

The Family: Is It Obsolete?

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The American middle-class family, already stripped of most non-essential duties, now faces an attack on its remaining last bastions. Sex is available premaritally, extra-maritally and non-maritally to more and more Americans. Thus, Morton Hunt reports that for the present generation of young Americans, age 18 to 25, premarital sex runs as high as 81 percent for females and 95 percent for males. Extra-marital sex is reported by about half of the males, and one out of five women. Education has long ago been taken from the family and invested in special institutions, the schools. While in the old days the members of one family often worked one farm, very few families today are also a "work" unit. The rapid rise in women who work (more than 60 percent of all married), or are on welfare, breaks economic dependence as a source of a family bond. Meals can be readily obtained at the mushrooming fast-food franchises, at the supermarket and at "Take-Homes."

Thus, as this short history of the modern family suggests, there is a continued, expanding divestiture of missions from the family to other institutions. Now, even the upbringing of young children, once considered by social scientists *the* family duty (indeed, in many societies the marriage is not considered fully consummated until there are offspring), is being down-graded by an increase in the number of persons who decide not to have children at all, and those who decide that they do not need a family to bring up infants. They either delegate this duty to day care centers,

as available to singles as to couples, or do the job on their own. Nine million children under the age 18 are being raised by one parent only, mostly by women. Thirty percent are under the age of six. There are about 2.4 million one-parent families as compared to 29 million nuclear families. The growth rate of single-parent families has increased by 31.4 percent, almost three times the growth of two-parent families. According to my calculations, if the present rate of increase in divorce and single households continues to accelerate as it did for the last ten years, by mid-1990 not one American family will be left.

The historical trends which propel the decline of the family are now accelerated by an additive, a slew of arguments which justify, legitimate and, indeed, even welcome these developments. They characterize the progressive decline of the nuclear family as "progress" and provide people with additional incentive to take to the exit, to dismantle the often shaky marital bond, instead of providing for a cooling-off mechanism to cope with the occasional centrifugal forces every marriage knows. While we have not reached the stage where breaking up one's family to enjoy "all that life has to offer" has become *the* thing to do, in many and growing circles the stigma attached to divorce—even when young infants are involved—has paled, the laws' cooling mechanisms have weakened, and reasons which "justify" divorce have grown in acceptance. Indeed "no-fault" divorces, which require no grounds at all, are now available in most states.

Beyond the Family

Until quite recently these trends were viewed as pathological. In the Fifties, for example, the rising divorce rate was defined as a social problem, and marriage counseling was on the rise. The attitude of marriage counselors and that of society-at-large was typified by Dr. Paul Popenoe, marriage counselor and *Ladies Home Journal* columnist, who asked "Can this Marriage be Saved?" and month after month related case histories to prove that "yes," it almost invariably could be.

During the Sixties, however, an intellectual and to a lesser extent, a public opinion turn around began to take place. The idea that spouses were morally obligated to hold their marriage together and that nine times out of ten they could succeed in doing so if they were willing to work at it moved increasingly to the right of mainstream thinking. Today's popular experts on marriage and the family seldom ask first, "Can this marriage be saved" but instead, "should it be?" And more and more often the answer given is not only "no" but an optimistic and affirmative "no." This is due to a new popular wisdom which says that people might be better off dissolving an unsatisfactory marriage, and either live single or try again, than to go through great contortions to fix their present marriage. While the many marriage and family experts of the Fifties saw their task as shoring up the family's defenses so that it could better withstand attack, a significant

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contingent among today's experts is ready to view the invading social forces as potential liberators.

One: Divorce is AOK

Several related lines of argument are currently being used to identify and explain what are seen as positive aspects in the rising divorce rate. The most novel one is the idea that *second marriages are better than first marriages*. Thus, Leslie Aldridge Westoff, a Princeton demographer, writes about "blended" or "reconstituted families" rather than second marriages, in an article entitled "Second-time Winners." (The labels are important; blended or reconstituted sounds more approving than "second time around.") Westoff reports that for the couples she interviewed the first marriage was a dry-run. In the second marriage they applied the lessons learned, did not repeat the same mistakes, and chose mates more wisely. "In retrospect many of the couples saw their first marriage as a kind of training school; . . . divorce was their diploma. All agreed that the second marriage was the real thing at last. With both partners older, more mature, somewhat expert at marriage, everything moves more smoothly, more meaningfully."

While Westoff may feel she is just reporting the results of some interviews with some couples, the implication to the reader, the music her writing vibrates, is that the first marriage is to the second one what premarital sex is to marital sex:

evidence shows one improves the other. And indeed *if* there were sufficient data to support a view of the first marriage as a dry-run, there would be less reason for concern. But Westoff herself laments the lack of systematic research on second marriages; her insights are based on a few interviews. She also concedes that second marriages are less stable than first ones. Statistically, 59 percent of second marriages as opposed to 37 percent of first marriages, will end in a divorce, according to Dr. Paul Glick of the U.S. Census Bureau. Nor does she show that such re-marriages, even if they do last, have no detrimental effects on the children. Do the children also consider their parents as a dry-run and their step-parents as an improvement?

Two: Disposable Marriages

The "if-at-first-you-don't succeed, try, try again" optimism about divorce is at least not down on marriage as an institution. Another increasingly common viewpoint, however, is one which interprets the rising divorce rate as a symptom that something is radically wrong with marriage and/or the family. This school of thought rejects the view that marriage can work once you know yourself well enough and choose the "right" partner; it sees it as *healthy* that individuals in great numbers want to get out of what it views as a decaying social bond. It tends to look upon the rising divorce rate with much the same hopefulness with which a Marxist approaches a new recession: as a condition which cannot be tolerated for long, and hence will

force revolutionary changes in social structures. Those who subscribe to this view tend to see new family forms waiting in the wings, from contractual marriages to group-marriages.

Significantly, a common feature of most of these new marital styles is that they seek to take some of the strain off the nuclear family by de-intensifying the husband-wife relationship. One way is by limiting the duration of the relationship a priori to an agreed period of time and defining the terms of the dissolution of the relationship from its very inception. Thus, by this school's terms, divorce has become no more of a crisis than completing a stint in the army or delivering the goods as agreed to a supermarket. Another alternative is to diversify one's emotions by investing them in a large number of intimate relationships, making each one less intense and hence less all-important. Thus, it is often said that sexual fidelity puts too much of a strain on many marriages—acceptance of one or both partners' adultery may well save some relationships, since the couple can stay together while getting the sexual variety, affection or whatever from outside persons. Better yet, it is said, group-marriage secures that you'll always have a mate, even if you divorce one, two, or three. Such de-emotionalization and de-emphasis is however a two-edged sword. On the one hand, spouses who do not depend exclusively on each other and who obtain satisfactions from other persons may be able to continue living together for long periods without having to

resolve their conflicts, at the risk of bringing them to a destructive head. On the other hand, such relationships may be too shallow to provide the needed emotional anchoring and security many people seek and need.

The contractual marriage or contractual cohabitation mentioned above has been widely advocated and has aroused a fair degree of popular interest. Those who favor contractual marriages tend to look upon all social life as a series of exchanges. Conflict and tension arise when one or both parties fail to live up to their parts of the bargain. Conflict is seen as more likely to arise in a relationship, such as that characterized in the traditional marriage, where the reciprocal "rights and duties" of each partner are not clearly spelled out and agreed to in advance. Thus, the male swinger who marries may do so with the implicit understanding that this change in legal status will not cramp his lifestyle while his bride may be marrying under the illusion that her husband-to-be will transform his lifestyle once they are wed. Those who propose contractual marriage suggest that a great deal of subsequent conflict between spouses (and disappointment with marriage) could be avoided by bringing such unspoken expectations into the open, to be discussed and agreed upon and then formalized in a marital contract akin to the contracts that govern relations between parties in a business transaction. For example, the prospective marital partners might agree to write monogamy into the contract or, alternatively, include a clause permitting sexual side-trips or

bi-sexual relations. But once each party had signed the agreement each would have to abide by the stated rules. Violation of such contractual terms could be declared in writing and signed by both parties to be grounds for immediate unilateral termination of the contractual marriage. In addition, unlike the traditional marriage bond which was supposed to be entered into as a lifelong commitment, contractual marriage typically provides for periodic review and renewal (or non-renewal) of the contract, say every three to five years.

The problem, however, is that contracts work in the business world primarily because the relationships involved are highly limited and specific, and calculative motivations are enough to sustain them. But for two people to live together, to share wealth and ill fortune and the slings and arrows of life, requires a deep, encompassing, positive relationship of the kind implied in marital vows but antithetical to any contract. Contracts put people continuously on their guard: did I get my share, did he (or she) do his job? Marriage requires more altruism, less accounting, and above all a greater sense of commitment to a *shared* life.

Three: Granny—Yes, Husband—No

Another viewpoint which has become intellectually chic recently is the celebration of the extended family. Like contractual marriage it claims to reduce the pressure on the nuclear family by de-intensifying the emotional bonds between husband and wife,

parent and child. The idea is that if family members had a multiplicity of sources of satisfaction for their various needs they would not become overly dependent on one single source or parent. Some of the theorists of the extended family favor a revival of older family forms in which several generations of blood relatives lived under the same roof or within close geographic proximity. Others favor the formation of "extended families of choice," e.g., communes. Thus, it is said that our typical middle class suburban "nuclear" family is emotionally unwholesome. Segregated from grandparents and other kin, it provides the child with only two warm caring adults, both of whom are increasingly absent or harried, instead of the abundance provided by the grandparents, uncles, aunts, and nieces and nephews of the extended family. In India, where extended families often run to hundreds of members, a baby "is never put down," there is always an uncle, cousin, or someone, to comfort a crying child. Among immigrant families extended family members provided many of the support services offered by welfare agencies, day care centers and other institutions, at great cost to the taxpayers, and often with highly impersonal if not bureaucratic paternalism. A number of Unitarian congregations, concerned with the "too many stresses which are being placed on the small nuclear family," are forming hundreds of artificially-extended families whose members vacation together or help each other with problems such as babysitting or care of elderly infirm relatives.

What does this have to do with the survival of the nuclear family? Ostensibly, by easing the burden on parents to be constantly responsive to one another and to their children, the extended family makes it less likely that break-up will result from spouses continually over-burdening one another. However, several of the extended family advocates take the next step and say that with family security provided by a circle of grandparents, cousins and uncles, a permanent husband's presence loses its importance. Look, they say, at how well impoverished families have managed, despite the comings and goings of common-law husbands. The mother, because she has the support of her mother and kin, is able to manage quite well.

The rub is that although it would be useful to have an extended family, most middle-class couples could not necessarily be induced to belong to or maintain one. The forces which in the past undermined the extended family pattern in the middle class—from the need to be mobile for economic success, to the desire for individualism and privacy—are powerful ones and difficult to reverse. Thus, while a middle class granny might be available to baby-sit here and there, if she lives nearby, and brothers and sisters may be good for a loan now and again, it is a long way from such occasional aid to surrogate parenthood. Indeed, in most societies, even those looked upon so enviously because of exotic extended family arrangements, the kernel of child raising is not the mother but a

couple, the husband-wife, the nuclear family. The artificial extended families do provide a nice *supplement* to the nuclear family, but are much too thin and frail to *replace* its vital core.

Four: Broken is better

Perhaps the most sophisticated argument against the notion that husband-wife families are needed for the character formation and psychological well-being of young children emerges from studies of children from *broken* homes. In the public mind, and that of most officials, it is widely assumed that broken homes breed juvenile delinquents, truant or runaway kids, young drug addicts and most recently teen and pre-teen alcoholics. Statistical correlations are frequently uncovered. For instance, Dr. Gordon H. Barker found a high correlation ($r = .79$) between broken homes and delinquency. However, the commonsense interpretation of such results has been seriously challenged on the elementary ground that when broken homes are compared to non-broken ones, the fact that broken homes occur so frequently among the poor and minorities while non-broken ones are generally middle-class, is ignored. Or to put it differently, lower-class families produce more delinquent kids, whether they are children from broken homes or not. Indeed, if families of the same class background are compared, *most of the difference* in juvenile delinquency rates between children from broken vs. unbroken homes *disappears*. Those

familiar with these findings thus tend to conclude that having both a father and a mother is not vital to character formation.

Looking at the same data, I suggest that proper economic conditions, housing and employment may well be more important for the proper upbringing of a child than a lasting positive relation between the parents, and between parents and child. At the same time, I am not convinced it has been shown that family stability is irrelevant; it may just be a less important factor than social class. Less important is not the same as unimportant.

Moreover, Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University suggests that one way poverty damages kids is by disintegrating their families. Both suicide and lower scholastic achievement are particularly high among children whose families earn less than \$4,000 a year and as many as 80 percent of such families in central cities are single-parent ones.

Finally, another finding has been widely disseminated, and even many people not familiar with the evidence cite it on their way to the marital exit: rotten marriages are worse than broken homes. In his research on adolescents in boys' training schools and high schools, Dr. F. Ivan Nye found that less delinquent behavior was evidenced in broken but happy homes (35 percent) than in unbroken but unhappy homes (48 percent). These data led Nye to conclude: "The *happiness* of the marriage was found

to be more closely related to delinquent behavior in children than whether the marriage was an original marriage or to a remarriage or one in which the child was living with one parent only." According to Professor William J. Goode, "Psychiatric studies emphasize the difficulties experienced by people who as children lived in 'empty shell' families, in which people carry out their formal duties toward one another, but give no understanding, affection or support, and have little interest in communicating with one another. . . . It seems likely that role failure within the home has a more destructive impact on children than the withdrawal of one's spouse."

On the other hand, to the extent that families are needlessly undone by rationalizations, beliefs and arguments, probably the most widely held and destructive myth is the quest for the *perfect* relationship. The incessant search for "more" is a direct descendant of American optimism and romanticism which looks for a marriage which will be harmonious and loving, full of communication, understanding, mutual respect, joy and fulfillment through children. When all this is found out to be as close to the reality of most families as Marcus Welby is to your M.D., a million Americans a year take to the exits, not because they are anti-family but anti-*their* family. Thus, 80 percent of divorced persons will try again, and many of these will risk a third time, restlessly looking for that Hollywood made-in-heaven marriage. Even after they grow more accomodating, they still believe that

they have missed out. Others, dating at forty, fifty and older, living together, breaking up, trying again, are still looking for that "happily ever after" promise that keeps eluding them.

Encouraging such utopian quests are several psychotherapists and psychiatrists, many of whom are trained to deal with individuals, not couples. Thus, sometimes deliberately, often unwittingly, by trying to help each individual client achieve a full life, they encourage their patients to break up their marriages (although many do ask people not to make major life changes while in therapy). The trouble is that if any person seeks to maximize his or her own happiness and freedom without considering the consequences to others and to a relationship, the result can be highly detrimental to all those involved and to the family as an institution. People must learn to balance the personal rewards of "doing one's own thing" against the hurt it might entail to others. No relationship, no institution, family or society can survive otherwise. In many instances, however, the effect of therapy is to encourage people to focus on their psycho-dynamics, feelings and needs, to the neglect of their spouses and even children. It does encourage divorce.

What Could be Done?

Faced with the progressive dismemberment of the American family, there is surprisingly little public action for two reasons: first, the arguments that the current rate of family break-up may be a blessing in

disguise raise doubts concerning the nature and extent of the crisis; and second, public officials feel that there is little the government could or should do in this intimate matter. To my mind, we need a thoroughgoing review of evidence concerning the consequences of family break-up to determine whether or not we have a national social problem on our hands. A Presidential or Congressional Commission could be given the task of investigating the harmful consequences of family dissolution by bringing together and examining existing data and, where reliable data are not available, by carrying out studies of its own. Should the Commission find that single-parent families, contractual families and rebleded families are doing as well as the declining traditional two-parent families, we can relax and enjoy the marital merry-go-round. Should it establish that the slew of "new" family rationalizations are ill-founded and we have a serious and growing problem on our hands, the very fact that a highly visible study has reached such conclusions, presenting evidence and airing pro and con arguments in public hearings, should help puncture these arguments.

Moreover, the recent fashion of "the-less-the-better-Presidency" should not be allowed to obscure the great agenda-setting power the White House has in many areas outside the administrative scope of government. Hence, without at all suggesting that the federal government should take on the job of fixing a million dissolving families a year, or even one, by

launching a National Institute of Marital Health or any other such agency, we do believe that a few well-presented speeches by the President or a White House Conference on the future of the family could go a long way to call public attention to the problem.

Second, as Walter Mondale keeps reiterating, the "family impact" of various government programs should be assessed and taken into account as old programs are revised and new ones formulated. Thus, day-care centers are a blessing for working women and certainly a better place for a young child than roaming the streets. But they are also costly institutional substitutes for family, and by de-emphasizing the importance of parents in children's lives, they may well further contribute to the erosion of family bonds. More opportunities for *half* time jobs, without loss of privileges (such as benefits and promotion) both for women and men, may provide some parents with an alternative preferable to day-care centers, one which is less costly to the public, less bureaucratic and more compatible with a viable family.

Also, laws which work against the family should be altered, both because the government should not encourage the dissolution of families *and* because laws symbolize public attitudes. As has often been pointed out, it is still true in about half of the states that the only way an unemployed male wage earner can get his children on welfare is to divorce his wife. There is no AFDC for

unemployed fathers. Thus, to the extent that welfare laws and regulations still penalize marriage, they should be altered.

Furthermore, the regulations governing Social Security benefits for retired persons favor individuals who are single by reducing the total monetary awards to couples. An unmarried woman is eligible to receive 100 percent of her Social Security benefits, whereas this amount is significantly reduced if she is married to a man who is also receiving benefits. This is said to be a significant factor for many retired couples living together rather than marrying. It might be asked—what ill effects result from old people living together unmarried? The answer is that (a) they should be free to choose to live together or marry, but not pushed into living together by government regulations, and (b) older people set models for younger people; "If granny does not marry the guy, why should I?"

In a similar vein, Martin M. Spencer, writing in the *CPA Journal*, cites a divorced couple who reconciled but decided not to remarry, because *remarriage would have jacked up their income tax bite by \$5,460*. Generally, income tax rates for single persons are lower than for married persons filing separate returns. (Married persons benefit from filing joint returns only if one spouse earns much more than the other.) The recent provisions allowing people to deduct the cost of child-care under certain circumstances further reward the single parent over two

working partners in a marriage whose joint income tends to put them above the ceiling for allowable deductions.

Finally, it might well be advisable that a divorce cooling-off period and opportunities for counseling be reinstated by those states that went somewhat overboard in making divorce easy and painless. While most divorce reforms are desirable, especially those that remove the necessity of declaring one party "guilty" and the other "innocent" and those which serve to avoid bitter wrangling between spouses which may be communicated to their children, divorce by mail and other reforms which have the effect of divesting divorce of its seriousness over-liberate divorce. The state should not imply that divorce is a trivial matter—something one can do on an impulse. Reinstating—or beginning again to enforce—a thirty-day minimum cooling-off period with opportunities for counseling, if the couple desires, would seem to be a reasonable compromise.

Other steps may well be devised. The main point is that pre-occupied as we are with prices, jobs, shortages and energy—all related to the material aspects of our societal existence—we should not neglect what to many sociologists still seems to be the vital cell of our society. The disintegration of the family, one must reiterate these days, may do as much harm to a society as running out of its favorite source of energy. ■