

April 6, 2004

Parenting: Problems

Read: Luker: Why Do they Do It? Skolnick
Kaplan: Black Teenage Mothers and Their Mothers: The Impact of Adolescent
Childbearing on Daughters' Relations with Mothers
Arditti: Rethinking Relationships Between Divorced Mothers and Their Children:
Capitalizing on Family Strengths

I. Review of contemporary problems in parenting

- A. Family life: how it has changed for the worst, according to those who see the 50s as ideal?
 - 1. Divorce, much more common—about one in two: broad trend of a weakening role of marriage in family life
 - 2. Young adults postponing marriage, some of them cohabiting
 - 3. A growing number of children, currently about 30%—are born to mothers who are not married
 - a. The articles you read by Mannis (single mothers by choice), Luker and Kaplan address this issue
 - 4. Many more mothers of small children are working outside the home
 - 5. These trends characterize the industrialized west, not just the USA
 - a. The exception is teenage pregnancy: the article by Schalet said that rates were 9 times higher in the US than in the Netherlands
 - 6. In fact, the most unusual and distinctive decade for family life was the 1950s
 - a. Our model, the “Cleaver” family, does not represent the traditional family in history
 - b. Marked the turnaround for many trends of the century:
 - 1) Birth rates rose
 - 2) Age of marriage was at a century-long low
 - 3) Rising divorce rate slowed

- a) Remember, the highest rate was in the 1940s
- 4) Largest proportion of children (slightly more than half) were raised in the “breadwinner-homemaker” family

II. Hypothesized causes of problems in parenting

A. Economic shifts: income

1. 1950s and 1960s American economy was strong, wages were rising
 - a. Average income of full-time workers, adjusted for inflation, doubled
 - b. High-school graduates could expect to find decent factory jobs
 - 1) Many could anticipate owning their own homes
 - c. Most generations of Americans have expected to do better economically than their parents’ generation; this is no longer true
2. But 1973 on oil price crisis and subsequent adjustments resulted in stagnation of wages ever since
 - a. Manufacturing moved overseas
 - 1) A political issue in the upcoming election is the continued trend of outsourcing—not just manufacturing
 - b. Automation—computers, etc., replaced workers with machines
3. How were families affected?
 - a. Young men with poor job prospects (unemployed, or very low wages) are reluctant to marry
 - 1) In some sectors young women see difficulty of finding a reliable earner for a husband, they are less likely to wait until marriage to have children
 - 2) The Arditti article about Black adolescent mothers; most of the fathers disappear, their job prospects probably playing a role in their decision-making

- 3) For the most part families of poor pregnant adolescents do *not* encourage them to marry if the father is going to be a burden rather than an asset
 - b. Marriages face more strain because of inadequate incomes
 - 1) Most experts agree that many middle-class and all working-class families need 2 incomes to get by
- B. Economic shifts: work patterns
- 1. The postmodern family: the movement of married women into the working force produces changes in the division of labor at home—ideology and practice
 - a. We have seen in many articles that men do not take up the slack even though their participation increased and amount of work decreased
 - b. 1985 women still did 70% of the work
 - 2. Possible explanations?
 - a. One is that men still earn more
 - 1) And so the exchange is equal when this is taken into account
 - 2) Obviously it's more complicated than such a formula indicates
 - b. A lag in cultural values is another explanation
 - c. Another explanation is what Coontz calls “situated social power”¹
 - 1) Unequal access to economic resources, political power, social status—and men and women have different options
 - 2) Research shows that men are happiest in a relationship when they don't have to do much housework and yet meals get made, clothes get ironed, the house looks good.

¹ Coontz, Stephanie, 1997. *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*. New York: Basic: 18.

- 3) Divorce has more serious implications for women, who have fewer options—so even if the husband says doesn't care if beds go unmade, she might be unconsciously assessing the risk and finding it too high, so she maintains high standards and resents her husband

C. Violence

1. Will be discussed Thursday April 15
2. Coontz and others illustrate interlinkage
 - a. Her figures on economic hardship and increasing rates of violence
3. Feminist movement stressed violence against women
 - a. But the Violence Against Women Act was passed only in 1994
 - 1) Murder of Nicole Simpson
4. Violence against children
 - a. Some evidence of a rise in rates recently
 - b. Often appears in the media in stories about monster mothers, who are always single
 - c. But intact families are by no means immune

D. Divorce and Remarriage

1. Co-parental divorce (parents share parenting 50-50): problems
 - a. Where are the children to live?
 - 1) Vast majority of cases maternal physical custody: figures on fathers with custody 10%-14%
 - b. Divorce brings sharp economic slide for women; given the above, serious effects on children
 - 1) Fathers' incomes increase by 10% following divorce
 - c. Remarriage is statistically the only way for women to stop economic decline

- d. Some studies of the variable rates of continued emotional and financial support by fathers show correlations with role of father in the family prior to divorce
 - 1) The “breadwinner-only” type of father is most likely to desert children; the co-parent most likely to maintain the relationship
 - e. Yet Lawson and Thompson say that “Ironically, more emotionally involved [Black] fathers before their divorces visit their children less often”²
2. Unfortunately, the divorce process often spoken of as a matter of “winning” and “losing”
 - a. If you “lost,” then you disengaged from children
 - b. Oftentimes custody is the prize that’s fought over
 3. Remarriage
 - a. At current rates, about 1/3 of all adults can expect to marry, divorce, and remarry during their lifetimes
 - b. Stepfamilies have always been with us (Cinderella)
 - 1) You will probably be surprised at the numerous gaps in knowledge about stepparenting pointed out by Mason et al. in the readings for Thursday
 - c. Complications: links to other households
 - 1) Children going back and forth
 - d. Ex-spouses play a larger role in remarried parents’ lives when there are children
 - 1) Tugs and pulls of stepchildren, biological children, and former spouses
 - e. Society is definitely not set up for this
 - 1) Troubling legal issues

² Lawson and Thompson, p. 410

- 2) Biological parents are favored regardless of record of caretaking
- 3) What happens when one parent leaves the state because of job relocation, or to be with new spouse?

E. Shifts in government policy

1. Areas of family life affected by government policies?
 - a. Exercise: list all of the ways government policies affect our lives today that weren't present at the beginning of the 20th century
2. Coontz argues that economic burdens resulting from economic shifts, structural adjustment, outsourcing, "flexibility," downsizing, are shifted back onto families
 - a. Increasing number of non-unionized contract workers
 - b. NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1994 resulted in 75,000 U.S. workers losing jobs
 - c. More and more part-time workers without benefits are hired
 - d. Deregulation
 - e. Real wages are actually far below increases in productivity
 - 1) Proportion of full-time workers in poverty continues to grow
 - f. Between 1980 and 1994 the Fortune 500 companies shed 4.4 million jobs, while sales increased 1.4 times and assets increased 2.3 times
 - 1) For a while, average CEO of a large corporation received a compensation package of more than 3.7 million per year
 - g. Which means we're shortchanging our children
3. To what degree do we see the nation's children as "our children?"
 - a. When there are 500,000 homeless children at any one time
 - b. When 4 million children go hungry at some point of each month

4. Numerous ways government policies affect families:
 - a. Education
 - 1) “Other people’s children” bond issues
 - b. Housing
 - c. Job training
 - 1) Jobs to apply for once one is trained
 - d. Welfare Reform: AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children)
 - 1) Based on idea that individuals are responsible for contracting their own welfare
 - a) They are at fault if they fail
 - b) If their children suffer, it’s just too bad
 - 2) The government spends more on military bands than on AFDC

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21A.230J / WGS.456J The Contemporary American Family
Spring 2004

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.