

Public and Private Families

A R E A D E R



ANDREW J. CHERLIN

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FAMILIES: A READER

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PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FAMILIES

PREFACE

This volume consists of 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* (1996, McGraw-Hill). Nevertheless, it can be used with other textbooks or no textbook at all. 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, "There 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 (David Chambers's discussion of the lack of legal recognition of step-parents), 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 book excerpts from the large literature on family history: Stephanie Coontz's look at family diversity in past times, 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 United States. And I have included some interdisciplinary work, such as an analysis of a recent, national survey on sexual behavior.

In 1996, Congress enacted a welfare reform bill that constitutes the greatest change in social policy toward poor families since the Great Depression. It is too recent to be analyzed in existing textbooks. I have therefore written a background article especially for this volume that I hope will help students understand the implications of the new law for low-income families. In addition, I have included Mark Rank's report on his intensive studies of the family lives of welfare recipients, from *Living on the Edge: The Realities of Welfare in America*.

The metaphor of public and private families 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. 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 is 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 would like to thank several people who reviewed the preliminary draft of this reader: Sandra L. Caron, University of Maine; Patricia McManus, Indiana University; Joan Toms Olson, Mary Washington College; William W. Pendleton, Emory University; Stacy Rogers, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Linda Stephens, Clemson University; and Stephen Wieting, University of Iowa.

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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. Author of the McGraw-Hill textbook *Public and Private Families: An Introduction* (1996), 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 the 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.

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 divorce 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*; and “Recent Changes in American Fertility, Marriage, and Divorce,” in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political*

and Social Science. 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*, the *CBS Evening News*, National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, and other news programs and documentaries.

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INTRODUCTION

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.

Confronted with these great changes, some observers long for the good old days of large, close, extended families. But Stephanie Coontz argues in an excerpt from her book, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, that the good old days are a myth. Coontz makes the point that there was great diversity in the family lives of Americans in previous centuries. Moreover, death disrupted families nearly as much as divorce does now. Emotional

closeness and romantic love between spouses weren't seen as very important. Perhaps Coontz occasionally goes too far in her zeal at stripping away the myths of the past. She is more optimistic about the state of contemporary marriage than are most other commentators. The demographic trends chronicled by McLanahan and Casper suggest an erosion in the role of marriage. More than at any other time in the nation's history, people are living with partners outside of marriage, divorcing their spouses, and having children outside of marriages. Even without romanticizing the past, these are major changes.

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

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. Copyright © 1996 by Russell Sage Foundation. Reprinted with the permission of the publishers.

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 potential marriage partners by the young women they are dating, even when the women become