her ability to function as a parent is in turn influenced by her physical and psychological well-being. Depression, anger, or stress can make a mother irritable, inconsistent, and less able to cope with her children and their problems. Marital dissatisfaction and conflict can be a major influence on a woman's psychological state, whether or not divorce occurs.

Until recently, the typical study of children of divorce began after the separation took place. Two important studies — one by Jack Block and his colleagues and another by Andrew Cherlin and his — examined data on children that focused on the child's behavior long before the parents divorced. These studies found that problems usually attributed to the divorce could be seen months and even years earlier.

Usually, these results are assumed to reflect the impact of family conflict on children. But a recent analysis of divorce trends around the world offers another possibility. The research not only shows that many of the so-called effects of divorce were present before the marriage, but also suggests the even more radical hypothesis that in at least a sizable number of families, the problems that children generate may *create* parental conflict and thereby increase the likelihood of divorce.

At the moment, however, in contrast to the crusade against single mothers, the attack on divorce seems to have made little headway. Divorce, after all, affects a sizable proportion of middle-class families, including a number of leading family values advocates such as Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, Robert Dole and Phil Graham.

The issue of never-married single-parent families has become a flash point in the family wars because it touches on such important issues as sex, gender, race, and welfare. Dan Quayle's attack on *Murphy Brown* confused the issue. It is true that increasing numbers of single, educated, middle-class women are having children. In fact, among those in professional or managerial occupations the rate nearly tripled in the last decade. Despite the increase in these *Murphy Brown* mothers, however, only eight percent of women are in that category.

Out-of-wedlock births continue to be far more prevalent among the less educated, the poor, and racial minorities. As prominent authors have pointed out, the assumption that early childrearing causes poverty and school dropout is backward. These conditions are as much the cause as the effect.

Elijah Anderson, Linda Burton, William Julius Wilson and other urban sociologists have broken down the old economy versus culture dichotomy in understanding poverty. They have shown how the unraveling of the economy in the inner cities, combined with the continuing stigma of race, has resulted in a destructive interaction between structural change and cultural response. Cut off from the rest of society, with little or no hope of stable, family-supporting jobs, young men prove their manhood through an oppositional culture based on ruthless macho and sexual prowess. Young women, with little hope of either a husband or economic independence, drift into early sexual relationships, and in turn into pregnancy and childbirth.

Once in place, the oppositional culture on the streets, and the violence it fosters, becomes a new reality afflicting the inner city. The majority of its residents identify with decent rather than street values, but their children must at least learn the code of the streets to survive there. In a vicious cycle, the street culture reinforces fear and other negative feeling towards inner city blacks, leading to further alienation and hopelessness on the part of the young. Break-

ing the cycle will take more than moral exhortation or cutting off welfare.

The same economic transformations that have battered the inner cities have also shaken the middle class. The family structuralists, however, have little to say about the impact of economic forces on families. Some authors have mentioned that the loss of good jobs has deprived high school graduates across the country, as well as inner city young people, of the ability to support families. Improving job opportunities for young men would enhance their ability and presumably their willingness to form lasting marriages.

There is no shortage of evidence of the impact of economic hardship on families. The studies of inner city problems are paralleled for other groups in a spate of recent books. Some portray the fast growing population of working poor, people who play by the rules but remain below the poverty line. Other books have documented the impact on working-class families of the decline from well-paying white-collar jobs. They also point to the hardening of working and middle-class attitudes toward the poor, racial minorities, and immigrants as a byproduct of economic decline. Other authors document the effects of downward mobility in middle-class families.

A large body of quantitative research reinforces these more qualitative analyses. As Glen Elder and others have found, using data from the Great Depression to the 1980's, economic conditions such as unemployment or economic loss are linked to children's problems through their parents' emotional states. Economic stress often leads to depression and demoralization which in turn leads to marital conflict and bad parenting, which can consist of harsh discipline, angry outbursts, and rejection. Child abuse and neglect, as well as alcoholism and drug use, have been found to increase in response to economic stress.

As child advocates and researchers have long known, the greatest threat to children's well-being and development is poverty and inadequate income. The Society for Research in Child Development has recently issued an over 700 page special issue of its quarterly journal devoted to children and poverty. Overall, the articles reflect the ecological perspective, originally expounded by Uri Bronfenbrenner and others, now central to the understanding of human development.

The key assumption of the ecological framework is that single variables such as family structure or low birth weight are not very useful in themselves in explaining child outcomes. Rather, a complexity of factors in the child, in the family, in the immediate environment and beyond contribute to development. Poverty has such an impact because it affects not only the parent's psychological functioning, but is linked to poor health and nutrition in parents and children. In addition, it contributes to impaired readiness for education, bad housing, the stresses of dangerous neighborhoods, and poor schools, as well as the stigma of being poor. Thus, one study found that among both black and white children, family income and poverty status were more powerful determinants of children's cognitive development and behavior than other factors, including family structure and maternal schooling.

Child poverty in the United States, as the family structuralists point out, is higher than it was two decades ago. It is also much higher in the United States than in other Western countries, among both whites and blacks. It is not an inalterable fact of nature that children born to poor families or unmarried mothers have to grow up in poverty. Although other Western countries may have higher initial poverty rates than we do, they do more than we do to provide additional support.⁵ They are less willing than we are to choose disapproval of parents over supporting the well being of children.

The family structure debate raises larger questions about the changes in family, gender, and sexuality in the past three decades, such as what to think about them and what language to use in talking about them? The language of moral decay will not suffice. Many of the nation's churches and synagogues are rethinking ancient habits and codes to accommodate new conceptions of women's equality, and new versions of morality and responsibility in an age of sexual relationships outside of marriage and between partners of the same gender.

The nation as a whole is long overdue for a serious examination of the upheaval in American family life since the

5. See F. HOBBS & L. LIPPMAN, U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, SER. P.85, NO. 8, CHILDREN'S WELL BEING: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON.

1960's. An important consideration is how to mitigate its social and personal costs, especially towards children.

Leaving aside the cultural warfare that might break out, such an examination would be grounded in the history of the American family and not the lost family of a mythical past conjured up by our nostalgic yearnings. A more realistic vision is offered by the massive body of historical scholarship that has emerged since the 1970's. From the beginning, American families have been diverse, on the go, and buffeted by social and economic change. The gap between family values and actual behavior has always been wide.

Such an examination would also be based on the awareness that the family trends we have experienced over the past three decades are not unique to America. Every other Western country has experienced similar changes in women's roles and family structure. The trends are rooted in the development of the advanced industrial societies. Family sociologist Andrew Cherlin has explained that we can no more keep wives at home or slash the divorce rate than we can shut down our cities and send everyone back to the farm.

However, our response to family change has been unique. No other country has experienced anything like the cultural warfare that has made the family one of the most explosive issues in American society. Most other countries, including our cultural sibling Canada, have adapted pragmatically to change, and have developed policies in support of working parents, one-parent families, and all families raising children.

Sooner or later, we are going to have to let go of the fantasy that we can restore the family of the 1950's. Given the cultural shocks of the past three decades, and the quiet depression we have endured since the mid-1970's, it is little wonder that we have been enveloped in a haze of nostalgia.

Yet, the family patterns of the 1950's, which Americans now take as the standard for judging family normality, were actually a deviation from long term trends.⁶ Since the nineteenth century, the age of marriage, the divorce rate, and women's labor force participation have been rising. In the 1950's, however, because of an unusual set of historical circumstances, the age of marriage fell to a new low, the propor-

6. See ANDREW J. CHERLIN, *MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE* (1981).

tion of the population married reached a new high, and the American birth rate approached that of India. In addition, the divorce rate leveled off. The only trend to persist through the Ozzie and Harriet era was the steady but unnoticed march of women into the labor force.

Barring a major cataclysm such as a severe depression, the changes are too deeply woven into American life to be reversed by "just say no" campaigns or drastic changes in divorce and welfare laws. Most of us would not want to reverse all the trends that have helped to transform family life, including declining mortality rates, rising educational levels for both men and women, reliable contraception, and greater opportunities for women.

The task is to buffer the effects of these changes on children and families. We already have ample knowledge of what needs to be done.⁷ Ultimately, the politics of the family is simply politics. An article arguing the need for systematic economic reform points to a dilemma facing the Clinton or any other reform minded administration. Between the new economic realities and the kinds of broad measures that might address them, there is a yawning gulf of politics and ideology into which even the most well-meaning and intelligently conceived policy can tumble. A similar gulf lies between the new realities of American family life and the kinds of child and family policies that have been proposed by commissions and study groups over the years.

Yet there may be more possibilities for consensus in favor of ameliorative approaches out there than there appears to be at the moment. As E.J. Dionne has pointed out, the debate is more polarized than the public.⁸

We saw in 1992 that an inclusive pro-family message could be articulated and combined with proposals for economic and social reform. Such a message, recognizing both the diversity of family life and the continuing importance of family, appealed to a broad cross section of Americans. It easily could happen again. If we are to avoid the nightmare scenarios of social deterioration described by the new family structuralists, we had better not follow their more punitive and coercive prescriptions.

7. See White House Conference on Children, Report to the President: Child Development Recommendations (1971).

8. E. J. DIONNE JR., *WHY AMERICANS HATE POLITICS* (1991)

