

analysis because there is a considerable discrepancy between perceptions of reality and objective conditions. Popular constructions of problems of the family are based on some dubious assumptions.

Notions about the breakdown of the family, almost by definition, make assumptions about the history of the family. The words *breakdown*, *extinction*, and *collapse* suggest a process going from some reasonably healthy state in the past to a relatively unhealthy state in the present and/or future. Those who argue that the family is breaking down assume a knowledge of the state of the family in the past and that that former state was better than that of today's family. These are questionable assumptions. To put these assumptions in critical perspective, we need to know something about the history of the family. Writes John Demos,

To study the history of the American family is to conduct a rescue mission into the dreamland of our national self-concept. No subject is more closely bound up with our sense of a difficult present—and our nostalgia for a happier past. How often, in reference to contemporary problems, does the diagnostic finger point in the direction of family life?⁵

Not until relatively recently have a good many historians begun systematically studying the history of the family. More has been learned about the history of the family in the past four decades than in the previous two centuries.⁶ Demos's review of the history of the family reveals, "First and definitely foremost, there is no Golden Age of the Family gleaming at us from far back in the historical past. And there is no good reason to construe recent trends in terms of decline and decay."⁷ Every family pattern that has developed and then faded has had its own advantages and disadvantages. Many problems associated with the family today are either exaggerated or falsely dissociated from the family of the past. For example, while divorce rates are inordinately higher today than they have been in the past, we cannot assume that marriages were more successful in the past. Demos notes that "[i]n earlier times, countless marriages were ended by simple, and legally unrecognized, desertion."⁸ Besides those opting for desertion ("the poor man's divorce"), there were many more people trapped in loveless marriages, who were spiritually and emotionally separated, with little hope of moving on to a better marriage in a world where divorce was severely stigmatized. The proportion of marriages "invisibly" separated in the late nineteenth century may not have been much different from the proportion visibly separated today.⁹

Many of those who fear the breakdown of the family identify the changing role of women as the principal source of the family's decline. They long nostalgically for the "breadwinner/housewife" form of family that, writes Coontz,

produced a sentimental, almost sacred, domestic sphere whose long-term commitments and nurturing balanced the pursuit of self-interest in the public arena. Recent social problems, they argue, stem from a self-defeating

Problems of the Family

THE FAMILY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The family is such a basic institution—and so near and dear to us all—that a great variety of problems in society are often believed to emanate from problems in the family. Social problems as varied as poverty, drug abuse, crime, and deficiencies in educational achievement are often blamed on the "breakdown" of the family. While there are many who think the family is on the verge of extinction, it has been and continues to be one of the most enduring institutions throughout the world and throughout history. Many people think the family is undergoing dramatic changes today. They are right. However, many think that these changes have begun only relatively recently and that they spell the doom of the family and of civil society. They are wrong. The family in America has been undergoing change since the first settlers arrived, and the colonists—much like their modern-day descendants—prophesied the downfall of the institution.¹ "The 'crisis of the family,'" writes Arlene Skolnick, "...is a national tradition, and not just in America: historians of the family in other countries have made much the same discovery."² The "crisis of the family" argument is not just typical throughout the world; it has been typical throughout history. Historian of the family Stephanie Coontz writes,

[F]or thousands of years people have been proclaiming a crisis in marriage and pointing backward to better days. The ancient Greeks complained bitterly about the declining morals of wives. The Romans bemoaned their high divorce rates, which they contrasted with an earlier era of family stability. The European settlers in America began lamenting the decline of the family and the disobedience of women and children almost as soon as they stepped off the boats.³

In 1966, Clark Vincent noted that "[s]ince the earliest writing available, changes occurring in the institution of the family have been used and interpreted to support either an optimistic or a pessimistic premise concerning social change, and the pessimists have consistently outnumbered the optimists."⁴

Thus, significant numbers of people have always felt the family to be on the verge of collapse when, in fact, history has demonstrated that it was not. Problems of the family, then, are a prime subject for a critical constructionist

superegalitarianism that denies men's and women's differing needs and abilities and desanctifies family relations.¹⁰

Many believe this traditional division of gender roles to be part of the "natural order" of things and that departures from the breadwinner/housewife model are unnatural. However, the breadwinner/housewife model did not emerge as the dominant family form until the nineteenth century. Before that, in an agrarian society, the family—mother, father, and older children—made up an economic unit, with each member contributing to production (harvesting, making clothes, milking cows, churning butter, etc.). Not until the Industrial Revolution did father go off to work and become the "breadwinner," leaving mother at home to become the "housewife" and perform unpaid housework. It is questionable, then, just how natural and traditional the breadwinner/housewife form of family is. In cross-cultural and historical perspectives, it seems to be an unusual and transient form of family. The breadwinner/housewife model is, according to sociologist Kingsley Davis, an "aberration that arose in a particular stage of development and tends to recur in countries now undergoing development."¹¹

It should also be noted that the breadwinner/housewife model that emerged in the nineteenth century appeared as the dominant form of family only in the middle and upper classes, only among those who could afford it.¹² Popular constructions blame the problems of the poor on their departure from the breadwinner/housewife model, yet the poor have never been able to afford such a lifestyle in significant numbers.

While some believe the family that is based on "traditional" gender roles to represent the natural order of things, it produced some unnatural and disaffecting results. In the nineteenth century, men were perceived to have uncontrollable sexual desires, while women were supposed to have none. This could hardly have been conducive to satisfying sexual relations. Studies in the history of gynecology have uncovered an "astonishing number of cases" in which women sought clitorectomies in order to control their sexual desires.¹³ Prostitution was rampant in the nineteenth century. Many married men sought prostitutes as a sexual outlet, in part because they had been socialized to believe their sexual appetites were uncontrollable and because their wives had been socialized not to enjoy sex. Writes Demos,

But sex was merely an extreme case of a pattern that affected every sort of contact between men and women. When their appropriate spheres were so rigorously separated, when character itself appeared to be so gender-specific, what was the likelihood of meaningful communication? ...[It] was a new mode of partnership—formal, self-conscious and contrived.¹⁴

Divorce rates began to rise in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the "tramp phenomenon" emerged with, eventually, hundreds of thousands of disaffected men who had run away from their wives, wandering the cities and countryside.¹⁵ The nineteenth century also saw the rapid proliferation of

"voluntary," often single-sex, organizations, such as the Elks, the Mother's Association, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. These, according to Demos, signaled a "deficit in family life" and a search for companionship "preferable to what could be found at home."¹⁶

Though the conditions described above may be grim, there certainly were happy families in the nineteenth century; but this could hardly be thought of as the "golden age" of the family. Following World War II came a brief, but unusual, period in the history of the American family, which still plays a pronounced role in the American psyche and continues to affect popular constructions of problems relating to the family. This new and historically odd family was the postwar family, or the "'50s family."

The Family of the 1950s

Today, those who glorify the breadwinner/housewife form of family do not harken back to idealized images from the nineteenth century but to idealized images from the 1950s. If they had a television in the 1950s, they likely had a steady dose of idealized images of the family broadcast into their house through such programs as *Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver*. Some of these shows, *Leave It to Beaver*, for example, continue to be broadcast in syndication. However, if you are too young to have caught these on television, you can be sure that a great many of the baby boomers—a large proportion of today's parents, grandparents, teachers, professors, and legislators—grew up watching the 1950s construction of the ideal family on TV. There were usually two or three kids, the division of labor among father and mother was quite specific, and gender roles were mutually exclusive. Father worked 9–5, mother was the homemaker/nurturer, and when father came home from work, he took charge of the family. Other family patterns were rarely, if ever, seen on television.

Today, many social problems are seen as the result of deviations from this family form, the so-called traditional family. Mary Ann Mason and her colleagues write,

The current debate starts from the idealized American family of the 1950s—middle class, two biological parents, a breadwinner husband and homemaker wife, and two or three biological children—and assumes that any departure from that pattern is negative. Since most contemporary families do depart in one way or another from this pattern, most commonly because the wife and mother is in the paid work force, the fifties norm implies by definition that the family is in decline or in trouble.¹⁷

The family of the 1950s—both on and off television—however, was far from traditional. It was, in fact, most unusual and, historically, almost freakish. Men returned home from the war, and a great many of the women who had been in the workforce during the war left their jobs (either willingly or not so willingly). New families were being formed at an astonishing rate,

and the baby boom was under way. "In fact," writes Skolnick, "the decade stands out as an unusual one for twentieth-century family life, whose historical trends have been falling birth rates, rising divorce rates, and later ages of marriage."¹⁸ Also, according to Coontz,

[T]he "traditional" family of the 1950s was a qualitatively new phenomenon. At the end of the 1940s, all the trends characteristic of the rest of the twentieth century suddenly reversed themselves: for the first time in more than one hundred years, the age for marriage and motherhood fell, fertility increased, divorce rates declined, and women's degree of educational parity with men dropped sharply. In a period of less than ten years, the proportion of never-married persons declined by as much as it had during the entire previous century.¹⁹

"Domestic bliss" was supposed to be the principal goal of everyone, especially of women. The home became a sanctuary and was to be the primary source of self-fulfillment, especially for women. "The legendary family of the 1950s . . ." writes Elaine Tyler May, "was not as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of 'traditional' family life with deep roots in the past. Rather, it was the first whole-hearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members' personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life."²⁰

From the turn of the century until the 1950s, women had been steadily gaining new freedoms, more independence, and increasing parity with men. Such progressive steps came to a screeching halt with the family of the 1950s. In the first half of the century, more women were going to college and planning to establish a professional career. "But in the 1950s," notes Skolnick, "most women who attended college had no career plans and dropped out in large numbers to marry."²¹ Women had always been at a disadvantage, but in the 1950s in the United States, with "a birthrate that approached that of India, the insistence that marriage and motherhood take up the whole of a woman's identity, and the increased emphasis on gender difference," women's social and economic status began moving backward rather than forward.²²

Perhaps most women would have testified that, like their television counterparts, they found all of the fulfillment they needed as housewives and mothers. However, there were signs of widespread despair that were never depicted on television and rarely brought to the public's attention through any other medium in the 1950s. According to Coontz, "The hybrid idea that a woman can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it."²³ Women who had difficulty accepting their domestic roles were sometimes diagnosed as schizophrenic, then institutionalized, and sometimes administered shock treatments to force them into submission.²⁴ Psychiatrists introduced a new term to their diagnostic regimen, *housewife's blight*, and doctors began prescribing record

numbers of antianxiety drugs. A favorite prescription drug was called *Miltown*. By 1957, with the drug out for just 3 years, 1.2 million pounds of these pills had been consumed in the United States.²⁵ When magazines did recognize the plight of the 1950s housewife, by printing articles such as "The Plight of the Young Mother" and "The Mother Who Ran Away," their sales often increased dramatically. When *Redbook* asked its readership to submit examples of "Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped," 24,000 people replied.²⁶ In the 1960s, commentators, nostalgic for the 1950s, noted the resurgence of increasing divorce rates; but they failed to note that a great many of those getting divorced in the 1960s had gotten married in the 1950s.

In the 1950s, nobody heard much about marital strife, wife abuse, child abuse, or incest. The fact that nobody heard about these phenomena did not mean that they did not occur at rates comparable to those of today; it means only that these phenomena had not surfaced in the public consciousness. They had not been constructed into social problems. Yet, it is quite likely that these incidents occurred as or more often then as they do today because the family was much more shielded from public scrutiny in the 1950s than it is today. Wife abuse was dismissed as "nobody else's business";²⁷ incest involving a daughter, if it did come to anybody's attention, was quite likely to be defined as female "sex delinquency";²⁸ and evidence of child abuse was more likely to be shrugged off by emergency room physicians as being the result of an "accident" than it is today.²⁹ Family violence has received a good deal of public attention in recent years from both professionals and the media; law enforcement officers have been alerted, and neighbors have been sensitized. Consequently, there is less opportunity to perpetrate such acts with impunity than there was in the 1950s.

Television in the 1950s showed us only the middle-class families who could afford a particular standard of living. In the 1950s, 25 percent of the U.S. population was poor.³⁰ Yet, television never showed poor families that could not afford the kitchen appliances and vacuum cleaner that made June Cleaver's life so much more tolerable. It did not show us the families that could not afford the breadwinner/housewife model because both parents had to work to eke out a living.

It also showed nothing about social inequality or about the diversity of American society. Television families, writes Coontz, "were so completely white and Anglo-Saxon that even the Hispanic gardener in *Father Knows Best* went by the name of Frank Smith."³¹ Yet, during the 1950s, the United States was undergoing major changes with regard to its racial and ethnic composition. Prior to that decade, most African Americans and Mexican Americans lived in rural areas and most African Americans and Mexican Americans lived in the end of the decade, most African Americans and Mexican Americans lived in the cities, and the majority of African Americans had moved to the North. Puerto Ricans were immigrating in such large numbers that by 1960 there were more Puerto Ricans living in New York than in San Juan.³² Such demographic changes must have been unsettling to many in the white majority,

who likely found comfort in the virtually all-white world depicted on television.

Finally, for those who believe many of society's problems would disappear if only we could return to the 1950s-style family—when people were independent, self-sufficient, and able to manage without government subsidies—we should be mindful of the fact that middle-class families of the 1950s were the recipients of some of the most generous government subsidies in U.S. history and would likely not have existed without such assistance. Through the GI Bill, World War II veterans were eligible for generous benefits, including educational subsidies and extremely low-interest housing loans subsidized by the government. With the help of these benefits, people were able to marry earlier in life than in times past; they bought their houses in the suburbs, and millions improved their lot in life. Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West note,

More than any other government program before or since, the GI Bill helped a broad spectrum of Americans—blue-collar as well as white-collar workers, black as well as white workers—attain the American Dream.... In... an age of disillusionment with government, it is hard to comprehend that the conservative 1950s, that golden age of the American family, was largely a creation of public policy.... Contemporary conservatives who espouse family values but attack social spending seem unaware of the degree to which the families of the 1950s were subsidized by public programs....³³

Furthermore, the federal government pumped billions of dollars into highways, sewage systems, and other projects that made middle-class suburban life all the more attractive. Enormous amounts of government monies went into the subsidizing of middle-class suburban family life. Meanwhile, the conditions of the cities were being ignored. Cities became increasingly dilapidated and dangerous, spurring a further exodus from them; those who could afford it moved out to the suburbs, leaving the poor behind to face a host of social problems for decades to come.

In summary, popular constructions that hold to the view that the family is breaking down and that the decline of the family is the cause of numerous other social problems are based on the belief that the family was once a healthier institution and, consequently, engendered fewer social problems. An examination of the history of the family provides little basis for such a belief. Throughout American history, there have been significant numbers of people or numbers of significant people who believed the family was on the brink of disaster, blamed then-current social problems on the woeful condition of the family, and waxed nostalgically for the golden age of the family. Today, substantial numbers of people wax nostalgically for the family of the 1950s, which (1) was a very unusual family pattern brought about by a unique set of historical conditions; (2) had its own problems as well as many of the problems experienced by today's families; (3) was inaccessible to millions of poor families; and (4) to the extent that it was a healthy institution,

derived much of its strength from government subsidies, often at the expense of the poor.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE FAMILY

Historically, there have always been people alarmed about the state of the family because the family has always been undergoing changes. One of the most significant changes taking place in the past few decades, the one that has had a pronounced effect on millions of families, causing considerable concern, has been the movement of women into the workplace. Since the Industrial Revolution, lower-class women have always worked in as well as outside the home. Until relatively recently, most middle-class women did unpaid work within the house but did not do paid work outside of the house. Today, they do both. This change has had momentous effects on women, on children, on men, on marital relations—on families.

After World War II, most jobs in the labor force were in manufacturing; since the 1970s, the economy has depended increasingly on service sector jobs (i.e., providing services, such as word processing, teaching, computer repair, social work, etc.). The demand for high-paying blue-collar workers, in automobile and steel manufacturing, for example, began to shrivel; and the demand for low-paying "pink-collar" workers, sales clerks and secretaries, for example, began to expand. With several economic recessions in the 1970s, men faced unemployment and stagnating wages. Women moved into those pink-collar jobs and into other jobs as well; and though their wages were lower, they were able to offset the declining financial situation of their husbands.

In that women demanded less in terms of salary, they began competing with men for jobs, driving down wages for men and making it even more difficult for a man to support his family without the help of a working wife. In fact, many company owners and managers came to prefer hiring women because they were "better adapted, cheaper, more reliable and more easily controlled" than men.³⁴ In 1960, 32 percent of married women were in the labor force. By 1985, this figure had climbed to 54 percent, and in 2007, it stood at 62 percent. Even more striking is that the proportion of working married women with children under the age of 6 rose from 19 percent in 1960 to 62 percent by 2007.³⁵

Today, millions of middle-class wives must work outside of the household if their family is to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. Of course, securing middle-class status for their families is not the only reason for women to work outside of the home. "Economic necessity, the traditional reason for women working," write W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, "has increasingly come to coexist with positive assertions of choice: work allows women to become independent, to develop a career, and to terminate unsatisfactory marriages, and it gives them greater power both outside the family and within it."³⁶

Does a woman working outside of the family increase a couple's likelihood of divorce? The research data are inconclusive but do suggest that dual-earner families are indeed more likely to divorce.³⁷ There are a number of possible explanations for this correlation. For one thing, most women working outside of the home basically have two jobs because, as we have seen in Chapter 3, they also do most of the housework. This undoubtedly causes stress and resentment and decreases marital satisfaction among many women. Another part of the correlation between dual-earner families and divorce is explained by the fact that a woman earning an income has greater independence and is better able to exit a failed marriage and live on her own.

Stress in the Modern-Day Family

We should keep in mind that divorce rates today are also quite high among breadwinner/housewife couples. Both dual-earner and breadwinner/housewife marriages face considerable challenges in today's society. Cowan and Cowan write,

The challenge to juggle the demands of work, family, and friendship presents different kinds of stressors for men and women, which propels the spouses even farther into separate worlds. When wives stay at home, they wait eagerly for their husbands to return, hoping the men will go "on duty" with the child, especially on difficult days. This leaves tired husbands who need to unwind facing tired wives who long to talk to an adult who will respond intelligibly to them. When both parents work outside the family, they must coordinate schedules, arrange child care, and decide how to manage when their child is ill. Parents' stress from these dilemmas about child care and lack of rest often spill over into the workday—and their work stress, in turn, gets carried back into the family atmosphere.³⁸

Cowan and Cowan refer to the modern couple as "pioneers" because they are crossing uncharted territory. "[A] brief survey of the changing context of family life in North America suggests the transition to parenthood presents different and more confusing challenges for modern couples creating families than it did for parents of earlier times."³⁹ Today's family, they argue, must get along with less support than families of the past. Parents today are more isolated from their parents and siblings, who in the past were more available to help out in child-rearing. People today are less likely to know their neighbors, who otherwise might be able to help them. Even if they do know their neighbors, their female neighbors are more likely to be off working during the day. "Many women who stay at home to care for their babies find themselves virtually alone in the neighborhood during this major transition, a time when we know that inadequate social support poses a risk to their own and their babies' well-being."⁴⁰

Further, they argue that today's family must deal with more ambiguity than families of previous generations. In the past, the family's life was more

tightly scripted. The purpose of the family was to produce and raise kids. The father had his specified role and the mother hers; there were few acceptable choices available to them with regard to how they played their roles. Consequently, there was less ambiguity. Today's parents have "more choice about whether and when to bring children into their lives... will the mother return to work, which most were involved in before giving birth, and, if so, how soon and for how many hours?"⁴¹ Such ambiguity leads to anxiety, and this is one of the many sources of stress families face in today's society.

In addition to these stressors, which are relatively new to today's parents, real wages have stagnated, men and women are working longer hours on the job, and their jobs have become less secure. The restructuring of the global economy and corporate downsizing have placed untold pressures on families, depriving them of both their job security and the time they had to spend together. Writes David Elkind, "The postmodern global economy makes unceasing demands on adults to constantly update their skills or to change occupations, and has robbed postmodern parents of their sense of vocational security."⁴² Not only are jobs less secure but people are putting in longer work hours than they did 20 years ago. According to Juliet Schor's research, the average worker puts in an additional 163 hours of work on the job per year, or the equivalent of about an extra month's work.⁴³ This work increase cuts across the occupational spectrum to include assembly-line workers, hospital orderlies, and Wall Street attorneys. Parents, consequently, have less time to spend with their children. This is a primary source of concern both for those who would like to see the return of the 1950s family and for those couples who feel they cannot afford to have the wife stay home to care for the children.

Bankruptcy and the Family

The number of personal bankruptcies in the United States has increased steadily and alarmingly over the past two decades. Even before the Great Recession, Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi, authors of *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke*, wrote,

Bankruptcy has become deeply entrenched in American life. This year, more people will end up in bankruptcy than will suffer a heart attack. More adults will file for bankruptcy than will be diagnosed with cancer. More people will file for bankruptcy than will graduate from college. And, in an era when traditionalists decry the demise of the institution of marriage, Americans will file more petitions for bankruptcy than for marriage.... The number of car reposessions has doubled in just five years. Home foreclosures have more than tripled in less than 25 years, and families with children are now more likely than anyone else to lose the roof over their heads.⁴⁴

Before the Great Recession, most of those filing for bankruptcy were in middle-class families with two working parents. To stay in the middle class,

most families require two incomes; and while popular wisdom may hold that two incomes make a family more secure, Warren and Tyagi argue that two incomes make a family more vulnerable to financial collapse. In the past when most mothers stayed at home most of the time, they acted as standby reserves who could go into action should an emergency arise. If the father lost his job, became bedridden for an extended period, or indeed died, the mother could go to work and make up for a significant part of the lost income. Today, families depend on the incomes of both mother and father, and there is no one standing by in case of an emergency.

Furthermore, with two-income earners, families are twice as likely to be beset by an emergency. The chances of financial disaster befalling the family due to job loss, serious illness, or death are doubled because now both father *and* mother are vulnerable. Should either parent lose income over an extended period, there is no one to take up the slack and financial ruin, then bankruptcy, become very likely.⁴⁵ This is not an argument in favor of mothers staying at home because if most mothers did so, besides the fact that women would not be able to fulfill their career goals, millions more families would not be able to own their own home or to send their kids to college, and the number of families able to afford a middle-class lifestyle would be only a small fraction of what it is today.

Research shows that most bankruptcies are not the result of foolishly incurred debt as some would argue. According to the Harvard-based Consumer Bankruptcy Project, almost 90 percent of those who file for bankruptcy do so because of job loss, medical problems, or divorce or separation.⁴⁶ The myth of the foolishly spending debtor, however, is propagated by creditors who do not want to see their debtors protected by bankruptcy law. The myth was also cultivated by members of Congress who passed legislation in 2005 making it tougher for families to file for bankruptcy. It is probably no coincidence that lending institutions spent \$5,000,000 lobbying for the bill and over \$20,000,000 in contributions to both political parties and to individual legislators.⁴⁷ A congressional staff member who helped craft the legislation chided, "If this were NASCAR, the members [of Congress] would have to have the corporate logos of their sponsors sewn to their jackets."⁴⁸ MBNA, a major lending institution, was also the largest contributor to George W. Bush's 2000 presidential campaign.⁴⁹ Cracking down on credit card abuse, the public was told, would lower fees and interest rates. Instead, what we saw was credit card companies' profits rise 30 percent the first 2 years after the legislation, no decrease in fees and interest rates, and more families suffering financial crises, experiencing much more stress than they would have before the legislation was passed.⁵⁰

The myth of the foolishly spending debtor also persists today, argue Warren and Tyagi, because blaming the victim allays the financial fears of the rest of us. We can take comfort and feel less vulnerable if we tell ourselves that "they" went bankrupt because of their lack of discipline.⁵¹ Meanwhile, in a country where downsizing can lift stock values, health care is not viewed

as a basic right, and two incomes are required for membership in the middle class, most of us are indeed vulnerable.

Warren and Tyagi warned us of the rising vulnerabilities to bankruptcy even before the subprime mortgage crisis which triggered the Great Recession. This crisis was brought on by reckless financial institutions that required little or no proof of income or assets from borrowers and by legislators who looked the other way while receiving campaign contributions from the very same institutions.

CHILDREN: OUR MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCE?

We often hear politicians, religious leaders, and pundits refer to children as "tomorrow's leaders," "our nation's future," and "our most precious resource." One would think that such phrases indicate the importance of our country's investment in children. Yet, in the United States, the wealthiest country in the world, our government invests very little in the welfare of its children relative to other Western industrialized countries and many other countries around the world. The message from today's legislators to American parents is fairly clear: "you do the investing because we won't." Consequently, the United States has higher rates of child poverty and lags behind other Western industrialized nations in terms of day care and parental support programs.

Child Care

Most middle-class mothers must remain in the workplace if their family is to maintain their standing in the middle class. It was the goal of welfare reform in the 1990s to move more and more lower-class mothers as well into the workplace. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 that "ended 61 years of guaranteed aid to poor children"⁵² was designed to force poor "welfare mothers" out of the home and into the workplace. Oddly enough, some people that would like to see middle-class mothers leave the workplace and return home to their children also want to see lower-class mothers leave their children at home while they go to work. This might not be such a glaring contradiction if these people also supported adequate government funding for child-care services and facilities.

Consistent with its insubstantial antipoverty programs, the United States ranks miserably in the world in terms of providing for the care of young children with working parents. Part of this is explained by the belief that mothers should be at home caring for the kids. (A Baptist church in Berryville, Arkansas, for example, closed its day-care center in the belief "that working mothers too often neglect their children and set bad examples."⁵³) However, adding to our list of contradictions, despite the desire of many to see mothers

do more "mothering," the United States provides very little in the way of legislation that allows working mothers to spend time at home caring for their children. Every Western European nation, for example, guarantees paid maternity leave, ranging from 14 weeks in Germany to 64 weeks in Sweden and from 50 percent of the woman's average wage in the United Kingdom to 100 percent of the average wage in Norway and at least half a dozen other countries.⁵⁴ The United States guarantees leave only, *without* pay, and only to women working in organizations with more than 50 employees. In Sweden, even fathers are allowed up to 10 "daddy days" to stay at home and help care for their newborn, and they are compensated at 90 percent of their regular income. Swedish law also allows parents with children under the age of 8 to opt for a 6-hour workday instead of the usual 8-hour day, with a proportional reduction in pay.⁵⁵ A sample of family leave and wage replacement policies can be found in Table 4.1 below. With some 30 countries reporting to the International Network and Leave Policies and Research, the organization announced in its 2011 review, "Australia introduces a universal paid leave entitlement—now only the USA is without."⁵⁶

Recognizing that mothers often have to work outside the home, most Western European countries offer state-subsidized day care. Danish public policy, for example, ensures that parents have to pay no more than 30 percent of operating costs of day-care facilities; low-income families pay no fees at all. The vast majority of Western European countries provide child care for children from the age of 2½ or 3 until primary school. In most of these countries, such care is part of an educational system that allows parents to start their kids in the system at such early ages, but only if they choose to do so. Many countries are cutting back on the provision of child-care services. Sheila Kamerman and Alfred Kahn estimate that "these countries meet about 67 to 75 percent of the 'need,' not enough, but far more than in the United States."⁵⁷ Though the United States does allow child-care tax credits and subsidizes child care for some low-income families, child care remains a tremendous financial burden for most families with young children.

The U.S. government does little to nothing to regulate the quality of child care provided by day-care centers, while its European counterparts set strict standards for the training of staff members and for limiting staff-to-child ratios. Of course, one of the best means of maintaining quality is by offering providers a decent salary. Yet, in the United States, day-care providers are often paid at minimum wage, and their jobs often do not include benefits. A *U.S. News and World Report* article sums up the problem, "the warped dynamic of the child-care market is all too plain: There are too many parents chasing too few day-care openings in settings where there is too much turnover of providers who receive too little training and pay."⁵⁸ The median annual wages of a child-care worker in 2008 was just under \$20,000 (only about \$3,000 above the poverty threshold for a family of three) and more than 40 percent of workers in the industry have only a high school education or less. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that "[m]any child daycare

Table 4.1 Maternity and Parental Leave Policies

Country	Duration of Leave	Percentage of Wage Replaced
Austria	16 weeks	100%
	2 years	Partial
Belgium	15 weeks	75–80%
Canada	1 year	55%
Denmark	1 year	60%
	+2 weeks paternity	60%
France	16 weeks for first 2 children including compulsory 6 weeks before birth; 26 weeks for 3rd child; post-birth leave applies to adoption as well	100% for Maternity and paternity leaves; flat rate for parental leave
Germany	14 weeks	100%
	+2 years	Flat rate/Income tested
	+3rd year	Unpaid
Greece	16 weeks	50%
Hungary	24 weeks	70%
Iceland	6 months	Flat rate + dependent benefit
Ireland	18 weeks	70%
Italy	5 months	80%
Japan	14 weeks (6 pre and 8 post Birth)	60%
Mexico	12 weeks	100%
Norway	52 weeks parental leave (or 42 weeks at 100%)	80%
Poland	16 weeks for first child 18 weeks for subsequent births	100%
United Kingdom	18 weeks	6 weeks at 90% 12 Weeks at low flat rate
United States	12 weeks family	unpaid

Source: The Clearinghouse on International Developments of Child, Youth and Family Policies at Columbia University, <http://childpolicyintl.org>.

workers become dissatisfied with their jobs' stressful conditions, low pay, and lack of benefits and eventually leave. The proportion of child daycare workers who need to be replaced each year is much higher than the average for all occupations."⁵⁹

A study of child-care centers conducted by a team of researchers from a number of prominent universities throughout the country found, among other things, that (1) "child care at most centers in the United States is poor to mediocre"; (2) "children's cognitive and social development are positively related to the quality of their child care experience"; and (3) "states with more stringent licensing standards have fewer poor-quality centers." They also found that the centers that offered higher-quality care depended less on parent fees for their operating costs, paid higher wages and provided more benefits to their staff members, had higher staff-to-child ratios, and had staff

members who were better educated, better trained, and had longer tenure at the center.⁶⁰ These happen to be many of the features that distinguish child care in European and many other countries from that in the United States. While many argue that the United States cannot afford to ensure that high-quality care is available at reasonable costs to all those in need, Kamerman and Kahn write, "most of what we have urged also is done in many countries and is popular with citizens and a range of political parties. Their economies have not collapsed, and their families thrive."⁶¹

Again, the critical constructionist is concerned with the disjuncture between perceptions of reality and objective conditions. If Americans think that children are "our most precious resource" and "our nation's future," then there is a considerable discrepancy between these beliefs and the priority given to children on our national agenda.

Children in Poverty

What is not on the table, and perhaps most significant, is a set of social arrangements that allows children to be the most poverty-stricken group in America. There is no concept of justice or virtue that justifies our willingness to allow millions of children to suffer in poverty.

(Paul Wellstone)⁶²

As mentioned earlier, critical constructionists are concerned with alternative ways various problems can be explained. Also, as mentioned in Chapter 2, popular American constructions place the blame for poverty on those individuals suffering the condition rather than on current economic arrangements. This construction of the problem suggests that the solution lies in changing the behavior of those individuals rather than changing the economy. This construction, therefore, works to the advantage of those who have an interest in keeping the economy just the way it is, namely, of those benefitting the most by current economic arrangements: the elite. However, what about the children of the poor? If we are to believe that poor adults have only themselves to blame and, therefore, deserve to suffer from poverty, do their children deserve the same? Are the children of the poor counted among "our most precious resource"?

There were more than 12.3 million children living at or below the U.S. Census Bureau's conservative poverty threshold in 2005;⁶³ 7 in 10 of these children live in families with at least one parent working.⁶⁴ That was before the Great Recession. By 2010, the number of children living in poverty had risen to 16.4 million, or 22 percent of all children. In 2010, a significant portion of the children living in poverty—more than 40 percent—live in families with incomes that amount to less than half the poverty threshold.⁶⁵ Instead of using the official U.S. poverty threshold, Table 4.2 below looks at relative poverty, setting the poverty line at 50 percent below a country's median family income. As this table indicates, the United States tolerates

Table 4.2 Children in Poverty (Percent of Children Living Below 50% of the Median Income)

Australia	15.8
Austria	7.8
Belgium	6.7
Canada	14.9
Finland	2.8
France	7.9
Germany	9.0
Italy	16.6
Netherlands	9.8
Norway	3.4
United Kingdom	15.3
Average Above	10.0
United States	21.9

Source: Mishel et al., *The State of Working America, 2006/2007*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press/Economic Policy Institute, 2007, 350.

double the average rate of child poverty and levels greater than all other OECD countries indicated.

Especially at risk are children under the age of 3, who experience the highest poverty rate of any age group.⁶⁶ Dr. David Hamburg, former director of the Carnegie Corporation, a foundation dedicated to the study of children's well-being, states,

Early childhood is clearly one of the most crucial periods of development. It is characterized by rapid growth, specific environmental needs, maximal dependence on caretakers, great vulnerability, and long-term consequences of failure in development. It is a dramatic period, with great changes and striking contrasts. First, the nine months of pregnancy—from a single cell to a very complex organism. Next, the critical transition from living inside the mother's body to living in the world outside. Then the period of forming the initial human attachments that shape so powerfully the possibilities for human relationship and social skills. So this initial phase has a strong bearing on a child's entire life. Especially in poor communities, the risks of permanent—and largely preventable—damage are formidable.⁶⁷

Contrary to popular constructions about poverty, three in five poor children are white, one in three lives in suburban America, one in three lives in a family with married parents, and most live in a family with a parent(s) who works.⁶⁸ However, minorities do, indeed, account for a disproportionate number of the poor. Black and Hispanic children are more likely to be living in families without fathers, and their mothers are more likely to be unemployed; but they are also more likely than white children to be living in

poverty *whether or not* their mothers are working. About 20 percent of white children under the age of 3 are living in poverty; most of them are living with single, unemployed mothers.⁶⁹

Thus, there is reason for some of the traditionalist alarm about the breakdown of the breadwinner/housewife family. High rates of out-of-wedlock births, as well as of divorce, do indeed have a negative impact on the economic status of millions of families, especially minority families. With regard to the welfare of children, however, it makes no difference whether out-of-wedlock birth and divorce rates are the result of individual decisions or grander structural and economic factors; the children of the poor still suffer for reasons beyond their control. Furthermore, it must be noted that even having a working father living at home is certainly no guarantee that a family will rise out of poverty. "Thirty-two percent of all men between twenty-five and thirty-four when working full-time now earn less than the amount necessary to keep a family of four above the poverty line."⁷⁰ According to Rebecca Blank, "The emphasis in this country on encouraging the poor to work harder ignores evidence that the vast majority of the poor either cannot participate in the labor market, are already looking for more work and not finding it, or are already working full-time."⁷¹

The Consequences and Costs of Child Poverty

Poverty can affect virtually every aspect of a child's life. Poverty increases the likelihood of marital instability, alcoholism among parents, and child abuse.⁷² Compared to nonpoor children, poor children are one-third as likely to have had adequate prenatal care, almost twice as likely to be born prematurely, almost twice as likely to be of low birth weight, twice as likely to repeat a grade in school, and about three and a half times more likely to be expelled from school.⁷³ State health officials in Kansas report that low-income children are three times more likely to die before reaching age 18 than higher-income children. According to the same report, before reaching age 18, low-income children are four times more likely to die from fires and five times more likely to die from infectious diseases and parasites.⁷⁴

Recent research in the neurosciences reveals that children growing up in poverty are more prone to high levels of stress hormones that can permanently impair their neurological system that "literally disrupt the brain architecture." These effects are more likely to occur among children between the ages of 6 months and 3 years and these effects are beyond "the damage caused by inadequate nutrition and exposure to environmental toxins."⁷⁵

Poor children tend to score lower on IQ tests and on tests of their cognitive abilities. Such correlations help to explain their lower school achievement and suggest that poverty is, to an extent, self-perpetuating. If it is more difficult for poor children to succeed in school, then there is an increased likelihood that they will fail to generate higher incomes than their parents. Some would argue that correlations between test achievement and poverty can

be explained by inadequate parents, inadequate parenting, or a number of other variables. Research cited by Arloc Sherman of the Children's Defense Fund indicates "that poverty's ill effects *cannot be explained away* as mere side effects of single parenthood, teen parenthood, race, or parents' low IQs or lack of education"⁷⁶ and that poverty is correlated with IQ irrespective of growing up in a single-parent family or of the mother's education.⁷⁷ Therefore, it seems that poverty itself generates an environment that produces these effects. Poor families are less able to afford an adequate diet necessary for a child's proper mental development; a poor child's environment is less likely to be filled with books and educational toys that might better facilitate the child's intellectual development; and a poor child's home life is characterized by a variety of deprivations, distractions, and "setbacks" that make achievement extremely problematic. Box 4.1 illustrates the problems posed by such setbacks.

Poverty does not have costs and consequences just for poor children and their families but, of course, for society as well. With the help of University of Michigan researchers Mary Corcoran and Terry Adams, the Children's Defense Fund estimates that each year of childhood lived in poverty reduces future earnings for young men by 2.5 percent and for young women by 1.65 percent. They argue that reduced earnings result in reduced consumption

BOX 4.1. PROBLEMS THAT ADD UP AND INTERACT

Picture a seventh grader struggling to do well in school. Perhaps child poverty means she cannot concentrate properly on her homework one night because the power company has shut off the lights. The next night she cannot concentrate because she's hungry. The night after that she cannot concentrate because people are shouting and arguing in her crowded apartment building. The next night she cannot concentrate because her brother's asthma has flared up and the family must make a long nighttime trip to the emergency room by bus. By the end of the week, she is tired and has fallen further behind in her studies.

The number and breadth of problems assailing poor children wears down their resilience by forcing them to fight battles on many fronts at once. A child with a wealth of resources can absorb a minor illness or other setback and then compensate or catch up. But for poor children who are faced with more setbacks than other children, the cumulative weight of assaults can be overwhelming.... Some experts believe that the number of setbacks a child suffers often matters as much or more than what the setbacks are.

Source: Arloc Sherman, *Poverty Matters: The Cost of Child Poverty in America*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund, 1997, 27, 9.

and, therefore, reduced production. They conclude that "for every year 14.5 million American children continue to live in poverty...society will lose a total of \$130 billion in future economic output."⁷³ Poverty also costs citizens and taxpayers. Poor children are more likely to repeat a grade in school and/or to need special education. Poor children are more likely to grow up and become violent, costing citizens in terms of their potential for victimization and in terms of taxes spent controlling the poor through the criminal justice system. As Sherman states, "A nation that does not invest to end child poverty now will inevitably pay for its consequences later."⁷⁴

As we have seen, European countries invest far more in the welfare of their children and they do so, according to sociologist James Russell, based on the principle "that all adults, including those without children, should share to some extent in the costs of raising society's children because society as a whole benefits from having children adequately reared."⁷⁵ As we begin to think of children in terms of their potential contributions and/or costs to society, we approach a *human capital perspective*. From this perspective, children are seen as future assets or future liabilities to society, depending upon how society invests in them. Children are, in the words of Kamerman and Kahn, "an investment good, not merely a consumption frill. They are society's future."⁷⁶ The phrases "our nation's future" and "our most precious resource" imply a human capital perspective and an appreciation for the importance of investing in children. Yet, the United States invests relatively little in its children.

Responding to the Problem

The way the causes of a social problem are constructed will affect the way the solutions to the problem are constructed. In the United States, the causes of poverty are often believed to be laziness and a lack of moral fortitude among the poor. While such constructions undoubtedly apply to some poor persons, they do not apply to most. The media, however, on those rare occasions when they do attend to the problem of poverty, rarely portray anything other than the stereotypes.

William Scarborough sums up typical constructions of poverty and the problem with such constructions.

There are many commonly held stereotypes about poor families with children in the United States. For example, many believe that all poor families are alike—that they are lazy (in that their parents do not work), that they are persons of color, that they are uneducated, that they have many unrelated members, and that they have been poor all of their lives. The facts are that many of these families are white, are composed of relatively small numbers of related individuals, and the adults in the families generally work and have high school educations.... The problem is that these and other important facts rarely receive adequate media attention, thus perpetuating the stereotypes.⁷⁷

By their effect on public policy, constructions of the poor as lazy and undisciplined have severe effects on poor children, even though no one actually

believes that poor children are themselves to blame for their poverty. As mentioned earlier, many of the negative consequences poverty has on poor children occur irrespective of the parents' marital status, educational attainment, or parenting abilities. In other words, the principal cause of these negative consequences is a lack of family income. This suggests that the best remedies would be policies targeting the enhancement of family income, such as income subsidies, minimum-wage increases, and programs boosting the number and availability of employment opportunities. If family values and the welfare of children are indeed primary policy concerns, then these should be the focus of our efforts. This is not a new argument, but it seems to have been lost in much of the debate about the family.

Responding to child poverty is largely a matter of priorities. Priorities are such that, for example, every 66-year-old in the United States is entitled to health care at public expense but not every 6-year-old because many of the poor do not qualify for Medicaid. Few take issue with providing Medicare to the elderly, many of whom may have a hard time taking care of themselves; but what rationale could legitimate depriving children of the medical care they need? The answer is that it is not so much a matter of rationale as it is the fact that the health care needs of poor children have not been successfully constructed into a social problem. They have not been made a priority. Meanwhile, "every six days we spend more on the military than we do annually on Head Start, which still serves only one in three eligible children."⁷⁸ President Eisenhower himself (a Republican and former five-star general) recognized the woeful priorities that placed child welfare below military expansion when he stated, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies...a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, and the hopes of its children."⁷⁹

Despite the U.S. view of itself as being "child-centered," the United States is one of only two countries in the world that has not ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Children. (The other country is Somalia, which does not have an internationally recognized government.) Having been ratified by 198 countries, it is the most widely accepted of all U.N. conventions. Among other rights, the document includes access to food, shelter, and health care. The convention best represents an ideal to which its signatories pledge they will aspire. Many of these countries, of course, have a worse record on child welfare issues than the United States. However, most of these are themselves poor countries that might argue that they cannot afford to assure every child access to food, shelter, and health care. The United States, though, is among the wealthiest countries in the world and cannot make such an argument.

It may seem astounding to most Americans, but all Western European countries provide some form of family allowance programs. These initially began as a way to offset the costs of having children in the face of declining

birthrates. Finland, for example, subsidizes families nearly 85 percent of the cost of raising a child. More generally, most European countries subsidize the costs by an average of "10 percent of wages per child."⁸⁵ In contrast, the United States only offers a tax credit of \$600 per child. These countries' family welfare policies are based on the human capital perspective discussed above, viewing children as

a societal good, a societal investment, rather than only a private "consumption" pleasure for the individual family. The family's economic situation is a major factor in how children fare and develop. Therefore, society should share some of the costs of child-rearing as a matter of justice, solidarity, and societal self-interest.⁸⁶

In Sweden, for example, as in the United States, absent parents are expected to contribute financially to the child's welfare; however, if the parent fails to do so in Sweden, the government provides a "maintenance advance" to the child. "The parent responsible for paying child support," writes Ruth Sidel, "is required to repay the amount advanced, but in the meantime, the child will not have to suffer because of nonpayment."⁸⁷ Such progressive policies reflect very different priorities than those seen in U.S. policy. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that in European countries, as Kameron and Kahn report, "[i]nfant mortality rates are consistently lower than those in the United States, fewer babies have low birth weights, childhood immunization rates are higher, and therefore certain disease rates are lower than in the United States."⁸⁸

Table 4.3 compares poverty rates among children in selected countries before and after taxes and transfers. ("Transfers" refer to government payments to the poor in the form of welfare, tax credits, food stamps, etc.). The "Proportional Reduction" column shows how much each country's "welfare system" effectively reduced rates of child poverty. As we can see, some countries reduced their rates of child poverty by as much as 70 or 80 percent or even greater. Before taxes and transfers, France and the United Kingdom had child poverty rates comparable to the United States. But, through taxes and transfers, France reduced its child poverty rate by more than 70 percent, the UK by nearly 40 percent, while the United States reduced its rate by less than 18 percent. The only country with a lower proportional reduction than the United States in Table 4.3 is the Netherlands; but note that it started with a child poverty rate considerably less than half of the U.S. rate. From these data, it appears that, relative to its peers, the antipoverty system in the United States is quite insubstantial.

Child welfare and antipoverty programs are expensive but not as expensive as many of the programs to which the United States has historically given priority, such as the military. Many European countries are cutting back on their child welfare and antipoverty programs, but these programs remain a much higher priority than in the United States. The constructions

Table 4.3 Percentage of Children Living in Poverty Before and After Taxes and Transfers

	Before	After	Proportional Reduction
Austria	17.7	10.2	42.3
Belgium	16.7	7.7	53.9
Canada	22.8	14.9	34.6
Denmark	11.8	2.4	79.7
Finland	18.1	2.8	84.5
France	27.7	7.5	72.9
Germany	18.2	10.2	44.0
Netherlands	11.1	9.8	14.4
United Kingdom	25.4	15.4	39.4
Average Above	18.8	9.0	52.1
United States	26.6	21.9	17.7

Source: Data obtained from Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto, *The State of Working America: 2006/2007*, Economic Policy Institute, 351. Authors cite Miles Corak, 2005, "Principles and Practicalities of Measuring Child Poverty in Rich Countries," LIS working paper no 406, Luxembourg Income Study.

of children as "our most precious resource" and "our nation's future" do not correspond with where children rank in our nation's list of investment priorities. A critical constructionist analysis calls for a reexamination of these priorities, keeping in mind that countries not as wealthy as the United States have done much more to improve the lot of their children and, therefore, the prospects for their nations' futures.

CAPITALISM VERSUS THE FAMILY

It is generally agreed that the two principal ingredients in a capitalist economy are (1) the pursuit of individual self-interests and (2) a free market. Under these conditions, according to Adam Smith, the best possible products and services will be made available at the lowest possible prices. According to Smith, there is no better way to ensure the efficient production and distribution of goods and services in society. A free market is one in which the government does not intervene. The less government intervention, the freer the market and the more capitalist the economy. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, the United States is among the most capitalist societies in the world; but it does not represent a pure form of capitalism because the U.S. government does intervene in the production and distribution of goods and services in a number of ways. Some of these interventions include the minimum wage, Social Security, unemployment compensation, and state-funded educational, police, and fire-fighting services. Note that in one way or another, each of these "interventions" serves to ensure the well-being of

millions of families. So while most Americans have been socialized to take a negative view of the phrase *government intervention*, virtually all of us benefit from one or another interventionist policy.

A great many countries provide far more in terms of government policies ("interventions," in capitalist terminology) that ease economic strain on family life than does the United States. While some may argue that the United States is the financial powerhouse that it is today because of its relatively anti-interventionist/capitalist policies, we should note—as mentioned above—that the most profamily program in U.S. history was the GI Bill, which made the American Dream a reality for millions of families, which was implemented during American economic ascendancy throughout the world, and which helped to prolong that ascendancy for decades to come.

Whether or not one subscribes to the belief that poor adults are to blame for their own poverty, few people believe that poor children are to blame, yet capitalist anti-interventionism means that higher proportions of our children suffer from poverty than those in other Western industrialized nations. While providing children with substandard nutrition, substandard housing, and substandard education would be unthinkable in many of the less capitalistic Western nations, such provisions are tolerated in the United States.

As we have seen, economics plays a crucial role in the well-being of the family. While it may be preferable to have a stay-at-home parent (mother or father), especially in the early years of a child's life, most families can ill-afford the loss of wages involved. Efforts to enable more parents to spend more time at home with their children—such as family leave legislation—are often opposed by powerful constituencies as unwelcome government intervention. (Often, these are the same constituencies that are heard bemoaning the decline of the breadwinner/housewife couple and calling for the return to "traditional family values.")

In short, "family values" and capitalist values are often antithetical. Capitalists, write Hewlett and West,

undermine family life because they fail to see the ways in which market values destroy family values. Committed as they are to free and unfettered markets, they forget that values are the "black hole of capitalism," to use Lester Thurow's memorable phrase. Indeed, market capitalism leans on some of the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, self-centeredness.⁸⁹

Americans who identify themselves as conservatives are typically against both government regulation of the economy and government assistance to families. However, it is the scarcely regulated economy that so frequently disrupts families. As we saw in Chapter 2, the lack of government regulation does indeed make business more flexible and competitive; at the same time, it allows for social change to take place at such a rapid pace that millions of

families have been, are, and will be devastated. For example, Edward Luttwak writes of the deleterious effects of deregulation in the airline industry,

From a strictly economic point of view, the greater efficiency brought about by unregulated competition justifies all. But from a social point of view there is no such compensation. With its stable well-paid jobs, the regulated airline industry of the past enhanced the stability of employees' families and their communities as well as those of the aircraft industry that supplied the airlines.

Today's chaotically unstable airlines are by contrast very disruptive, as they rapidly expand or drastically shrink over a matter of months or even weeks, as they abruptly shift "hubs" and maintenance bases from one place to another, each time hiring and firing employees in their constant maneuvering. It would be a nice bit of sociological research to calculate the number of divorces . . . caused by deregulation-induced economic stress on the families of airline employees.⁹⁰

Of course, the airline industry is just one among thousands of industries and its employees among tens of millions workers (and parents) who have and/or will undergo the effects of "creative destruction" as the United States drags the world's economy toward an even more extreme mode of capitalism.

In the meantime, other democratic but less capitalist societies are mindful of the effect free markets can have on families, and they have enacted policies to prevent or reduce the kinds of family devastation that have been seen in the United States. While their economies may or may not be less competitive, their families are arguably much healthier. If unemployed, parents have generous unemployment compensation available to them. If employed, parents are more secure in their jobs and can rest assured their children are being well cared for in government-subsidized child-care centers. Further, government policies ensure that they have more time to spend with their children, especially when they are newborn or very young, without serious reductions in their incomes. These policies, far more than the policies found in the United States, do indeed seem to reflect "family values."

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

One of the most divisive issues in American politics in recent years has been whether or not gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to marry. At issue is whether gay and lesbian unions should be recognized by law and accorded the same rights and privileges as heterosexual couples. For members of the gay community these rights and privileges amount to more than a matter of tax returns, employment benefits, and the rights of survivorship, but also to the respect of equals and, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, "Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"—because for most

Americans growing up, a happy marriage is a goal for which, we are told, everyone should strive. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes,

Marriage is both ubiquitous and central. All across our country, in every region, every social class, every race and ethnicity, every religion or non-religion, people get married. For many, if not most people, moreover, marriage is not a trivial matter. It is a key to the pursuit of happiness, something people aspire to—and keep aspiring to, again and again, even when their experience has been far from happy. To be told “You cannot get married” is thus to be excluded from one of the defining rituals of the American cycle of life.⁹¹

The exclusion of gays and lesbians from the defining ritual of marriage almost certainly seems to stem from centuries of prejudice against homosexuality in the Judeo-Christian world because few other explanations seem to apply. Ian Robertson writes, “The traditional sexual values of American society in general have their roots in a particular interpretation of ancient Judeo-Christian morality.... [The] Old Testament, which urges the faithful to ‘be fruitful and multiply,’ censures those who ‘waste’ their seed, and imposes severe penalties for non-reproductive sexual acts.”⁹²

Groups that are opposed to same-sex marriage are often forthright in acknowledging that their objections are based on their religious beliefs and usually argue that marriage is for the purpose of procreation. Indeed this is most likely the reason for the origin of marriage, but “nonprocreative” marriages have long been tolerated. No one objects to marriages of sterile people or of people too old to have children. Nussbaum notes,

Impotence, lack of interest in sex, and refusal to allow intercourse may count as grounds for divorce, but they don’t preclude marriage.... Convicted felons, divorced parents who fail to pay child support, people with a record of domestic violence or emotional abuse, delinquent taxpayers, drug abusers, rapists, murderers, racists, anti-Semites, other bigots—all can marry if they choose. Indeed, they are held to have a fundamental constitutional right to do so—so long as they want to marry someone of the opposite sex.⁹³

Other than religious grounds, alternative objections to same-sex marriage are rarely articulated in public forums. The battle over same-sex marriage, with one side wanting to see its religious beliefs enforced by law and the other side wanting the law to reflect its secular beliefs, is not dissimilar to ongoing strife in the Middle East between the Islamists and the secularists. In fact, the social constructionist is inclined to see the issues of same-sex marriage as a symbolic flashpoint between liberals and conservatives in the so-called culture wars. The modern usage of the term *culture wars* stems back to the 1960s when student protests, Vietnam, and civil rights marches were frequently in the headlines. But an example more similar to the same-sex marriage issue can be found in events leading to Prohibition in the 1920s.

At the turn of the twentieth century the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority comfortably held the reins of power in the United States. The coming decades saw a large flow of immigrants into the country, and most of these immigrants settled in the nation’s large urban industrial centers. Many of these immigrants were Catholics from Ireland and Italy and many were Jews from Eastern Europe. The Protestants traditionally eschewed alcohol, while alcohol was well integrated into Catholic and Jewish traditions. According to Joseph Gusfield in his classic sociological analysis, the largely rural Protestants felt their lifestyles and their position of power were being threatened by the new immigrants and alcohol became symbolic of their differences. This cultural conflict resulted in the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919, outlawing the nonmedicinal consumption and distribution of alcohol. But since the law was rampantly and flagrantly violated, says Gusfield, this was more of a “symbolic victory,” demonstrating that Protestants had so much power they could even make a part of Catholic and Jewish cultures illegal.⁹⁴

Similarly, same-sex marriage has become symbolic of the differences between religious conservatives and secular liberals, especially of their different attitudes toward sexual diversity. As we will discuss in Chapter 5, it was not that long ago that large segments of the U.S. population thought that homosexuality was sinful, perverse, and and/or a manifestation of psychological pathology. It was not surprising that most gays and lesbians stayed in the “closet.” In the aftermath of the civil rights movement, when many gays and lesbians started “coming out” and proudly declaring their sexual orientation, it was to the shock and horror of many religious conservatives. In recent decades, when civil rights protections have been extended to the gay and lesbian community, many on the religious right have objected, feeling threatened, feeling their lifestyles undervalued.

The extension of antidiscrimination laws and the extension of partner benefits in the workplace to gays and lesbians have been little victories in what may be seen as a larger war between religious conservatives and secular liberals. In this case, the symbolism of same-sex marriage probably does not escape either side in the debate; but when one side’s objections are based almost exclusively on religion, it may well be fighting a losing battle in a nation constitutionally bound by the “establishment clause”—what most people know as the “separation of church and state.”

History suggests a certain inevitability of victory for the cause of same-sex marriage. An easily discernable trend in United States’ history is toward the extension of equal treatment to disenfranchised groups who organize and fight for their rights. Women and racial minorities have fought for and gained the rights to equal treatment under the law. Gays have fought for and won recognition and respect from large segments of the American population. As we will see in Chapter 5, in the 1970s the gay community successfully fought to have homosexuality dropped from psychiatry’s handbook of mental disorders. They fought for and won the right to serve in the U.S. armed forces.

As this book is being written don't-ask-don't-tell has been repealed. The most recent surveys show that the majority of younger Americans favor the abolition of laws banning same-sex marriage and, reports the *Los Angeles Times*, "the gradual shift in public acceptance occurred as younger people entered the voting population and older ones died."⁹⁵ If the gay and lesbian community stay organized in their opposition to these laws—which they almost certainly will—then it is not a question of *if* they will succeed, but *when*.

APPLICATION: CHILDREN HAVING CHILDREN

President Bill Clinton once called teenage parenthood the nation's "most serious social problem." The problem was reignited when Jamie Lynn Spears, teen star on the Disney Channel, revealed her pregnancy and again when the daughter of Sarah Palin, the Republican vice presidential candidate in 2008, revealed hers. Indeed, teen parenthood is often assumed, without question, to be a negative social condition. Reactions to the concept of teen pregnancy and/or parenthood are so universally negative that its mention elicits an almost knee-jerk response, and its detractors rarely have to state what is wrong with it. Some think it is a principal cause of poverty, some are concerned that the mother (as it is usually the mother who is implicated) is not mature enough to raise a child, others argue that she is not physiologically ready, and still others are concerned because teen pregnancy is indicative of trends in teen sexual behavior that they find alarming. However, those who express alarm are rarely called upon to specify their concerns. British researchers Sally MacIntyre and Sarah Cunningham-Burley note similar concerns with the construction of the problem in the United Kingdom.

This failure to specify why we should be worried often proves particularly irritating because it leads to a lack of precision about the nature of the perceived problem of adolescent pregnancy. It is often simply taken for granted that conceptions (or births or abortions) occurring in the teenage years are problematic. For whom they are problematic, and in what ways, are topics that are too infrequently discussed. But unless we are clear in our definition of the problem, how can we analyze its features or proper solutions to it?⁹⁶

Teen pregnancy/parenthood did not become part of popular discussions of social problems until the early 1970s.⁹⁷ The issue did not suddenly become a matter of public concern because of increases in adolescent fertility at that time or just before that. In fact, rates of childbirth among teenagers were declining between 1957 and 1983.⁹⁸ The construction of the phenomenon as a problem persisted; in 1993, Annette Lawson and Deborah Rhode commented, "Contrary to much alarmist rhetoric, neither the United States nor the United Kingdom is experiencing an epidemic of 'children having children.' The frequency of teenage childbirth has varied considerably over time and culture, and current levels are by no means unprecedented."⁹⁹

Yet, popular concern had been unprecedented. Thus, because of the lack of correspondence between public perceptions and objective realities, the problem is particularly amenable to a critical constructionist analysis. Such an analysis starts with the fact that teen parenthood has not always been held in such disregard and goes on to examine the reasons, other than the ostensible ones, that account for its recent status as a social problem.

Many people's concerns about teen pregnancy have to do with their moral objections to premarital sex. Though proscriptions against premarital sex have always been prevalent in American culture, the historical evidence from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indicates a certain tolerance for premarital sex and teenage pregnancy as long as the couple was willing and financially able to marry. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, it is estimated, almost 30 percent of first births were premaritally conceived.¹⁰⁰ At the end of the nineteenth century, 23 percent of the babies born in the United States were conceived out of wedlock, mostly to young, urban, working-class women who were less subject to the oversight of their family or community. (To the extent that there was opprobrium, most of the wrath of family and community was focused on women who engaged in premarital sex, not their male partners.) Rates of out-of-wedlock births were also high among lower-class black families, especially among tenant farming families for whom child labor was an economic asset. These children were cared for by extensive kinship networks, a system that still survives in parts of the black community today.¹⁰¹

In addition to the concern about premarital sex, many people object to the notion of teenagers bearing children, whether married or not. However, this too, is a relatively new concern. Teenage childbearing has been common throughout American history and was far more common in the 1940s and 1950s, for example, than it is today. Of course, most of the teenage mothers were married, yet they experienced far less stigma than the married teenage mothers of today. Popular constructions of teen pregnancy/parenthood, then, include prevailing notions of childhood ("children having children"), youth, adolescence, and the appropriate age at which people can engage in sexual relations and begin families. It is important to note that the vast majority of teenage mothers are in their late teens: two-thirds of them are 18 or 19 and only a small fraction are below 16.¹⁰² It should also be noted that such notions of age-appropriate behavior are themselves social constructions. "The appropriate age for sexual relations and parenthood has always been a matter of cultural definition, and in the United States it has varied considerably across time, region, class, race, ethnicity, and gender."¹⁰³ Diana Pearce writes,

In the strictly physiological sense, "children having children" is an oxymoron. In fact, in our national history and in much of the world today, marriage and childbirth for teenage women are the norm. Thus the definition of teenagers who become pregnant as children reflects a cultural construction of the ending of childhood that is considerably later than the actual physical transition.¹⁰⁴

If not in terms of physiological maturity, then in what ways do popular constructions suggest teenage mothers are different from older mothers? Many associate teenage pregnancy with unplanned pregnancy. Yet, about three-fourths of all unplanned pregnancies are to women beyond their teens.¹⁰⁵ Another common perception associates teen parenthood with out-of-wedlock births. Yet, 69 percent of births out of wedlock are to women over 20.¹⁰⁶ As McIntyre and Cunningham-Burley point out, popular constructions do not recognize that

many women over 20 have unplanned or unwanted pregnancies and may be unmarried or unsupported. It is also worth pointing out that no one expresses much concern about older mothers—for example those having children when they are 35 or 40—even though they may face obstetric and social hazards and may often be unsupported, and even though the rates of pregnancy among these age groups are increasing.¹⁰⁷

Popular constructions also question the motives of a teenager who decides to have her baby, while they do not question the motives of her older counterpart, even though they might be the same motives. McIntyre and Cunningham-Burley write,

Of the first it is often said that her motives . . . are suspect because she seeks an object to love and to return her love, that she desires to achieve adult status, or that she wants to gain independence from her parents. But a 26-year-old might have identical motives, which in her case are taken to be normal and possibly admirable.¹⁰⁸

It is also believed that the teenager will have fewer supports available to help her with her child than her older counterpart. Yet, she is more likely to be living at home with her parents than her older counterpart, and more government-assistance programs are available to her than to her older counterpart. The implication of most constructions about teen motherhood is that the teenager will live to regret her choice of having a baby, but there is little empirical evidence to suggest that this is the case any more for the teen mother than for her older counterpart.¹⁰⁹

Race and Class

Much of the attention focused on teen parenthood emphasizes its occurrence within the black community. The media portray teen motherhood as largely a problem of the black community. Ann Phoenix writes,

The issue of teen motherhood provides an excellent example of the intersection of the negative constructions of teenage mothers with those of people of color. Although teenage motherhood is stigmatized generally . . . concern about black teenage mothers is expressed more frequently and is often more heightened than that about their white peers.¹¹⁰

Indeed, teen motherhood does occur disproportionately in the black community. However, there are far more white teen mothers than black teen mothers in the United States, and the rate of teen motherhood is increasing much faster among whites.¹¹¹ The rates among white women in the United States are also far higher than they are among white women in most other industrialized countries.¹¹²

Singling out black single mothers became a popular exercise in the 1960s, with the release of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report blaming much of the plight of the black poor on the increased incidence of female-headed families in the black community. Poverty is indeed one of the more frequently cited objections to teen motherhood. The problem, as it is popularly constructed, is that if a teenager decides to have a baby, she is forgoing education and training that would otherwise allow her to achieve financial success. Teen motherhood, especially black teen motherhood, usually comes to the attention of the public when calls for welfare reform heat up. Welfare critics charge that teenagers are having babies just so that they can live on the dole, thus attacking the motives of teen mothers and accusing the welfare system of encouraging teen motherhood. There is little evidence substantiating these claims, however. In fact, teen motherhood rates are frequently higher in the states that provide the least amount of public assistance.¹¹³

The relationship between poverty, teen motherhood, and race is far from obvious. However, to the extent that it can be delineated, a good deal of research indicates that being black in the United States increases one's likelihood of being poor and that being poor increases the likelihood of teen motherhood. "Teens from low-income or poor families," writes Jane Mauldon, "...are nine times more likely than teens from higher-income families to have a child."¹¹⁴ As for teen mothers forgoing their education in favor of having a child, studies indicate that a great many of them dropped out of school before becoming pregnant.¹¹⁵ In other words, teen motherhood was not the cause but often the result of forgoing an education, and the young woman's inability to succeed in school may explain both her decision to have a child while in her teens as well as her remaining poor into her later adulthood. Among poor teenagers who have a child while still in school, the odds of finishing high school or obtaining a GED are comparable to those of poor teenage women who do not have children.¹¹⁶

Further, if a young woman from a low-income family does indeed drop out of school—"forgo" her education—to have a baby, research indicates that she will likely be in no worse shape in her adulthood than her peer who delayed maternity. Joseph Hotz, Susan Williams McElroy, and Seth Sanders compared poor women who had babies in their teens to an interesting control group, poor women who had miscarriages in their teens and had their first child at the age of 20 or 21; they found that the former group worked more, earned more, and received less public assistance in their later adulthood than the women who delayed maternity.¹¹⁷ This seemingly paradoxical finding is explained fairly easily. The poor women who had children in their

teens were likely still living at home and still linked to a social support network that could help them raise their children. On the other hand, the poor women who delayed maternity were less likely to be living at home, more distant from such a support network, and therefore, less able to leave their children to go to work and more in need of public assistance. In other words, having their children in their teen years may actually be adaptive for low-income women, especially poor black women. Mauldon writes,

While by most people's standards few of the teenagers who become parents are well equipped to raise a child, these women might not be in a much better position if they waited. These young women probably have greater claim on familial resources (however limited) if they are teenage parents than if they give birth in their twenties. They may also have greater claim on social resources, in the form of specialized education programs for teenage parents, health care, or counseling. The employment picture for them could also favor childbearing: they probably cannot find good jobs as teenagers, but by the time they are in their mid-twenties, when employers might be more inclined to hire them, they will have completed their childbearing and their children will be in school full time.¹¹⁸

Frank Furstenburg, who has studied teen pregnancy extensively, writes, "the advantages of delaying parenthood are not so great for black [women]. . . . The cruel fact is that for blacks delaying childbearing has relatively low payoff. They are damned if they do and damned if they don't."¹¹⁹ He further argues that "[d]iminishing teen pregnancy is not, as claimed by many social scientists and policymakers, the silver bullet that, if properly aimed at the right target population, could make a huge dent in the level of poverty and disadvantage in our nation."¹²⁰

The "obvious" drawbacks of teen motherhood become less than obvious from the viewpoint of critical constructionism. As we can see, a critical constructionist analysis illustrates the fact that many of the assumed disadvantages of teen pregnancy are often exaggerated or unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, the way the problem of teen motherhood has been popularly constructed serves to reaffirm the ideology of abundant opportunity in the United States and, in doing so, remains an effective scapegoat for the problems of the poor, especially the black poor, blaming them rather than the social structure for their impoverishment. This is not to suggest that there are no drawbacks to teen motherhood or that teens should be encouraged to have children, but such an analysis does challenge us to reconsider where this problem is placed on our list of priorities. If poverty is more often the cause rather than the effect of teen motherhood, then perhaps poverty and its structural causes should be placed higher on that list.

SUMMARY

Popular constructions of the breakdown of the modern-day family are based upon idealized impressions of the family of the past. Yet, there has never

been a "golden age" of the American family. Even in colonial times, people were bemoaning the decline of the family. While divorce rates are quite high today, in the past, when divorces were rare, it was not uncommon for people to be trapped in loveless marriages, to be unofficially separated, or to opt for the "poor man's divorce," separation. Today, those who are the most alarmed about the state of the family often identify the "working mother" as the source of the problem. Yet, the breadwinner/housewife form of family is a relatively new pattern that did not emerge until the Industrial Revolution; and when it did emerge, it was common only in the middle and upper classes and made possible only through the labor of the lower classes.

The breadwinner/housewife form of family reached its apotheosis in the 1950s, following World War II. The baby boomers—that is, many of today's parents, writers, politicians, and political pundits—grew up on a steady diet of idealized images of the 1950s family, which made up a substantial portion of television programming. Those images inform a good deal of the rhetoric in current debates about the family. References to the "traditional family" often allude to this form of family. The family of the 1950s, however, was far from traditional. It in fact represented a setback in a long-standing and continuous progression in the status of women. Women were marrying younger, having more babies, and giving up career ambitions; and the educational gap between men and women began to widen. Women were suddenly supposed to find all of their happiness within the confines of the family. Many did not. Of those who did not, their frustration was indicated by the new psychiatric diagnosis of "housewife's blight" and by the thousands upon thousands of women being prescribed anti-anxiety drugs. When the divorce rates did increase in the 1960s, "traditionalists" often failed to recognize that a substantial proportion of those couples getting divorced were the ones who had gotten married in the 1950s.

The family of the 1950s was also far from traditional in that it was very heavily subsidized by government monies. Traditionalists—who proclaim the values of independence and self-sufficiency and who are often the fiercest opponents of welfare—also fail to recognize that the family of the 1950s was made possible by some of the most generous government subsidies in U.S. history. The GI Bill enabled World War II veterans to establish themselves, marry early, support their wives and children, and achieve the American Dream with relative ease.

Since the 1950s, married women have taken jobs outside the home in substantial and increasing numbers. A series of recessions, wage stagnation, and a rising cost of living have made it necessary for families to have both husband and wife working in order to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. So, while the traditionalists argue that mothers should be at home with their kids and not out working, the lost income would represent far more sacrifice today than it would have in the 1950s.

While "family values" are often proclaimed to be the country's first priority when election time rolls around, the United States has fewer policies and programs to support the family than a great many countries around the

world. Many other countries have far more generous laws providing for maternity leave (usually paid), and some even provide for paternity leave (often paid). Relative to other industrialized countries, the United States also ranks poorly in the provision of child-care services. As a result, many poor single mothers feel the need to stay at home with their children, and many middle-class children receive inferior child care.

When the family is identified as a serious social problem, children are usually considered the most important casualties. Of those problems facing children, the critical constructionist is most concerned with those associated with poverty. While Americans often speak of children as "our most precious resource," the United States is willing to tolerate child poverty rates that would be unconscionable in Western Europe and other parts of the globe. The belief that individuals are to be blamed for their poverty and not the social system accounts for the American tolerance of high poverty levels. Yet few, if any, actually believe that children are to be blamed for their poverty. Minimal efforts to resolve this contradiction are to be found in U.S. social and economic policies.

From child poverty and a lack of social supports for poor families, we turned our attention to the issue of same-sex marriage. Most of the opposition to the legalization of marriage is found among Christian conservatives and the issue has become a symbolic flashpoint in the so-called culture wars. But the trend in American history is toward equality and with the gay and lesbian community achieving success in many recent battles, history seems to be on the side of victory in this one.

One popular method of blaming poverty on individuals has lain in the identification of teenage pregnancy as a social problem, especially when it occurs in the black community. Teen pregnancy has only relatively recently been constructed as a social problem. Today, it has such negative connotations that its detractors rarely feel compelled to say what is wrong with it; but it is generally regarded as irresponsible behavior that leads to the diminution of the mother's life chances and to the perpetuation of poverty, especially within the black community. Research, however, reveals that poverty is more the cause of teen pregnancy than the effect. Further, there is evidence indicating that teen pregnancy may well be an adaptive behavior for poor women.

In summary, throughout this chapter, a critical constructionist analysis reveals numerous inconsistencies in the way problems of the family are popularly conceived. Popular constructions about the current state of the family often work from false assumptions about the history of the family. Popular constructions usually place blame on individuals, whereas there are grander social and economic forces accounting for many of the problems facing the family. In placing blame on individuals, popular constructions reinforce the status quo and offer inadequate remedies relative to the remedies found in countries that implement policy based on a human capital philosophy.

Discussion Questions

1. What is meant by the assertion in this chapter that the family of the 1950s was perhaps the most heavily subsidized generation of families in American history?
2. Could the U.S. government develop more family-friendly policies than it has? And would the costs of such policies outweigh the benefits?
3. If it was agreed that teen pregnancy is a serious problem in the United States, what policies or programs can you think of that would minimize the incidence and/or the deleterious effects of teen pregnancy?