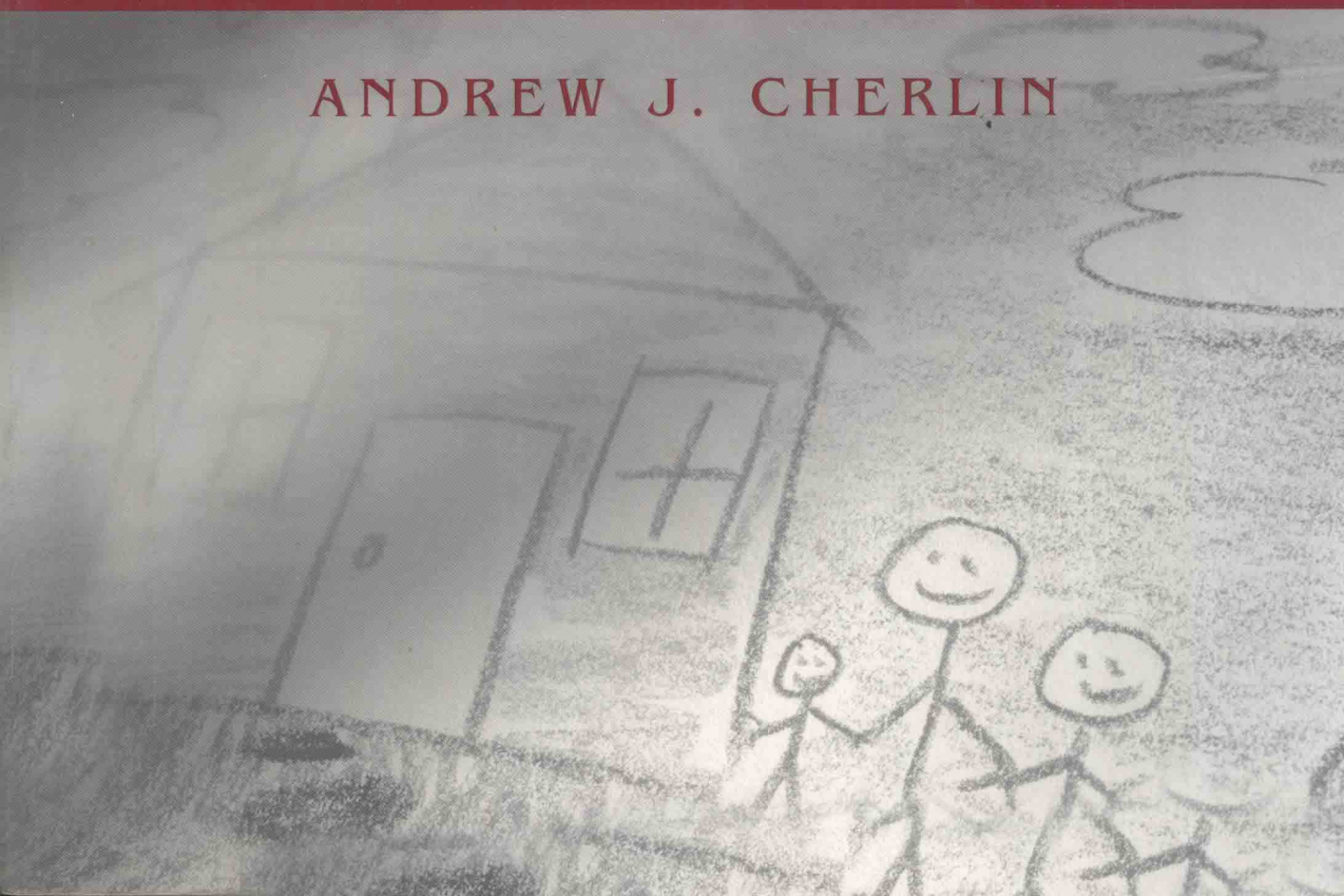
PUBLIC & Private

FAMILIES

SECOND EDITION

a reader

ANDREW J. CHERLIN



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PREFACE

This volume consists of 32 readings that are keyed to the 16 chapters in a textbook I wrote for courses in the sociology of the family, *Public and Private Families: An Introduction.* Nevertheless, it can be used with other textbooks or no textbook at all. The metaphor of public and private families in my textbook and in the title of this reader reflects my sense that families matter in two senses. First, they perform activities of great importance to the public interest—most notably raising the next generation and caring for the frail elderly. Second, as the main site of our personal lives, they provide the private satisfactions of love, intimacy, and companionship. Think of viewing families through either of two lenses. When you are interested in caregiving, childrearing, and material support, you would look through the lens of the public family. When you are interested in intimacy, sentiment, and emotional support, you would look through the lens of the private family. The two lenses provide different ways of looking at the same group of family members. For example, a married couple may be providing each other with love and intimacy but also raising children. The two perspectives, then, can be thought of as complementary and sometimes overlapping ways of looking at the same reality: the institution of the family.

Many textbooks and readers focus more on the private family; they mainly describe how people manage their personal relationships as they proceed through the life course. I include this perspective, too, but I attempt to balance it with a consideration of the important public issues raised by the great recent changes in family life. Indeed, hardly a week goes by without some family issue—no-fault divorce, gay marriage, teenage childbearing, welfare reform, child care, deadbeat dads, domestic violence, and so forth—appearing on the front page of the newspapers.

Consequently, it's crucial that students studying the sociology of the family encounter not just studies of the individual life course but also of the ways that family life affects our society. I have attempted to provide both the public and private perspectives on the family in this reader.

I tried to cast a broad net while trawling for the articles and book excerpts presented here. Many pieces describe the stories of real families: for instance, Susan Sheehan's eye-opening report on the struggles of a working-class family, "Ain't No Middle Class," from *The New Yorker;* and Alex Kotlowitz's riveting portrait of Pharoah Rivers from his best-selling book, *There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America.* Others, such as Janet Z. Giele's essay on conservative, liberal, and feminist views on family policy, reflect debate and controversy within sociology about the future of the family. Still others are drawn from the current classics of the gender-studies approach to the sociology of the family, such as Arlie Hochschild's already-famous portrayal of Nancy and Evan Holt from *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home.*

From outside of sociology, I have included insightful pieces by psychologists (Jamie K. Keshet's analysis of remarried couples), legal scholars (Elizabeth Batholet's discussion of adoption), and, in one case, a psychologist *and* a legal scholar (an analysis of joint custody by Eleanor Maccoby and Robert Mnookin). I also have imported a few excerpts from the large literature on family history: Steven Mintz's overview of men's family roles, Elaine Tyler May's discussion of the 1950s, and Ellen K. Rothman's description of the great changes in courtship during the twentieth century in the U.S.

In 1996, Congress enacted the so-called welfare reform bill, which constitutes the greatest change in social policy toward poor families since the Great Depression. Even after several years, there are few analyses of its potential impact on families and children. I have therefore written a background article, revised and updated for this second edition, that I hope will help students understand the implications of the new law for low-income families.

The second edition contains 12 new readings and two articles that have been revised—my welfare reform essay and Douglas J. Besharov's article on child abuse. Excerpts from several recent books are included, such as Katherine Newman's *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City;* Mary Patillo-McCoy's *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class,* Pepper Schwartz and Virginia Rutter's *The Gender of Sexuality,* and Alan Wolfe's *One Nation, After All.* I also have included recent articles, such as Paula England and Nancy Folbre's "Who Should Pay for the Kids?" a discussion of the social benefits of raising children, and Steven Nock's "The Problem with Marriage," a critique of traditional arrangements that provide greater benefits for men and an appeal for support of gender-neutral marriage. It is my hope that the mix of readings retained from the first edition and readings added for this edition will produce a useful overview of the sociology of the family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew J. Cherlin is Benjamin H. Griswold III Professor of Public Policy in the Department of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University. He received a B.S. from Yale University in 1970 and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1976. His other books include *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (revised and enlarged edition, 1992); *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part* (with Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., 1991); *The Changing American Family and Public Policy* (1988); and *The New American Grandparent: A Place in the Family, A Life Apart* (with Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., 1986). In 1989–1990 he was chair of the Family Section, and in 1995–1996 he was chair of the Population Section of the American Sociological Association. In 1999 he was the president of the Population Association of America.

Professor Cherlin is a recipient of a MERIT (Method to Extend Research in Time) Award from the National Institutes of Health for his research on the effects of family structure on children. He was a member of both the Panel on Child Care Policy and the Committee on Child Development Research and Public Policy of the National Academy of Sciences. His recent articles include "Stepfamilies in the United States: A Reconsideration," in the *Annual Review of Sociology;* "Nostalgia as Family Policy," in *The Public Interest;* "Longitudinal Studies of the Effects of Divorce on Children," in *Science;* "Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health throughout the Life Course," in the *American Sociological Review;* and "By the Numbers," and "I'm O.K., You're Selfish," both in *The New York Times Magazine.* He also has written many short articles for

The New York Times, The Washington Post, Newsweek, and other periodicals. He has been interviewed on *ABC News Nightline,* the *Today Show,* network evening news programs, National Public Radio's *All Things Considered,* and other news programs and documentaries.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FAMILIES

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

Public and Private Families

The state of the American family—indeed, the state of the family in all industrialized nations—is a controversial issue, much debated by social commentators, politicians, and academic experts. A half-century ago, few observers seemed concerned. But since the 1960s, family life has changed greatly. Many users of this reader will have experienced these changes in their own families. Divorce is much more common; at current rates, about one in two marriages would end in divorce. Young adults are postponing marriage and often living with a partner prior to marrying. A growing number of children—currently about 30 percent—are born to mothers who are not married. And many more married women are working outside the home.

These trends aren't necessarily negative. For instance, married women's jobs often give them an improved sense of self-worth and boost their families' standards of living. Young adults may use living with a partner as a way to search for a more compatible spouse. In fact, some commentators hail the decline of the 1950s middle-class family in which wives usually stayed home and specialized in housework and child care. These breadwinner-homemaker families, it is alleged, restricted the lives of women and supported the continuation of conflict-ridden marriages that may have been worse for children than a parental divorce would have been. But the overall tone of the public commentary on family change has been one of concern.

In order to develop your own views on the subject, you first need to know the basic facts about changes in American families over the past several decades. In the first selection, demographers Sara McLanahan and Lynne Casper present an overview of four important demographic trends: the weakening role of marriage in family life, the increase in divorce, the changes in births to married and unmarried women, and the movement of mothers into the work force. All of these aspects have changed dramatically over the past half-century. The numbers and charts they present are the starting point for interpreting the controversy and debate that will be found in subsequent chapters. McLanahan and Casper also make the point that the United States has not been alone in experiencing these trends; rather, most Western European nations have experienced similar trends. This information suggests that the

causes of the changes in family life are probably not narrow events in the United States but rather broad changes in the economy and in culture in the industrialized nations of Europe and North America.

What do most Americans think about these changes in family life? The conventional wisdom is that they are sharply divided into the conservative and liberal camps of a "culture war," with the former urging a return to the single-earner nuclear family that predominated in the mid-20th-century and the latter defending the more diverse arrangements of our day. Sociologist Alan Wolfe set out to learn whether middle-class, suburban Americans share a common world view. For his "Middle Class Morality Project," he and his assistants traveled to eight suburbs around the nation and spoke to residents—including African-Americans and Hispanics who had moved out of the city. In his book, *One Nation, After All,* he reports that many of the people he talked to were deeply ambivalent about the changes, lamenting the passage of the "traditional" family but supporting the rights of individuals to choose other forms of family life. To be sure, Wolfe's study is not a random sample nor, despite a few numbers, a statistical one. Rather, it is a more informal, intuitive look at people in eight communities that represent some, but by no means, all of American middle-class society. Read it as a source of insight rather than as scientific proof.

READING 1-1

Growing Diversity and Inequality in the American Family

Sara McLanahan and Lynne Casper

Dramatic changes have occurred in the American family over the last four decades, as reflected in popular television shows. In the 1950s the typical family portrayed in most situation comedies consisted of a breadwinner-husband, a homemaker-wife, and two or more children. This "ideal" American family was depicted in such shows as "Father Knows Best," "Leave It to Beaver," and "Ozzie and Harriet." The Nelson family—Ozzie, Harriet, and their children David and Ricky—has recently received renewed fame in the press and has come to symbolize the typical American family of the 1950s. It now serves as a baseline against which to compare current family arrangements. Although the Nelson family was more of an ideal than a reality for many people, even in the 1950s, Americans did share a common image of what a family should look like and how parents and children should behave, which reinforced the importance of the family and strengthened the institution of marriage. No such common understanding exists today, for better or for worse.

Since the 1950s, families like the Nelsons have become increasingly rare, as young men and women have delayed marriage and childbearing, as wives and mothers have entered the labor force in greater numbers, and as divorce rates have soared. This does not mean that families are becoming extinct, but rather that they are taking on different forms. Along with the decline of families like the Nelsons, new types of families and living arrangements have become more dominant, including childless couples with two careers, one-parent families, and cohabiting couples with children. Nonfamily households—defined as households containing a single individual or people unrelated by either blood or marriage—have also become more prominent. Today, successful television shows, such as "thirtysomething," "LA Law," and "Murphy Brown," feature divorced and never-married characters, employed mothers, and single mothers (defined as divorced, separated, never-married, or widowed mothers raising children alone), reflecting the diversity of families that is characteristic of the 1990s. These "new families" indicate that Americans have more choices today than they did in the past about how to organize their private lives and intimate relationships (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991).

At the same time, greater diversity has meant greater economic inequality across households. Some of the new, nontraditional families, such as dual-earner couples, are doing very well; others, such as single-mother families, are doing poorly. In 1991, the typical dual-earner couple with children had an annual income of $46,629.[1] In contrast, the typical mother-only family had an income of only $13,012. Families like that of Ozzie and Harriet (working-husband, homemaker-wife, children) had an annual income of $33,961. The increase in single-mother families and dual-earner families during the 1970s and 1980s has led to increased inequality across households and to a feminization of poverty, with more and more of the poor being concentrated in families headed by unmarried mothers (Pearce, 1978). In 1960, 24 percent of poor families were headed by unmarried mothers; in 1990, the number was 53 percent. The diversity of families has also exacerbated racial and ethnic differences in economic well-being. Whereas the fastest growing white families are dual-earner families, a relatively

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Sara McLanahan and Lynne Casper, "Growing Diversity and Inequality in the American Family" in Reynolds Farley, ed., *State of the Union: America in the 1990s, Volume 2: Social Trends,* pp. 1–16.

advantaged group, the fastest growing black families are mother-only families, a relatively disadvantaged group.

Many people are concerned about what these changes mean for children and what government can (and should) do to help families and children adjust to change. Since women are spending more of their time working outside the home, their children are spending less time with them; and mothers are confronted with conflicting demands from the workplace and family. Despite the problems encountered by working mothers, today very few people believe that mothers' employment per se is harmful to children, except perhaps during the first year of life. And yet we used to think so, 40 years ago. Today, the policy debate about mothers' employment is primarily a debate over what constitutes quality childcare, how to make quality care accessible and affordable to families, and how to design parental leave policies to suit the needs of parents as well as employers (Da Vanzo, Rahman, & Wadhwa, 1994).

The public is much less sanguine about the future implications of marital disruption and single motherhood. When mothers work outside the home, children may spend less time with their parents, but the family also gains income. In contrast, when parents live in separate households, children experience a loss of parental time (typically the father's time) as well as a loss of income. Because the total loss of resources is substantial for children who live with single mothers, many people fear that this type of arrangement may be harmful to children. And indeed the empirical evidence supports their fears. Children who grow up with only one of their parents are less successful in adulthood, on average, than children who grow up with both parents. They are more likely to drop out of high school, to become teenage and single mothers, and to have trouble finding and keeping a steady job in young adulthood, even after adjusting for differences in parents' socioeconomic background (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). About half of the disadvantages associated with single parenthood are due to lower incomes. Most of the rest are due to too little parental involvement and supervision and too much residential mobility. Given the public concern about the growth as well as the consequences of single motherhood, the policy debate in this area is not just about how to help children adapt to family change, it is about how to reverse change. We use the word single in this chapter to refer to adults who are not currently married and living with a spouse. Many of these people were married in the past or will be in the future.

The idea that government should try to prevent single-mother families from forming is a hotly contested issue. It raises questions about the causes underlying the decline in marriage and the causes of single motherhood. Those who want government to limit the growth of single-mother families often claim that government is responsible for the growth of such families. They argue that the rise in welfare benefits during the sixties and early seventies sent the message to young men and women that if they had children and did not marry, the government would take care of the mothers and children. Thus, fewer couples married and more young women became single mothers. Charles Murray, a leading proponent of this view, argues that the only way to save families is to eliminate welfare entirely, forcing poor young women either to stop having children or to place their newborns with adoption agencies (Murray, 1984, 1993).

At the other end of the political spectrum are those who believe that the decline in marriage is due to the decline in job opportunities for poor young men—jobs that would enable them to support a family (Wilson & Neckerman, 1986). They argue that young men with the least education and the fewest skills were the hardest hit during the 1970s and 1980s by the loss of jobs from central cities and the restructuring of the workplaces that occurred. With no visible means of support and with bleak prospects for the future, these young men are not seen as po-

tential marriage partners by the young women they are dating, even when the women become pregnant. Nor are the parents of the girl likely to try to arrange a "shotgun marriage" as they might have done in the 1950s, when the likelihood of finding steady work was much greater for low-skilled men. In short, marriage has declined because the pool of marriageable men has declined.

These two theories tell us something about why marriage might have declined among women from disadvantaged backgrounds during the past few decades, but they do not explain why the trend also occurred among young women from more advantaged backgrounds. To fully understand what has happened to American families, we must look farther than welfare benefits and the loss of jobs for low-skilled men.

Another theory with considerable merit is that marriage declined because women became more economically independent; increased education, job opportunities, and hourly wages during the past three decades reduced the gains from marriage and gave women an alternative source of income outside marriage (Becker, 1981). This allowed them to be more selective in choosing mates and it encouraged them to leave bad marriages. The women's independence theory incorporates the two previous arguments. Welfare benefits, like earnings, provide less-educated women with an alternative source of income outside marriage. Similarly, the decline in good jobs for low-skilled men makes marriage less attractive for these women, especially if the level of welfare benefits remains constant.

Finally, some people blame the decline in marriage and increase in single motherhood on changes in American culture (Bellah et al., 1985; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988). The cultural argument has many different facets. Some people see the sexual revolution in the 1960s as the principal engine of change. Changes in attitudes about premarital sex made it easier for young men and women to live together without being married and destigmatized single motherhood. And improved and accessible birth control methods and more widely available abortions facilitated intimate relationships without the responsibilities and commitments they once entailed.

Other analysts focus on the shift in values that has taken place throughout the twentieth century, especially after 1960. The shift in values from those favoring family commitment and self-sacrifice to those favoring individual growth and personal freedom has given rise to the so-called "me generation." Many of the characters in recent television shows, such as "Northern Exposure," "Seinfeld," and "thirtysomething," show young people struggling with the tension arising from making permanent commitments to others while remaining true to their own ideals and personal growth.

The debate over the causes of family change has important policy implications. If welfare benefits are the major reason for the decline in marriage and the increase in single motherhood, reducing benefits or redesigning welfare incentives to be more marriage-neutral may have merit. If the decline in men's opportunities, the increase in women's employment opportunities, or value changes are the problem, eliminating welfare is not likely to have much effect on marriage, and it will definitely make poor children worse off economically. Ironically, if the increase in women's economic independence is a major cause of single motherhood, then encouraging welfare mothers to enter the labor force, which is a principal thrust of recent efforts to reform welfare, may actually exacerbate the trend in single motherhood, since it will increase the economic independence of women in the long run.

In this chapter we examine the changes that have made the prototypical Ozzie and Harriet family increasingly rare in the latter half of the 20th century. We begin by focusing on four major demographic trends: the decline in marriage, the rise in marital disruption, the changes in marital and nonmarital childbearing, and the

increase in mothers' labor force participation. Certain of these trends, such as the rising divorce rate, are extensions of long-term patterns that have been reshaping family life since the turn of the century. Others, such as the employment of mothers with young children, are more recent and represent a break with the past.

We also examine demographic changes in other Western industrialized countries in order to place the U.S. experience in the broadest possible context. The cross-national comparisons help us think about the causes underlying the changes in the American family, and how we might minimize the cost of change for children. Too often, commentators and political pundits in the United States speak as though the changes affecting the American family were unique to this country. As noted above, the growth of single-mother families is often attributed to the increase in welfare benefits during the 1960s and early 1970s. As we shall see, however, the United States is not unique with respect to divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and women's employment. Nor is there a simple 1:1 relationship between the prevalence of single parenthood and the level of welfare benefits across different countries. Many European countries, such as France, Great Britain, and Sweden, are much more generous toward single mothers, and yet they have less single motherhood than we do.

In the second part of the chapter, we examine family diversity and its implications for the economic well-being of American women. Census data allow us to compare the characteristics of several different types of "new families," including single-mother families, single-father families, and cohabiting couples. They also allow us to examine the prevalence of different work and family roles among American women and the standard of living commensurate with these statuses. As in the previous section, we compare the U.S. case with other industrialized countries. We find that married-couple families in which the wife is employed have the lowest poverty rates in nearly all the countries examined, whereas families headed by nonemployed single mothers have the highest poverty rates. We also find that single mothers are much worse off in the United States, relative to other families with children, than in most other countries.

The final part of the chapter directly addresses the question of why marriage has declined during the past two decades. Here we present new evidence based on our own empirical analysis of marriage market characteristics in different metropolitan areas of the United States. We find that marriage is more common in areas where women's employment opportunities and earnings are low, where welfare benefits are low, and where men's employment opportunities and earnings are high. We also find that increases in women's employment opportunities can account for a good deal of the decline in marriage between 1970 and 1990 among white women but not among blacks. Our results do not support the argument that increases in welfare benefits or declines in men's employment opportunities have led to large declines in marriage.

FOUR DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Four demographic changes have profoundly affected the American family in the past 40 years: the decline in marriage, the increase in marital instability, the change in marital and nonmarital fertility, and the increase in mothers' labor force participation. To understand what has happened to the family, we must understand what has happened in each of these domains (Da Vanzo & Rahman, 1994).

The Delay in Marriage

Throughout the 1950s, the typical young woman married when she was about 20 years old and the typical young man when he was about 23. This situation prevailed throughout the 1950s. By 1990, however, the median age at first marriage—the age at which half of the population has married for the first time—was 24 for women and 26 for men. In just three