

AMERICA'S FAMILY PROBLEM

By David Popenoe

Throughout our nation's history, we have depended heavily on the family to provide both social order and economic success. Families have provided for the survival and development of children, for the emotional and physical health of adults, for the special care of the sick, injured, handicapped, and elderly, and for reinforcing society's values. Today, America's families face growing problems in each of these areas and by many measures are functioning less well than ever before—less well, in fact, than in other advanced, industrialized nations.

The most serious problem concerns children. There is evidence that today's generation of children is the first in our nation's history to be less well-off psychologically, socially, and economically than their parents were at the same age.¹

As the first social institution in human history, the family probably arose because of the need for adults to devote a great deal of time to childrearing. Coming into the world totally dependent, human infants must, for a larger portion of their lives than for any other species, be cared for and taught by adults. To a unique degree, humans nurture, protect, and educate their offspring. It is hard to conceive of a successful society, therefore, that does not have reasonably strong families—multigenerational groups of kinfolk that effectively carry out their socially assigned task of raising children to become adults who are able to love and to work, who are committed to such social values as honesty, respect, and responsibility, and who pass these values on to the next generation.

Infants and children need, at minimum, one adult to care for them. Yet given the complexities of the task, childrearing in all societies until recent years has been shared by many adults. The institutional bond of marriage between biological parents, with the essen-

tial function of tying the father to the mother and child, is found in virtually every society; in no society has nonmarital childbirth, or the single parent, been the cultural norm. In all societies the biological father is identified, and in almost all societies he plays an important role in his children's upbringing, even though his primary role is often that of protector and breadwinner.

Family History

Over the past thirty years, the United States (along with other modern societies) has witnessed a major family transformation—the beginning of the end of the traditional nuclear family.² Three important changes have occurred: 1) The divorce rate increased sharply (to a level currently exceeding 50%), and some mothers decided to forego marriage, with the consequence that a sizable number of children are being raised in single-parent households, apart from other relatives; 2) married women in large numbers left the role of full-time mother and housewife to go into the labor market, and the activities of their former role have not fully been replaced; 3) the focus of many families shifted away from childrearing to the psychological well-being and self-development of their adult members. One indication of this latter focus is that parents increasingly break up—even when they have young children to raise—if their psychological and self-fulfillment needs are unmet in the marriage relationship.

We can never return to the era of the traditional nuclear family, even if we wanted to—and many women and men emphatically do not. The conditions of life that generated that family form have changed. Yet one thing that has not changed through all the years and all the family transformations is the need for children to be raised by mothers and fathers. Indeed, in modern, complex societies, in which children need an enormous

amount of education and psychological security in order to succeed, active and nurturing relationships with adults may be more critical for children than ever.

Unfortunately, the amount of time children spend with adults, especially their parents, has been dropping dramatically.³ Absent fathers, working mothers, distant grandparents, anonymous schools, and transient communities have become hallmarks of our era. There has been an associated weakening in many families, and in society as a whole, of the fundamental assumption that children are to be loved and valued at the highest level of priority. The recent decline of the family may be the single most important factor accounting for the record high, and in many cases increasing, rates among juveniles and adolescents of delinquency, suicide, depression, obesity and anorexia, drug abuse, and nonmarital pregnancies.⁴ Although especially prominent in America's inner cities, high rates of personal and social problems such as these are now found at all class levels and among all sectors of our population.

The Individualism Trend

To understand fully what has happened to the family, we must look at the broader cultural changes that have occurred, especially changes in the values and norms that condition everyday choices. Over recent centuries in industrialized and industrializing societies, there has been a gradual shift from a "collectivist" culture (a term I use with a cultural and not a political meaning) toward an individualistic culture. In the former, group goals take precedence over individual ones. "Doing one's duty," for example, is more important than "self-fulfillment," and "social bonds" are more important than "personal choice." In individualistic cultures, the welfare of the group is secondary to the importance of such personal goals as self-expression, independence, and competitiveness.⁵

Not surprisingly, individualistic societies rank higher than collectivist societies in political democracy and individual development. But the shift from collectivism to individualism involves social costs as well as personal gains—especially when it proceeds too far. Along with political democracy and individual development, individualistic societies tend to have high rates of individual deviance, juvenile delinquency and crime, loneliness, depression, suicide, and social alienation. In short, these societies have more free and independent citizens, but less social order and probably a lower level of psychological well-being.

The United States has long been known as the world's most individualistic society. Certainly, we place a high value on this aspect of our society, and it is a major reason why so many people from other countries want to come here. Yet for most of our history, this individualism has been balanced, or tempered, by a strong belief in the sanctity of accepted social organizations and institutions, such as the family, religion, voluntary associations, local communities, and even the nation as a whole. While individualistic in spirit, people's identities were rooted in these social units, and their lives were directed toward the social goals which they represented. Thus, the United States has been marked for much of its history, not by a pure form of individualism, but by what could be termed a "communitarian" or balanced individualism.

As the individualism trend has advanced, however, a more radical or "expressive" individualism has emerged, one that is largely devoted to "self-indulgence" or "self-fulfillment" at the expense of the group.⁶ Today, we see a large number of people who are narcissistic or self-oriented, and who show concern for social institutions only when these directly affect their own well-being. Unfortunately, these people have a tendency to distance themselves from the social and community groupings that have long been the basis for personal security and social order. Since the 1950s, there has been a decline in people being married, visiting informally with others, and belonging to voluntary associations, and there has been

an increase in the number of people living alone.⁷

The highly disturbing actions of inner-city residents evident, for example, in last spring's riots in Los Angeles could be considered less a departure from everyday American cultural reality than a gross intensification of it. Very few social and cultural trends found in the inner city are not also present in the rest of the nation. Indeed, with respect to the family, the characteristics of the black family pronounced by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 to be in a state of "breakdown" are very similar to the family characteristics of America as a whole in 1992!

In summary, for the good of both the individual and the society, the individualism trend in the United States has advanced too far. The family holds the key. People need strong families to provide them with the identity, belonging, discipline, and values that are essential for full individual development. The social institutions of the surrounding community depend on strong families to teach those "civic" values—honesty, trust, self-sacrifice, personal responsibility, respect for others—by which they can thrive. But let us not forget that strong families depend heavily on cultural and social supports. Family life in an unsupportive community is always precarious, and the social stresses can be overwhelming.

Not to Forget the Gains

While I have presented a fairly grim picture in describing these cultural changes, it is important to add that not every aspect of our society has deteriorated. In several key areas, this nation has seen significant social progress. For instance, we are a much more inclusive society today—segregation and racism have diminished, and we now accept more African-Americans, Hispanics, and other minority groups into the mainstream. The legal, sexual, and financial emancipation of women has become a reality as never before in history. With advances in medicine, we have greater longevity and, on the whole, better physical health. And our average material standard of living, espe-

cially in the possession of consumer durables, has increased significantly.

The Nuclear Family And Marriage

Given our nation's past ability to accept positive social change, we can have some confidence in our capacity to solve the problem of family decline. In seeking solutions, we should first consider what family structure is best able to raise children who are autonomous and socially responsible, and also able to meet adult needs for intimacy and personal attachment. Based on the available evidence, as well as the lessons of recent human experience, the family structure that unquestionably works best is the nuclear family. I am not referring to the traditional nuclear family, but rather to the nuclear family that consists of a male and female who marry and live together and share responsibility for their children and for each other.

How are the single-parent families doing? Accumulating evidence concerning the personal and social consequences of this family type paints a grim picture. A 1988 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics found, for example, that children from single-parent families are two to three times more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems than children from intact families, and reduced family income is by no means the only factor involved.⁸ Many other studies could be cited.

Toward Solutions

Of course, many people have no other choice than to live in step- and single-parent families. These families can be successful, and their members deserve our continuing support. Nevertheless, the benefits that strong nuclear families bring to a high-achieving, individualistic, and democratic society are absolutely clear. A committed marriage, for example, which is the basis of the strong nuclear family, brings enormous benefits to adults. It is ironic in this age of self-fulfillment, when people are being pulled away from marriage, that a happy marriage seems to provide the best source of self-fulfill-

ment. By virtually every measure, married individuals are better off than single individuals; quite clearly, a good marriage provides the basis for physical and mental health.

Another reason for supporting strong nuclear families is that society gains enormously when a high percentage of men are married. In general, every society must be wary of the unattached male, for he is universally the cause of numerous social ills. Healthy societies are heavily dependent on men being attached to a strong moral order, which is centered in families, both to discipline sexual behavior and to reduce competitive aggression. Men need the moral and emotional instruction of women more than vice versa. Family life, especially having children, is for men a civilizing force of no mean proportions.

It should be a source of serious concern, therefore, that men currently spend more time living apart from families than at probably any other time in American history. About a quarter of all men ages 25-34 live in nonfamily households, either alone or with an unrelated individual. In 1960, average Americans spent 62% of their adult lives with spouse and children, which was the highest in our history. By 1980, they spent 43%, the lowest in our history.⁹ This trend alone may help to account for the high and rising crime rates over the past three decades. During this period, the number of reported violent crimes per capita, largely committed by unattached males, increased by 355%.

Today, a growing portion of American men are highly involved in childcare, providing more help with the children than their own fathers did. But a large number of men, because they did not stay with or marry the mothers of their children, or because of divorce, have abandoned their children entirely. In general, childrearing women have become increasingly isolated from men. This is one of the main reasons why nothing might benefit the nation more than a national drive to promote strong marriages.

The New Familism: A Hopeful Trend

One bright spot in this picture is what some of us have called "the new familism," a growing realization in America that, "yes, the family really is in trouble and needs help."¹⁰ As reported elsewhere in this issue, public opinion polls indicate that nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that "family values have gotten weaker in the United States" and a majority of adults in both political parties think that "political candidates should talk about family values."

There are two groups primarily involved in this cultural mini-shift: the maturing baby boomers, now at the family stage of their life cycle, and the "babyboom echo" children of the divorce revolution. The middle-aged baby boomers, spurred by growing evidence that children have been hurt by recent family changes, have been instrumental in shifting the media in a profamily direction. And the echo children of the 1970s, even with their troubled childhoods, are coming into adulthood with a strong resolve not to repeat their parents' mistakes. They tend to put a high premium on marital permanence, perhaps because they have been unable to take the family for granted as many of their parents—the children of the familistic 1950s—did. These two groups may help the nation in the 1990s to turn away from the values of radical individualism and more fully embrace the ideals of family and other social bonds.

Endnotes

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