



OUTSIDERS LOOKING IN

by Graham B. Spanier

As with all of the social sciences, the study of marriage and the family began long before it was distilled into an academic specialty. Socrates mused about the family, and Plato, in what was perhaps man's first venture into "family policy," argued that the family would have to disappear as the price for establishing his *Republic*. Plutarch, Chaucer, Milton, Marx, and Freud each spoke his piece on the subject.

It was not until the 1920s, however, that, thanks largely to the pioneering efforts of men like Ernest Burgess and his colleagues at the University of Chicago, family research emerged as a serious academic endeavor. Even then, it was generally conducted by sociologists who saw "the family" as merely one specialization among several that they had, the way some realtors also handle insurance or some lawyers do tax returns.

Much has changed. Today, virtually every U.S. college and university has family specialists on its faculty. There are dozens of scholarly journals and newsletters devoted to the family—from *Demography* to the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. Professional associations of family researchers such as the National Council on Family Relations have a collective membership in the tens of thousands.

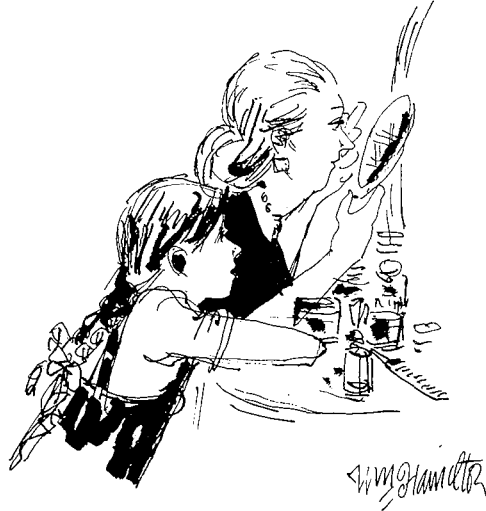
The stigma is gone, but the enterprise is not yet a truly "hard" science, nor, given the subject, will it ever be. In matters ranging from divorce to premarital pregnancy to homosexuality, establishing the facts of the case and relating cause to effect remain a murky business. Scholarly hypotheses sometimes set sail, drift, founder, and sink, possibly to be salvaged and refitted years later. Words like "inconclusive" and "ambiguous" pepper the more serious authors' concluding comments in journal essays. It is a frustrating profession.

For all their uncertainty, the best family researchers can offer some insights into *what* is happening, if not always into *why* it is happening or what it all means for America as a whole.

Let us begin with unwed cohabitation (or "living together," née, "living in sin"), a development fostered, so it is said, by the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey point to a steady increase in the

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"Mummy, when will I be old enough to get divorced?" was the caption on this cartoon by William Hamilton. For women, the average age of first divorce is now 27.



Reprinted from The Anti-Social Register, by William Hamilton. Published by Chronicle Books, 1974.

number of persons living together. The figure more than doubled between 1970 and 1978, to more than 1.1 million couples. Between 1977 and 1978 alone, there was a 19 percent increase.

Such living arrangements are popularly thought to be a lasting alternative to marriage, one more bit of evidence that the nuclear family is in a state of decay. In fact, cohabitation is rarely permanent. About two-fifths of those who now live together are never-married young adults, most of whom will eventually marry someone—if not necessarily the person they currently live with. Another 55 percent are divorced individuals, most of whom will eventually remarry. A few are elderly. Of all never-married persons living together outside of marriage, about 85 percent are under age 35, 8 percent are between 35 and 54 years of age, and 7 percent are 55 or older.*

Paul Glick of the Census Bureau and I have recently published data showing that cohabiting couples generally live in large suburbs or cities. They have, on average, relatively low incomes and experience high unemployment, although the women among them are more likely to be employed than are married women. Couples living together who are young and have never been married also tend to be better educated than either their married or previously married counterparts. Blacks

*Corresponding percentages differ for persons living together who have been previously married. Approximately 38 percent of such individuals are under age 35, 30 percent are aged 35 to 54, and 32 percent are 55 or older.

account for a disproportionate share of the number of couples living together, but the vast majority of all cohabiting couples are, in fact, white.

What most of these people have in common—perhaps the only thing—is that they have chosen this lifestyle as a temporary convenience, one made possible by effective birth-control techniques and perpetuated to a great extent both by changing mores and, especially among the young, by an increase in the number of career-minded women. “Living together” rarely constitutes an *ideological* rejection of marriage. Indeed, one of the greatest problems for such couples comes when one of them is ready to marry and the other is not.

Marriage is still the norm in our society, and, I suspect, it will remain so. In 1979 alone, more than 4.5 million persons got married; 9 out of 10 Americans eventually march down the aisle. Today's young adults seem to be as committed to the idea of marriage as were previous generations, but there is one difference: They are not in as much of a hurry. The median age at first marriage is now 24 for men and about 22 for women—an increase of nearly two full years each since the 1950s. Among women aged 25 to 29, one in five has never been married, versus one out of ten in 1960.

Why the delay? Demographer Kingsley Davis has cited, among other reasons, the lackluster state of the U.S. economy. Some young couples, he suggests, lack the financial security to launch a family, as happened during the Depression when the average age of first marriage was roughly as high as it is today. Unfortunately, the role of economics is one variable that family researchers have trouble documenting. Even when common sense points to it as a factor, it is difficult to “disaggregate” economics from other underlying variables, such as race, class, and education.

More persuasive explanations of the rising age of first marriage center around changing social values. Most men and women are now sexually experienced before the conclusion of adolescence; they don't need to get married simply to enjoy sex. Effective contraception, if employed, virtually eliminates the

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chance of an unwanted pregnancy, a fear (or reality) which in the past encouraged (or forced) some early marriages. For some youths, living together may make marriage seem less urgent, at least for a while. Moreover, a higher average age of marriage has historically been associated with higher educational levels, and the U.S. population, in particular the young population, is more educated than ever before. Finally, as I have already noted, the increasing number of ambitious young women looking first to their careers may also help shift the average age of marriage upwards.*

Divorce

Despite the impression often left by the media, the proportion of teen-age marriages has *declined* over the past decade. Those who do marry in their teens, however, are most likely to get divorced. Women who marry at ages 14 to 17 are twice as likely to get divorced as women who marry at ages 18 or 19, who in turn are one and one-half times as likely to get divorced as women who marry in their early twenties, for whom divorce rates are high to begin with. Men who marry in their teens are about twice as likely to get divorced as men who marry in their twenties. Interrupted education, poor job prospects, lack of money, basic immaturity, parental opposition, early (if not premarital) pregnancy—the factors behind the failure rate are clear to everyone except, perhaps, the teen-agers involved.

Teen-age married couples may be especially divorce-prone, but divorce, of course, is not just a teen-age phenomenon. There are now more than 1 million divorces in America each year, involving more than 2 million adults and 1 million children. (There are some 48 million married couples in the United States.) While the upsurge in divorce during the past two decades is finally slowing—the rate had more than doubled since 1960 from about 9 to more than 20 divorces annually per 1,000 married couples—there is nothing to suggest that the rate will actually decline. At best it will level off.

Divorce hits all social groups, but not equally. Divorce rates are considerably higher for blacks than for whites. Although divorce can strike couples of any age and circumstance, those who get a divorce tend to do so relatively early in their marriages. (Paradoxically, many couples who remain married say

*Some of the delay is also accounted for by a demographic wrinkle called the "marriage squeeze." On average, women marry men a few years older than themselves. When the first wave of Baby-Boom women (those born after 1945) hit marrying age in the late 1960s, the pool of older, "eligible" bachelors (men born *before* the Baby Boom) was relatively small.

that their happiest years were those statistically vulnerable early ones.) Generally speaking, the lower the educational level, the higher the divorce rate.

What weight to assign various economic factors—e.g., job stability, income level, welfare availability—is still a matter of dispute. Consider the controversial proposition that “welfare breaks up marriages”—a seemingly plausible hypothesis given that welfare benefits for an intact family are lower than they are for a female-headed family. Dozens of researchers have tested this notion. They have variously found that: the proposition is true; is false; is true for blacks but not whites; is true for whites but not blacks. Some contend that welfare has no effect on divorce rates but *does* delay remarriage; others suggest that some ineffable “third variable” may account for going on welfare *and* getting divorced.*

Who Stays Married?

What is the profile of the couple *least* likely to divorce? The wife would have married in her late twenties and would have a B.A. degree, but no more. (Women with graduate degrees have a disproportionately high divorce rate, perhaps owing to a greater sense of economic security and social independence.) The husband would also have a B.A. and would likewise have married in his late twenties. Both would be white and upper-middle-class, and would eventually become the parents of two boys or a boy and a girl (not two girls), with the eldest child born a couple of years after the wedding. Their chances of divorce would be lessened further if they lived in the countryside, were of the same religion, and went to church regularly.

Whatever the roots of marital success or failure, if one assumes that the divorce rate will remain relatively constant over the next couple of decades, then between one-third and two-fifths of all *first* marriages formed during the late 1970s are destined to end in divorce. Considering the whole potential cycle of divorce, remarriage, and redivorce, it is probable that between 40 and 50 percent of *all* marriages formed by today's young adults will not remain intact.

If there is a silver lining, it is that approximately half of those who get divorced do so relatively early in their marriages, often before they have children. The spouses, moreover, are rejecting an *unsuccessful relationship*; they are usually not rejecting the *idea of marriage or family per se*. Many of them, in fact,

*For a concise overview of the debate, see “The Effects of Welfare on Marital Stability and Remarriage” by Stephen J. Bahr, in *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (August 1979).

look forward to a "traditional" family life the next time around. The data on remarriage speak volumes. Approximately 25 percent of divorced persons remarry within a year following termination of a first marriage; 50 percent do so within three years; 80 percent of them do so ultimately. Samuel Johnson once called second marriages "the triumph of hope over experience." It would appear that many Americans are more hopeful about the family than some of the experts.

In any event, divorce may not be the worst of evils, at least for the adults involved. We do not have much hard data on the subject, but a reading of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or James's *Ambassadors* recalls the tragedy of some 19th-century marriages that obdurately remained intact. There is no evidence that the quality of U.S. marriages has declined (or improved) during the past century—only that Americans have become more willing and able to seek a divorce if a marriage fails to meet expectations.

... And the Children?

Much of our basic uneasiness about family instability stems from legitimate concern about what happens to the children—and, as a result, to society as a whole. Three in five divorcing couples have at least one child under 18 years of age. During the late 1970s, an average of two children were involved in every divorce in which there were any children at all under age 18. The impact of family disruption on children cannot be ignored, even when the divorce is amicable, and the custodial arrangement problem-free. Psychologist Mavis E. Hetherington has catalogued the problems that children sometimes experience following divorce: psychological stress, promiscuity, drug abuse, suicidal tendencies, guilt. Divorce may be especially hard on an only child.

Yet, Hetherington and others argue that it is far better for a child to grow up in a loving home with one parent than in a domestic battleground with two. Moreover, children are remarkably resilient, often evincing an uncanny ability to roll with the punches. Although no one suggests that divorce is actually *good* for children, just how much impact marital instability has on a child's emotional development and on his development as a young adult is one of those issues that divides scholars. But no one denies that a financial trauma attends most divorce actions, since divorced mothers who retain custody of their children usually experience economic hardship.

The number of households with children maintained by a man or (usually) a woman with no spouse present increased

THE BLACK FAMILY'S SPECIAL PLIGHT

Early in 1965, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his controversial report on *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Looking at three warning signs—nearly a quarter of urban black marriages were dissolved; nearly a quarter of black families were headed by females; nearly a quarter of black births were illegitimate—he concluded that “the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling.”

That general prediction has proven correct: During the past 15 years, those three rates have almost doubled (see charts on p. 128).

The black family was not always in such bad shape. Although Moynihan argued that the horrors of American slavery had broken the black family, historian Herbert Gutman has since found in the black family of the late 19th and early 20th centuries a stability comparable to that of white families. In New York City in 1925, for example, two parents were present in 85 percent of all black homes.

What went wrong, and when? Theories vary. There are no conclusive answers. Gutman blames the great 1940–70 exodus from the rural South to the cities, and high urban unemployment. But this popular “urbanization thesis” has yet to be tested by a sociological comparison of the effects of migration on poor whites and blacks.

Researchers such as the Urban League’s Robert Hill point to continuing economic pressures as the prime villain. In 1969, black households had a median income of \$6,063, or 61 percent of the median white income. Nine years later the figure for black families was \$10,879, or 59 percent of white income.

Yet, when economic factors are held constant, black families are still less stable than white families. Of all white households living on

from 3.2 to 5.7 million during the 1970s, thanks both to divorce and to the escalating number of births outside of marriage, particularly to women in their teens.* Black women are three times as likely as white women to head up a single-parent household. Households maintained by a married couple declined slightly

*Some 600,000 children are born to U.S. teen-agers every year, and more than 40 percent of them are illegitimate. Blacks are far more likely than whites to have a premarital pregnancy, but whites are more likely than blacks to have an abortion or rush into marriage as a result. (Approximately 75 percent of white children and 94 percent of black children born out of wedlock are kept by their mothers.) One Urban Institute study, *Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy and Childbearing*, has found that “mothers whose first child was born out of wedlock are more likely to receive welfare” than their married counterparts. On the other hand, the authors note that there is no evidence to support the frequent charge that the availability of welfare encourages premarital teen-age pregnancies. Nor does the availability of “family planning services”—i.e., contraceptive advice—foster promiscuity. Not surprisingly, the use of contraception does correlate with a lower incidence of teen-age pregnancy.

less than \$5,000 a year in 1977, one-third were headed by a single parent. For blacks, the rate was two-thirds. And even among middle-class blacks, single-parent families occurred at triple the rate for whites (13.7 percent versus 4.6 percent).

Black family breakups, argue some sociologists, are caused by persistent racism. Yet, by most measures, blacks have made gains in access to voting, education, jobs, and government aid since 1965—even as the black family's stability has worsened.

Contrasting the general socioeconomic success of black West Indian immigrants with the continuing "underclass" status of many native-born blacks, UCLA's Thomas Sowell concludes that racism *alone* cannot explain the disparities between blacks and whites. He suggests that a culture of "regimented dependence," inherited from Southern slavery and reinforced by the welfare state, is to blame. But that, again, is more of a guess than an answer. So is the "culture of poverty" explanation, which does little more than slap a label on the depressing statistics.

To call the black family "pathological," some critics say, is to impose "white values." Evidence of cultural differences does exist. A wide-ranging "kinship system" would explain why 15 percent of all black children are taken in by siblings, aunts, uncles, or grandparents; but the "extended black family" is probably more an adaptation to difficulty than an inherent strength.

Serious public discussion of the black family's special plight—and the implications for general black advancement—has not been widespread since the Moynihan report. Involving both race and family, the topic is a touchy one. Yet, as several scholars have noted, the statistics clearly indicate that the black family's future is too important a matter to be left to polemicists.

during the 1970s, to 72 percent of all households.

There is no lack of statistics about America's children that give cause for alarm, quite apart from the effects of divorce. Poverty and malnutrition afflict millions of children. So do abuse and neglect: It has been estimated that between 1.4 and 1.9 million American children are victims of one or the other annually. New York State last year spent \$42 million investigating some 52,000 reports of maltreatment of children—85 percent of them neglect cases. The two biggest apparent causes of simple neglect: the rising number of single-parent families, and the increasing entry of mothers into the labor force.

The fact of the matter is that the upbringing of children is often a secondary consideration, even in many intact families. A 1978 Yankelovich poll found that 51 percent of the parents sur-

PARENTS' COSTS OF REARING A CHILD, 1961-78

(estimates for a middle-class child raised in a city in the North Central states)

Age	Food	Clothing	Housing	Medical	Education ^a	Other ^{**}	Total
1-5	\$1,442	\$545	\$2,861	\$389	—	\$2,391	\$7,628
6	306	155	463	75	35	433	1,467
7	380	163	482	79	37	450	1,591
8	399	173	513	85	38	469	1,677
9	420	180	550	90	40	490	1,770
10	504	186	575	96	42	513	1,916
11	525	190	598	99	43	523	1,978
12	631	284	647	103	44	573	2,282
13	794	305	722	112	47	629	2,609
14	860	319	800	126	51	687	2,843
15	883	330	849	138	53	742	2,995
16	1,037	478	941	151	56	866	3,529
17	1,143	495	1,005	164	70	948	3,825
Total	9,324	3,803	11,006	1,707	556	9,714	\$36,110

^aincludes fees, books, and supplies^{**}includes transportation, recreation, reading, and other miscellaneous expenses

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This chart assumes both that the child has no more than four siblings and that he attends public schools.

Three major expenses are not depicted above. One, the cost of having a baby in the hospital, estimated to have been \$1,050 in 1961. Two, the follow-up cost of a college education: In 1979, when this child would have matriculated, one year at a state university cost \$5,000. Three, the potential income a woman forfeits by bearing and rearing a child. The average "lost opportunity" cost of a *first* child is normally about equal to the direct maintenance cost, in this case, \$36,110.

Taxpayers today shoulder much of the burden of rearing some American children. The offspring of teen-agers, for example, often become recipients of government aid. Researchers at SRI International, a California "think tank," estimate that each of the 442,000 first children born to teen-agers in 1979 alone will during his first 20 years of life require an average of \$18,710 extra in public welfare and health expenditures. This adds up to a total tax-supported outlay of \$8.3 billion, just for this "Class of '79."

veyed felt it was all right to send their children to day-care centers in order to give themselves more leisure time. Other polls of the 1970s suggest that many married couples today have a stronger commitment to each other or to their careers than to their children. To what extent such new attitudes may have contributed to the schools' growing problems of drug abuse, indiscipline, and classroom inattention since 1965 remains a matter of conjecture.

What "threats" do the much publicized "alternative" lifestyles pose to the future of the family? It is hard to argue that any alternative arrangement is likely to replace the family as we know it. Such alternatives have always existed, but they have never attracted large numbers of people. (Witness, in the United States, the early communes of the Shakers, Hutterites, Moravians, and the Oneida Community.) Most contemporary communes are short-lived, unless they have a strong ideological basis—or economic base. Even then they are often unstable.

There is certainly greater tolerance of alternatives today than ever before, particularly in the press and, I must add, among family scholars. Most of us have relatives and acquaintances who have never been married, or who are separated, divorced, or remarried, or who are living together outside of marriage. Without too wide a search, one can turn up group marriages, homosexual couples, and single-parent adoptions. Yet those variations that are by far the most common (remarriage, for example) actually build upon the structure and function of the family as we usually define it. The more unusual arrangements remain exceedingly rare.

Blue-Chip Stocks

What topics are likely to command the greatest interest among researchers in the decade to come? Another way of asking the question is: What are the most pressing family problems, and what research is most likely to be funded?

Family violence: This is a matter we still know little about. During the past few years, researchers such as sociologist Murray Straus and his colleagues Richard Gelles and Suzanne Steinmetz have attended to such questions as: What kind of person is most likely to abuse his spouse or child? What kind of child is most likely to become a victim? Do abused children become child abusers in turn? Should violent families be broken up? In 1974, Congress created the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect, with an appropriation in 1978 of \$19 million. And in December of 1979, the House passed a bill authoriz-

ing \$65 million over a two-year period to aid victims of domestic violence. (The Senate is expected to support the bill.) During the 1980s, we can expect some major studies of family violence.

The *quality of marital relationships* has long been the "blue chip" stock in family studies. This will continue. Some of the important questions: What factors make for a happy marriage? Is *when* one marries more important than *whom* one marries? What is the relationship between marital quality and marital/extramarital sexual behavior? What kinds of marital and family therapies work best?

Room for Humility

The *reciprocal influences between parents and children* will stir one of the up-and-coming theoretical debates. Researchers have generally paid more attention to the impact of parents on children than vice versa. Penn State sociologist Richard Lerner and his colleagues have begun examining the other side of the coin; they are likely to be joined by a growing number of developmental psychologists and family sociologists.

Divorce and all its ramifications are the greatest "institutional" problems facing the American family and its relation to the larger society. This is already a major focus of research—and of chronic debate among radical feminists, "pro-family" advocates, and others. The U.S. National Institute of Mental Health recently issued a request for proposals for projects that would examine the effects of divorce on children. The Institute was willing, the announcement said, to provide \$1 million to fund perhaps seven projects. No less than 136 proposals came in. Related topics such as *remarriage* and *stepparenthood*, which have not been studied extensively, will also get the spotlight.

Reproduction and *fertility* have been growth areas for research during the past two decades. Adolescent sexuality increased dramatically during the 1970s. So did adolescent contraceptive use, but not as fast as sexual activity. No one knows exactly why, but there is plenty of speculative research. The consequences are clear: adolescent pregnancy, abortion, and/or parenthood. These and other issues are being studied in a continuing survey of young American women conducted by Melvin Zelnik and John Kantner at Johns Hopkins University. Another study, the comprehensive National Survey of Family Growth, created in HEW (now the Department of Health and Human Services), is looking into the fertility of American women throughout their reproductive years. We don't know much about the social determinants and consequences of pregnancy or

the impact that number and spacing of children has on a family. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development is supporting inquiries in all of these areas.

We can also expect to see a growing body of research pertaining to *dual earner families* and the increase in the proportion of *working wives and mothers* in the labor force. Psychologist Lois Hoffman and others have begun work on government-sponsored projects to investigate a variety of issues: What is the relationship between fertility and employment? Do children, in fact, suffer when both parents work? Is a working wife more prone to divorce?

Finally, there has been an explosion of interest in *family demography*, in statistical trends affecting the family—marriage, divorce, remarriage, family economics, and household living arrangements as they vary by race, income, locale, age. One reason is that Congress relies increasingly on just this kind of information when it formulates legislation; bureaucrats use it to draft regulations and “target” financial assistance to the needy; scholars depend on it to identify areas of interest and put narrowly focused research into context. Paul Glick, senior demographer at the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the founding father of family demography, will preside as researchers this summer begin to pick over the results of the 1980 Census.

In short, aside from the highly useful Census “facts,” we can look forward to a bumper crop of research on the causes and effects of family trends during the next few years. How comprehensive—or useful—these analyses will be is another question. Scholars may already be producing more studies than anyone could ever hope to assimilate: A healthy portion of all scholarly articles published on the family every year are actually comprehensive reviews of existing research to help the experts stay abreast of the latest developments.

Moreover, insofar as serious family research may be helpful to Washington policymakers—and much of it is not—there is a considerable lag between academic discoveries and political action. Legislation rarely reflects the *latest* findings. Even if it did, how long would those findings remain valid?

There is, in sum, much room for humility as we continue to explore the dynamics of the American family.