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

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

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

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

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

### OVERVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### WHAT IS A "FAMILY"?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### AMERICAN FAMILY CHANGE, 1960–1990

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

The second point to consider is that the decade

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

### *The Number of Children*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Marital Roles*

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

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

### *Family Structure and Marital Dissolution*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Marriage*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Nonfamily Living*

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

#### FAMILY CHANGE AS FAMILY DECLINE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *Demographic*

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

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

#### *Institutional*

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

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

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

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

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

(Bumpass, 1990).

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

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

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

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

Finally, the function of the family in economic

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

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

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

### *Cultural*

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

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

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

#### EVALUATING FAMILY DECLINE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There are more regrets about this structural

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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