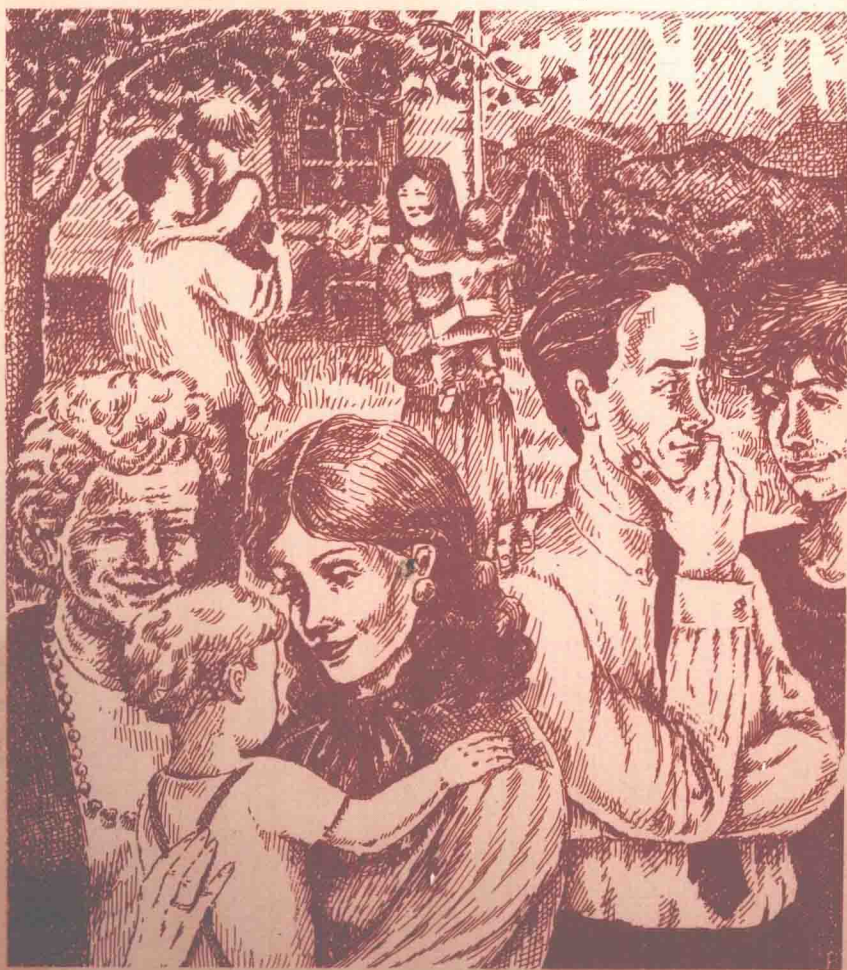


# *The Myth of Family Decline*

Understanding Families in a  
World of Rapid Social Change



*Edward L. Rain*

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Edward L. Kain



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*The childhood of Mildred Nelson Kain and Victor Oscar Kain was shaped in the crucible of the Great Depression. Their young adulthood was molded by the second World War. Like many American couples, they had several children during the post-war baby boom. I was the youngest of those children. My perspective on life was shaped by theirs. This book is dedicated, with love and appreciation, to my parents.*

# Acknowledgments

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These people and many others have added to the strengths of this book. The responsibility for any weaknesses must remain my own. I thank them all, along with the many other colleagues, students, and friends who are a part of these pages.

## About the Author

**Edward L. Kain** received his B. A. in sociology and religion in 1976 from Alma College in Alma, Michigan. He completed his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1980. After beginning his academic career at Cornell University, he moved on to Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas where he is now an associate professor in the Department of Sociology. Dr. Kain is active in both the American Sociological Association (ASA) and the National Council on Family Relations. He serves on the editorial board of *Teaching Sociology* and is active in the Teaching Resources Group of the ASA. His research focuses on various aspects of social change and family life, with special emphasis on mortality trends. He is currently researching a book on the social impact of the HIV epidemic.



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**Part I**

**What Is the Best  
Way to Think  
About Family Change?**



# 1

## Prophets of Doom

**A**lmost daily, the headlines scream out yet another message that seems to indicate the family is on its deathbed in modern America. News magazines include stories on unprecedented rates of divorce, frightening reports of elderly Americans (seemingly forgotten by their family and society) being mistreated and neglected in nursing homes, and children being raised in single-parent families. The evening news talks about the majority of mothers working outside the home and of social movements supporting concerns as diverse as abortion rights and homosexual freedom. All these issues seem to signal that the basic institution in our society is threatened.

These challenges to the family have been met sometimes with dismay and sometimes with resignation, but in recent years they have also been met with counterattacks led by groups rallying around a battle cry for a return to the traditional family of the past. It appears that the war has begun. Those fighting in the trenches, however, are not at all certain of the outcome because there are many separate battles being waged at once.

This book is an attempt to step back from the apparent battleground of the closing decades of the twentieth century and evaluate the health of the family in the United States from a broader perspective—one that places current family life within the context of social change. Families do not exist in a vacuum, and we cannot begin to understand the quality of family life in the last decade of the twentieth century unless it is placed within historical and social context. What were American families like in the past? How have families been changing over the past century? What types of family patterns can we expect to see over the next several decades?

Unfortunately, the task of placing family life within a broader context is an assignment with many dangers. Because most of us were born into families and have spent most of our lives in the context of our own family structures, we all have some sense that we are knowledgeable on the topic

of family life. It is somewhat difficult to step back from our personal experience and evaluate the institution of the family with objectivity.

To understand families in the present or the future, we must understand families in the past. We cannot possibly assess the health of family life as we near the twenty-first century unless we place it within a broader span of historical time. As individuals and as a culture, however, Americans tend not to think of contemporary issues in historical perspective. This is true not only of popular accounts of family life, but also of the work done by many family scholars as well (a point to be discussed more in chapter 2). Like Rip Van Winkle who awoke to a world vastly different than that to which he was accustomed, we often look upon contemporary family life with dismay. Our world is changing rapidly, and many of these changes seem to challenge our very conception of family life. We long for a return to traditional values and the traditional family structure that we remember from the past.

This dismay at the current state of affairs and desire to return to the past is what I have come to label the "myth of family decline." Our image of families in the past is often based on myth rather than reality. For the past three decades, work by historians, demographers, and sociologists has begun to paint a new picture of the history of family life. Using innovative methods to explore church, family, and civil records, these researchers have discovered patterns of family experience that stand in stark contrast to the images many of us have held about the traditional family.<sup>1</sup>

As an illustration of this point, take the following quiz, which asks a few basic questions about family life both in the past and the present.

---

### **A Brief Quiz on Families and Change in the United States**

1. Which of the following years had the highest divorce rate in the United States?
  - A) 1935
  - B) 1945
  - C) 1955
  - D) 1965
2. T     F     Because of the rapid rise in the divorce rate, children are much more likely to live in a single-parent household than they were a century ago.
3. T     F     In the past, most families lived in three-generation households. It is now much less likely for this to occur, since grandparents are put into nursing homes instead of cared for in the home.
4. What proportion of women worked outside the home in 1900?
  - A) one in fifty
  - B) one in twenty
  - C) one in ten
  - D) one in five

5. T F Over the past one hundred years, fewer and fewer people have been getting married, so the number of single people has been increasing.
6. T F The high incidence of female-headed households among black families today can be traced to the impact of slavery on family life as well as to the disruption of two-parent, nuclear families among black Americans during the time of Emancipation.
7. What is the most common household type in the United States today?
  - A) a single-parent family with one adult wage earner
  - B) a two-parent family with one adult male wage earner
  - C) a two-parent family with two adult wage earners
8. T F Very few families live below the poverty line (as officially defined by the federal government) for extended periods of time (five consecutive years).

Before I give the results to this quiz, there are two things to keep in mind: First, don't be upset if you did not score very well. I have given this quiz to hundreds of students and professionals, and the typical result is that scores are extremely low. In fact, when I gave the quiz at a conference attended only by professionals who specialize in working with and teaching about family life, most of the questions were answered incorrectly by a majority of the group! Rather than being a statement about the quality of professionals in the area of family, this reflects the tendency of our culture to ignore the past and to base opinions about our basic social institutions (family, education, economy, religion, and government) on a cultural image that often is greatly at variance with reality.

Second, I want to suggest that each of these questions illustrates a basic point that will be discussed in this book. Now, for the answers to the quiz:

**Question 1. Which of the following years had the highest divorce rate in the United States?:** A) 1935; B) 1945; C) 1955; D) 1965. The correct answer to this question is B. No, that is not a typographical error in the book; the correct answer is 1945. Most people are very surprised that the correct answer is not 1965. "Isn't it true that divorce rates have been rising throughout the century?", they ask. This response clearly illustrates one of the first central points of this book: *We seldom have a historical understanding of family life or of the impact of specific historical events on the functioning of families.* The divorce rates in this country reached a historical peak at the end of World War II. Several explanations have been given for this: First, it is likely that a number of couples married hurriedly after relatively short courtships when the man was about to be



sent off to war. Second, the stress of separation may have resulted in the development of other relationships for both the women at home and the men who were away. Third, both spouses may have changed considerably during the war years. The man who returned home from the battlefields may not have been the boy who left, and the woman at home may not have been the same girl whom he had courted and married. While it is true that divorce rates in this country consistently increased from 1950 through 1980, they did not match the peak of 1945 until the mid-1970s.<sup>2</sup> (See chapter 4 for further discussion about divorce and how it has been changing in this country.)

**Question 2. (True or False) Because of the rapid rise in the divorce rate, children are much more likely to live in a single-parent household than they were a century ago.** This statement is false. Most people do not realize the profound effects on family life that have resulted from rapid declines in the mortality rate since the turn of the century. While divorce has increased throughout this century, the drastic decline in the number of parents who die at an early age (leaving widows, widowers, and orphans behind) more than offsets the increase in single-parent households that results from marital disruption caused by divorce.<sup>3</sup> This question reflects a second basic principle of the book: *If an adequate understanding of family change is to be developed, we must look not only at data from the past but also at the relationships between different types of changes affecting family life.* (See chapter 4 for an elaboration of this idea.)

**Question 3. (True or False) In the past, most families lived in three-generation households. It is now much less likely for this to occur, since grandparents are put into nursing homes instead of cared for in the home.** This statement is false for a number of reasons. One of the most important findings of the new family history has been a challenge to the idea that the rise of the modern nuclear family (the family including only two parents and their children) is linked to industrialization and is a result of that process. Peter Laslett<sup>4</sup> and others have demonstrated that, at least in England, the nuclear family was the dominant form of household long before the advent of industrialization. Laslett makes a strong argument for the continuity of family life over time, and suggests that in a number of ways the family in the “world we have lost” was much as it is today. This illustrates a third central point of the book: *When we have actual data about family life in the past, it often presents a picture of family life that is drastically different from the image that is common in popular mythology.*

In fairness, I must say that Laslett’s work is a reaction to most contemporary theories of the family, which ignore the importance of his-