

inated policymaking in the Reagan and Bush administrations, the enormous diversity of opinion that continues to exist in such matters was easily obscured. The reason was not so much the nature of conservative traditionalism itself, but rather the fact that those outside the traditionalist camp were reluctant to disagree openly, lest they strengthen the advantage that the conservative traditionalists already had. At the time, many observers assumed that when the reign of conservative traditionalism ended, the unified coalition that had emerged in opposition to it would remain to formulate a coherent policy. But in trying to imagine what that policy might be, they tended to envision something in accordance with their own world view.

In fact, given the enduring range of values and beliefs among those outside the conservative traditionalist camp, it was always unlikely that a new policy could actually be fashioned without a struggle. But if it is no longer the case that one point of view holds bureaucratic sway in excess of its popular support, a real debate — with the possibility of a balanced resolution — is possible at last.

The Norplant controversy in Baltimore, then, is a harbinger of both bad and good news: Finding a solution to the problem of teenage childbearing will not be easy or pleasant, but there now exists an opportunity to forge a policy based on open and honest debate of the issues.

— Nan Marie Astone

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## Feminism, Race, and the Politics of Family Values

When social critics lament the state of the American family, they sometimes assert that the feminist movement has done much to undermine the values that once held families together and protected the interests of children. With its emphasis on individual fulfillment and its denigration of women's traditional role, feminism, these critics say, has ruptured patterns of family life and caregiving for which there are, in the nature of things, no substitute.

As it is usually formulated, this argument includes two invariable features: a fixed image of what constitutes a family, and an equally static view of what femi-

nism is. In her essay "Dan Quayle Was Right" in the April issue of the *Atlantic*, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead provides a characteristic example. With regard to family structure, she writes, "The social arrangement that has proved most successful in ensuring the physical survival and promoting the social development of the child is the family unit of the biological mother and father," and to judge from the context this claim is presumed to hold true "across time and across cultures." As for feminism, Ms. Whitehead represents it exclusively as a movement which sought greater equality for women by steering them into "the world of work

outside the home," where their attainment of economic independence was expected to diminish the importance of marriage. "In Gloria Steinem's memorable words," Ms. Whitehead writes, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." With this gesture, contemporary feminism, in all its diversity, is reduced to a bumper sticker, just as family structure has been reduced to a single archetypal form dictated by biology.

### Feminist Thinking About the Family

In reality, however, the past two decades of feminist thought present a complex and nuanced picture of the efforts of men, women, and children to find personal satisfaction and fulfill social obligations *within* families. And though there is no single feminist perspective on families, it is fair to argue that feminism has been at the forefront of efforts to clarify our understanding of family life. Feminist thinkers have demonstrated that family forms are socially and historically constructed, not monolithic universals that exist for all times and all peoples, and that the social and legal arrangements governing family life are not the inevitable result of unambiguous differences between women and men. They have drawn attention to the contradictions within families between love and power; between values of community and nurturance, on the one hand, and self-realization on the other. And they have challenged society to move beyond the sense of individualism and community as polar opposites in order to create a synthesis in which both sets of needs are met.

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Feminist thinkers and activists have redefined housework *as* work, and introduced such concepts as "caring work" to describe many of the unpaid, and often unrecognized, tasks that women perform for the benefit of others. More recently, and largely in response to the feminist scholarship of women of color, they have begun to link gender to issues of race and ethnicity. One of the crucial lessons of what we call "multiracial feminism" is that people *experience* the family differently, depending on their social class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation, and from their experiences they construct different definitions of what families are. These definitions are

not merely the result of cultural or ethnic variations. Structural patterns differ among families because social and economic conditions produce and may even require diverse family arrangements. Although the family nurtures ethnic culture, families are not the product of ethnic culture alone.

The family that conservative writers uphold as "legitimate" is no less a product of social structure and culture; it emerged as a result of social and economic conditions that are no longer operative for most Americans, and that never were operative for many poor Americans and people of color. From the original settlement of the American colonies through the mid-twentieth century, families of European descent often received economic and social supports to establish and maintain families. Following World War II, as Stephanie Coontz points out, the G.I. Bill, the National Defense Education Act, the expansion of the Federal Housing Authority and Veterans Administration loan subsidy programs, and government funding of new highways provided the means through which middle-class whites were able to achieve the stable suburban family lives that became the ideal against which all other families were judged. These kinds of support have rarely been available for people of color, and until quite recently were actively denied them through various forms of housing and job discrimination. A careful reading of family history makes it clear that family structure is the result of far more than individual choice and publicly asserted morality.

### Women and "Economic Independence"

It is true that feminist critiques of the family in the 1970s characterized it as the primary site of the oppression of women, and argued in support of women's increased participation in the labor force as a means of attaining some measure of economic autonomy. But this analysis never applied to women of color, or working-class women generally, because it falsely universalized the experience of white middle-class women who had the option of staying home to raise their children. More recently, feminist thought has begun to create a more complex understanding of the relationship between women and work, taking account of differences and diversities among women.

For example, the increased participation of women in the workforce varies significantly by race. African-American women have had a long history of high workforce participation rates, and these rates, along with those of Japanese-American women, increased only modestly after World War II. Much greater rates of increase occurred among white, Latina, Chinese, and Filipina women even before the advent of the feminist movement in the 1970s.

For white women, increasing participation in the labor force correlates with the rising divorce rate

(though it does not follow that the first has caused the second). For women of color, however, the same pattern does not hold. Their poverty as single mothers, moreover, is not a result of divorce but of a combination of factors, including job markets which are segregated by race and sex and which tend to offer them low wages and seasonal work.

Participation in the workforce has provided some women with increased influence over family decisions and improved their chances for supporting their families on their own. But this is more properly called *economic leverage* than economic independence. The extent of such influence, moreover, is directly related to women's relative contributions to family income, with those women who contribute the largest percentages having the greatest influence. Interestingly, this is true both of women in low-income families and of those in high-income, dual-career families. In general, however, claims about women and work must be modified with regard to the interactions of race and economic class. Feminists do argue that women should have the economic means to choose to leave a bad marriage, and that only the woman can define what constitutes a bad marriage.

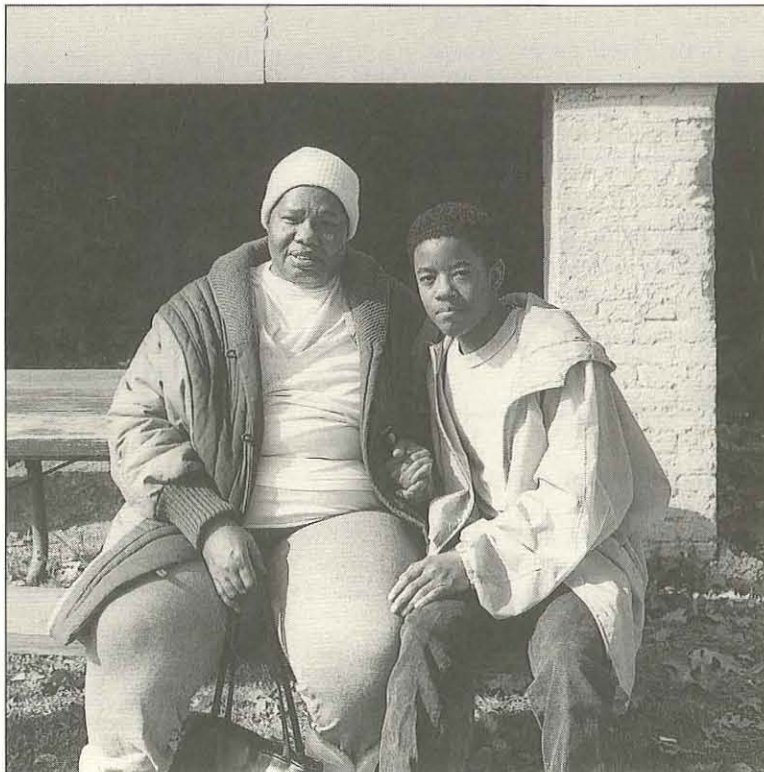
Women's family roles combine with their race and class to influence their position in the labor force. As a group, women are concentrated in a limited number of occupational categories; they earn less than two-thirds of what white males earn, and their opportunities for

advancement are limited. Women of color fare worse than white women in wages and opportunities for mobility.

Obviously, the disadvantages that women experience in the workplace have a direct impact on the economic well-being of their families. As Rosalind Petchesky writes, "only around 10 percent of all American households consist of the 'normative' model: husband-wife families with two or more children at home and the husband as the sole breadwinner." Among the 90 percent of families who do not conform to the normative model, there are many who depend on the financial contribution of a working mother. For them, the relative lack of job training opportunities for women, and the persistence of employment and wage discrimination, constitute a threat to family survival.

In her *Atlantic* essay, Ms. Whitehead acknowledges only a portion of this economic reality. She writes, "With the loss of high-paying jobs for high school graduates and the disappearance of good jobs from many inner-city neighborhoods, the ability of young men to provide for a family has been declining. Improving job opportunities for young men would enhance their ability and presumably their willingness to form lasting marriages."

Now no sensible observer would deny the importance of creating job opportunities for young men in inner-city neighborhoods. William Julius Wilson has



long argued that much of the decline in marriage rates in the inner city can be traced to the dearth of African-American men capable of supporting families. But as Barrie Thorne has written, because policies to restore men as family providers are "rooted in a conventional understanding of gender and family arrangements," they invariably ignore "the urgent training, employment, wage equity, and day-care needs of African-American women." They also ignore the fact that, as one University of Chicago study found, the higher the earnings potential of a woman in the inner city, the more likely *she* is to marry. Unfortunately, the current "progressive" family policy agenda lacks any commitment to improving opportunities for young inner-city women, even though research suggests that many of these women might decide against early childbearing and single motherhood if other life possibilities — including, but not restricted to, marriage — were visibly open to them.

### A History of Diversity

In saying that family structure is a result of economic and social factors as well as ethnic culture, we acknowledge a wide diversity of family forms among people of color. For example, two-parent families have been important in the lives and history of African-Americans. From the late 19th century up until the 1970s, the two-parent nuclear family was the predominant family form in the black community. Stories of former slaves who had their marriages registered with the Freedmen's Bureaus during Reconstruction have long been cited as evidence against the popular view that slavery destroyed any possibility of stable family life.

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But the family networks binding African-Americans have always included other forms as well. Many scholars have pointed to the importance of extended families and of "fictive kin" — people treated like family even though not related by blood or marriage — among people of color. These family relationships have been studied both as ethnic cultural traditions and as responses to economic and social structures that denied support to the formation of families.

For many years, unfortunately, social policies have rewarded and promoted primarily suburban nuclear

families, while extended families were viewed as a historical relic, a hindrance to the development of a "fit" between the family and the needs and demands of an urban industrial society. Latinos, among whom extended family networks play a crucial role in integrating family and community, were criticized for being too "familistic" — their lack of social progress was blamed on family values which kept them tied to family rather than economic advancement. African-American families were criticized as "matriarchal" because of the strong role grandmothers played in extended family networks. Today, grandmothers are younger and have their own unmet needs and goals. Young women living in low-income communities see fewer opportunities for themselves; their neighborhoods are far more dangerous, and they may not have the kinds of extended family and community support that were available two decades ago.

Nonetheless, as Andrew Cherlin writes,

[W]e must accept that extended kin networks will remain the central family unit for many African Americans in the near future, even if economic conditions improve. African Americans have a cultural tradition of relying more heavily on extended families, and they live in a society in which marriage is everywhere on the decline. Although racial differences could lessen substantially, no feasible government policy will result in black families' approaching the two-parent ideal. Nor need this occur; despite their limitations, networks of single parents often provide for and nurture their members as well as nuclear families could. In any case, it is inevitable that a large proportion of poor black children will grow up in single-parent households in the next decade or two.

Given this reality, a crusade to restore "the two-parent ideal" can offer very little to the children who are now in greatest need. In fact, this crusade may be undermining support for the very initiatives that are necessary to remedy the adverse social and economic conditions that these children face.

### Despairing of Solutions

Consider, in this light, a discussion of school failure in the Progressive Policy Institute's *Putting Children First* (1992). Authors Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and William A. Galston, gathering evidence for the "psychological and educational consequences of family disintegration," cite a recent study of American education by John Chubb and Terry Moe. This study, they correctly say, found that merely spending more money on education would not yield higher levels of school achievement. Galston and Kamarck then write:

As we begin a new decade, the next response to the continuing crisis in educational achievement is a frenzy of educational restructuring. But if we continue to neglect the crisis of the American family we will undercut current efforts at educa-

tional reform. Chubb and Moe have made an important contribution to our understanding of these problems by proving that the organization of a school has an independent effect on student achievement. Nevertheless, even they admit that school organization is not as important in predicting achievement as is the family background of the student.

John Chubb, however, does not share this assessment of the implications of his research. When he and his colleague compared family background and school quality as factors influencing educational achievement, they found them to be "about roughly equal." "It's a bit of a strange use of our study to say that family is more important," he remarked in a recent interview. "In fact, we were saying a little bit of the opposite. We were arguing that schools really do matter, and one should be optimistic about the difference you can make with a good school, even if family factors aren't in your favor."

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*Some analysts persist in seeing the family as the source of social disarray, instead of giving due weight to how social conditions affect the structure and viability of families.*

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Mr. Chubb also points out that the impact of family background is not primarily a function of family structure: "The factors that we found to be the most consistently strong predictors of a child's achievement had less to do with the structure of the family per se and more to do with the parents' educational and professional development." Although he would argue that, "all things being equal, having two parents at home is better educationally," he adds: "But you shouldn't exaggerate the payoff. . . . If you have two parents who don't value education, then the impact of the intact family is not going to be quite what you might expect. If you have only one parent who cares tremendously, you're going to probably see a greater impact there."

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead has also used a partial reading of social science data in order to cast doubt on the efficacy of policies other than those directed specifically at restoring the two-parent family. "If we fail to come to terms with the relationship between family structure and declining child well-being," she wrote in "Dan Quayle Was Right," "then it will be increasingly difficult to improve children's life prospects, no matter how many new programs the federal government funds. Nor will we be able to make progress in bettering school performance or reducing crime or improving the quality of the nation's future work force — all domestic problems closely connected to family

breakup." Unfortunately, in order to bolster her case, Ms. Whitehead overstates the harm that children generally experience as a result of divorce, as eleven prominent sociologists observed in a joint letter that the *Atlantic* has so far declined to publish:

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's article in the April issue exaggerated divorce's negative effects. As social scientists who have published research findings on the effects of divorce on children — some of which were cited in the article — we reach a different conclusion. To be sure, divorce is initially painful and distressing for nearly all children. Even after the initial phase, a minority of children experience lasting problems. But the evidence also suggests that divorce does not cause serious long-term problems for the large majority of children who experience it.

In other words, Ms. Whitehead gets only one side of the story right. Yes, having your parents divorce does increase substantially the risk that you won't graduate from high school or that you'll have a child out of wedlock. The increased risk is a legitimate cause for public concern, and we share that concern. Yet Ms. Whitehead goes further: she implies erroneously that because the risk of having problems increases, most children of divorce will have lasting problems. That's not so. Most will graduate from high school, won't have a child out of wedlock, and won't, indeed, suffer any of the serious long-term difficulties that Ms. Whitehead chronicles. . . .

The problem is not just that these analysts overstate the case against single parenthood. The core issue is that they persist in seeing the family as the source of social disarray, instead of giving due weight to how social conditions affect the structure and viability of families. A multiracial feminist perspective shifts the analytical focus from family structure to the broad issue of social support for families. In this context, family structure — whether families are headed by one parent, two, or a collection of "fictive kin" — becomes an intervening variable in the complex interrelationship between economic and social conditions, ethnic culture, and child well-being.

It may be encouraging that in the recent "Communitarian Position Paper on the Family," the seven authors observe that

The family . . . is not an isolated unit, but rather an institution nested in a wider social context that either sustains or weakens it. . . . We do believe that greater effort in areas such as prenatal care, women and infant nutrition, and early childhood health and education would yield significant returns. We also believe that an effective pro-family agenda must be backed by resources.

But these beliefs are not yet reflected in the typical rhetoric, or the major policy proposals, of the progressive family advocates.

### Children of Mine

Last spring The Washington Post published a story about a black grandmother in southeast Washington,

D.C., who operates a community center known as "Children of Mine." Hannah Hawkins's center is a place where sixty children each day receive help with their homework, play basketball, share a meal donated by a community kitchen or a local church, and sit together "at rap" to say whatever is on their minds. They also listen to Ms. Hawkins's earnest counsel: her admonitions not to pick fights, her praise for high marks in school.

"I have a mother and a pretend mother," one five-year-old at the center proudly announced to the reporter. A friend of Ms. Hawkins remarked, "Hannah just did naturally what native Washingtonians used to do for their neighbors' kids when there was a crisis — open your doors and take them in. You did it without thinking because it needed to be done. The only difference with Hannah's case was that her mission just kept growing." The *Post* reporter observed that "With no salary, no public funds, little self-consciousness and a lot of religion, Hawkins and a cadre of volunteers have been fiercely working their emotional alchemy on a group that includes some of the most hard-to-reach kids in the city." But the story also noted that Ms. Hawkins had been in Superior Court trying to hold onto the once-abandoned house she had reclaimed for her community center. "Where will we go around this neighborhood?" she asked herself in the reporter's presence, confronting the possibility that she might lose the case. "I just don't know." In a society that actually put children first, her program would not be in such desperate straits.

As her neighbor's comments suggest, Hannah Hawkins is not only a remarkable individual. She also belongs to what feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins calls the "othermother" tradition in the black community. As Ms. Collins describes it, this tradition has at least two functions; it allows "African-American women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families," and it provides these women with a motive for political activism. Along with other observers, Ms. Collins acknowledges that "the entire community structure of bloodmothers and othermothers is under assault in many inner-city neighborhoods, where the very fabric of African-American community life is being eroded by illegal drugs" and various kinds of social disinvestment from the lives of the poor. And yet, she writes, "even in the most troubled communities, remnants of the othermother tradition endure."

The example of extended families and othermothers, reflecting what Ms. Collins calls "a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability," has some-

thing to offer the larger society. It encourages us to view children as the concern of the whole community, not just the private property of two parents. It asks us to step outside the false security of suburban enclaves, gentrified neighborhoods, and racial and economic privilege and understand that our common future is dependent on the success and stability of children in the barrios, ghettos and reservations, as well as on that of the children of the elite. It lends urgency to the task of formulating a social policy that focuses on providing good schools, nutrition, health care, shelter, safety and security for all children and honest work at a living wage for their parents. From the perspective of multiracial feminism, only a policy that actively pursues these objectives can hope to improve the lives and prospects of American families.

— Bonnie Thornton Dill,  
Maxine Baca Zinn,  
and Sandra Patton

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