

# PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

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## MAKING CONNECTIONS: INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES

A few weeks ago, the premiere issue of a magazine entitled *Family Life* appeared on the newsstands. One of its founders, Jann Wenner, is also the publisher of *Rolling Stone*. Not surprisingly, this fact has led some observers to describe the new magazine as part of a larger cultural shift, and it's clear that those involved in the project see it this way as well. "Now that family life is central to our own lives and to the country," writes Nancy Evans, the publication's editor-in-chief, "it seemed high time that there be an intelligent, sophisticated magazine that addresses the issues." But the point here is not just that the editor can take the centrality of her subject for granted. Ms. Evans believes that she and her readers are linked by a common experience, and when she refers to it, the tone of her writing is both resolute and unexpectedly elegiac. *Family Life*, she tells us, grew out of the need to "celebrate and nurture these few years called childhood." "Many of us," she adds, "have discovered that raising a family has not taken us off track (as we feared) but has put us right back on the track we may have lost." At such moments, she is not merely pointing to the demographic reality that the baby boomers now have children of their own. She is also testifying, at least provisionally, to a moral reorientation.

One goal of this *Report* is to expand the frame of reference within which our discussions of family life take place. Specifically, we wish to explore an evolving network of human connections, not only within families, but also between individuals, families, and their

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes this quarterly newsletter. Articles are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Institute or its sponsors.

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communities. The title of this issue assumes that these connections are crucial to human experience, the formulation of social policy, and philosophical reflection.

In the pages that follow, a legal scholar and a philosopher examine the law emerging in response to the new reproductive technologies, suggesting that social and affective ties are frequently becoming more critical than biological ones in determining parental rights and obligations. A sociologist asks what has made teenage childbearing the focus of a public policy debate, directing special attention to the controversy over making long-term contraceptives available to young women in school-based clinics. Three feminist scholars observe how social and economic conditions, as well as ethnic and cultural differences, influence family structure, and in doing so they articulate a feminist ethos of social responsibility that draws on the traditions and historical experiences of people of color. A policy analyst examines specific measures that would assist working parents, single or coupled, in providing for their children and in preparing them for a radically changing economy and social world.

In the light of these essays, what becomes interesting about a venture such as *Family Life* is not the colorful advertisements for \$60 sweat pants or \$90 soccer gloves, or the article recommending animal entertainers for your child's birthday party. ("Animal acts are not cheap," the writer concedes. "We're still gulping

from the bill. But it's amazing what you'll do for your kids.") Flipping past all that, readers may look instead at the magazine's "Washington Report Card," which gives the number for the Children's Defense Fund legislative hotline and enlists support for a proposal that would grant all families a \$1,000-per-child tax credit. They may read about a company that has made a fortune marketing all-cotton children's clothing while paying 50 percent of its employees' child care costs. They may notice Robert Coles advising parents to set their children an example of altruistic service, followed by a description of five ways to help provide needy students with clothing, school supplies, and scholarships for after-school programs.

To a skeptical eye, these may be only sidelights. But we might also interpret them as efforts to express and cultivate a social and moral awareness that nostalgia cannot teach.

The Institute wishes to thank the Maryland Humanities Council for supporting the publication of this *Report*. In November, the Council is sponsoring a one-day conference on the theme "Family: Myth and Reality"; a detailed announcement of this event appears on page 23. The photographs in this issue are the work of Michela S. Caudill, artist-in-residence at the Woodbourne Center in Baltimore. They are part of a larger body of photographs which will be exhibited at Loyola College in the fall of 1994.



## Defining Families: The Impact of Reproductive Technology

Over the past few decades, scientists and physicians have developed various forms of assisted reproduction — technologies that make possible the creation of children outside of the normal reproductive process. These technologies have become so familiar that we easily forget how revolutionary they once seemed. It has been just fifteen years since the first “test-tube baby” was born in Great Britain, giving rise to dramatic speculations about the human future; by now, the practice of in vitro fertilization has resulted in the births of many thousands of children. Reproductive technology has enabled many previously infertile couples to play a biological role in the creation of their families. And scientists continue to refine their ability to extract, preserve, transfer, manipulate, and combine male and female gametes by means other than coital reproduction.

### A Child Essentially One's Own

If we ask how it is that reproductive technologies have come to be so widely accepted, and even routine, one answer may be that a fairly conventional vision of the family lay behind them from the start. The motive for developing these technologies was to help create nuclear families — families composed of a husband, a wife, and their biological children. It is a sign of the cultural power of this family ideal that so many couples remain determined to achieve it, even in the face of the expense and uncertainty associated with some of the newer technologies. These couples are not only seeking the love and companionship that children can provide, or the opportunity to nurture and protect. Many of them presumably share a deeper, more elusive desire as well, one that they believe can only be satisfied by some form of biological involvement in the creation of a child. That is to say, they wish to have children that are *essentially their own*.

Until the advent of reproductive technologies, the fulfillment of this wish was possible only for couples able to conceive and gestate without assistance. Reproductive technologies have extended the possibility to those who are unable to procreate naturally. Yet the impact of these technologies may exceed, and to

some extent confound, this limited goal. This is because the technologies do not merely enable couples previously diagnosed as infertile to reproduce. They also allow third parties to become biologically involved in the making of a child; and as a result, they raise questions about what it actually means for a child to be essentially one's own. For instance, in the case of artificial insemination, a wife may be impregnated not with her husband's sperm, but with that of a donor. With in vitro fertilization, the ovum may be donated, fertilized in the laboratory, and then implanted in the woman's uterus. And in surrogacy arrangements, a third party may become biologically involved in one of two ways. If a couple's own gametes are fertilized in vitro, and the resulting embryo is implanted in the womb of another woman, that woman bears the child as a *gestational surrogate*. If, however, the surrogate is inseminated artificially with the husband's sperm, she conceives and bears the child for the couple as a *genetic surrogate*.

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Thus, as Victor Weedn has observed, reproductive technologies have made it possible for a child to have as many as five parents: a genetic father, a rearing father, a genetic mother, a gestational mother, and a rearing mother. Of course, most of the families resulting from the use of these technologies will not be quite so elaborate. Nonetheless, it remains true that where there used to be only two ways of obtaining children — through natural parenting or through adoption — there are now intermediate possibilities.

Consider the example of surrogacy. A surrogacy arrangement may allow a man in an infertile marriage

to become a biological father; from one point of view, it gives him a chance at something like natural parenting. But since the birth mother in a surrogacy contract is relinquishing the child she has borne, the arrangement is, from another point of view, like an adoption. This is all the more true in genetic surrogacy, where the surrogate has contributed the ovum as well as the gestational site, and the man's wife has no biological tie to the child she will help to raise.

Inevitably, these new forms of biological involvement, and the social arrangements that accompany them, have raised important legal and ethical questions. We address two of them: first, the extent to which these technologies are subject to the regulatory regime of adoption or the laissez-faire regime of unassisted "natural" reproduction; second, the extent to which these technologies can be used in creating and legitimizing alternative families.

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### The Importance of Biological Ties

In our society, biological ties have been crucial to our characterization of the family and to the legal status that families enjoy. Fertile couples are free to have as many children as they wish, whatever their capacities as nurturers and providers, while adoptive parents are carefully screened and subject to elaborate regulations. Although in theory the rights of natural parents may be restricted in order to promote the best interests of the child, it is widely assumed that the child's best interests lie in being raised by the natural parents. Judges rarely inquire into such matters except when something goes wrong: when the parents' claims conflict, as in divorce and custody disputes (where the mother was, until recently, presumed the better parent), or when there are indications of abuse or neglect. Proposals for licensing natural parents meet with much the same resistance as proposals for deregulating adoption.

In opening up a range of reproductive options between natural parenting and adoption, the new reproductive technologies may force us to confront the disparity in the legal and social treatment of the two standard ways of obtaining children. We must determine whether the privileged status of natural parenting will be extended to assisted reproduction, or whether assisted reproduction will be heavily regulat-

ed, as adoption is, in "the best interests of the child." In deciding how to regulate new reproductive technologies, we will be deciding the importance of biological involvement and genetic contribution in conferring the authority to raise children.

Thus far, the claims of the new technologies to be assisting natural reproduction rather than offering new forms of adoption appear to have prevailed in this country. As Elizabeth Bartholet points out, there is almost no protective regulation in the United States to govern reproductive technologies. The legal response has not been univocal, however; it varies with technology, gender, marital status, and sexual orientation. If we look only at the example of artificial insemination by a donor, it might appear that a laissez-faire regime has prevailed. Courts and state legislatures in this country generally permit a woman, married or not, to conceive a child with a stranger's semen, without the stranger acquiring any parental claims, as long as procedures securing his anonymity are respected. The donor is free to contract away any rights flowing from his genetic connection to the child, and he is bound by his signature despite any subsequent misgivings he may have.

Accordingly, a semen donor has never succeeded in establishing his parental rights against an inseminated mother who followed the statutory procedure for donor insemination. As of 1990, statutes in 31 states had made the donor insemination recipient and her consenting spouse the legal parents of any resulting children, and 18 of these statutes explicitly provide that the sperm donor is not the legal father. The purpose of such laws is to guarantee that the family created by donor insemination looks like one created through natural parenting; the child is to have only one father. Still, Professor Bartholet argues that the laws governing parental rights in donor insemination cases actually constitute an absence of regulation, since they ensure "that the state will not engage in the parental screening or other inquiries that it insists on in the traditional adoption context."

Couples desiring children have far less freedom to treat a stranger's womb, in contrast to a stranger's semen, as a reproductive aid. In many states a biological mother cannot be compelled to relinquish her parental rights to the child she has borne, even if she contracted with a couple to bear the child as a surrogate. Specifically, 11 of the 17 states that have laws addressing surrogacy have banned enforcement of commercial surrogacy contracts, and one — Michigan — has criminalized participation in a surrogacy arrangement. Florida prohibits commercial surrogacy but allows surrogacy without payment, with a 7-day postnatal withdrawal option (a provision similar to that found in all state adoption statutes). Only two states, Arkansas and New Hampshire, explicitly per-

mit surrogacy and provide that the married couple who enter into an appropriate surrogacy contract thereby become the child's legal parents.

It may not be surprising that the parental rights of an anonymous sperm donor do not have the same force as those of a birth mother in a surrogacy arrangement. Under Anglo-American family law, paternity has long been defined not only on the basis of a man's biological relationship to a child, but also according to his social relationship with its mother. For example, the law has established a strong presumption of paternity in the husband, and until recently American courts allowed a husband to "legitimate" his wife's child by adoption without the knowledge or consent of its biological father. In contrast, the law traditionally gives great weight to the parental rights of a birth mother.

There is a second element that helps account for the disparate legal reception accorded to donor insemination and surrogacy, and that is the difference between donating gametes and providing gestation. In the well-known *Baby M* case (1988), the New Jersey Supreme Court held that even if this difference lay only "in the time it takes to provide sperm for artificial insemination and the time invested in a nine-month

pregnancy," that alone would "justify automatically divesting the sperm donor of his parental rights without automatically divesting a surrogate mother." Though in fact the court awarded Baby M to the couple who had contracted for her, it refused to treat the case as a contractual dispute; instead, it voided the contract, conducted a careful inquiry into the child's best interests, and gave the surrogate the visitation rights that the trial court had denied her. In deciding such cases, the courts have clearly been influenced by the fact that surrogacy looks far more like adoption than does donor insemination. What ultimately changes hands is not a vial of semen but a live baby, taken from a birth mother biologically and sometimes emotionally prepared to nurture it. Nonetheless, the time, effort, risk, and attachment involved in gestation may not keep it from being treated as a contractual service when it is not conjoined with a genetic link. In the California case *Johnson v. Calvert*, a court awarded exclusive custody to the genetic parents of a child born to a gestational surrogate, terminating the surrogate's parental rights, and at least two other courts have issued declaratory orders that make the genetic mother the legal mother of a child carried by a gestational surrogate.



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The *Johnson* court made its decision on two grounds that reflect the ambivalence and complexity of the legal response to the new reproductive technologies. First, the court emphasized the genetic link between the couple and the child, citing twin studies purporting to show the contribution of genetics to intelligence and other important human traits. As Rochelle Cooper Dreyfuss and Dorothy Nelkin argue, the court defined the child as a "genetic entity" and assumed that "shared genes are the crucial basis of human relationships." At the same time, in cutting off the surrogate's visitation rights, the court also emphasized that it wished to establish a family with the normal complement of parents, on the grounds that "two parents are better than three."

These two rationales — asserting the importance of genetic connection, on the one hand, and that of the two-parent family, on the other — converged in *Johnson v. Calvert*, with the result that the parental rights of the contracting couple were upheld. But the two rationales diverge in cases of assisted reproduction where a third "parent" makes a genetic contribution to the child. And the "two-parent" rationale comes under challenge when the two prospective parents desiring children are not a husband and wife, or even a boyfriend and girlfriend, but a gay or lesbian couple.

### Alternative Families

Legal efforts to limit the use of the new reproductive technologies to married, or at least heterosexual couples, have been made even in countries whose official policy favors "reproductive autonomy." For example, the French Senate is considering legislation that would restrict the use of in vitro fertilization and other fertility techniques to infertile heterosexual couples who are of reproductive age. By limiting the use of reproductive technology to heterosexual couples (though not necessarily married ones), the French law would prevent single women, and gay or lesbian couples, from receiving medical assistance in procreation. The obvious goal of such restrictions is to discourage the creation of alternatives to the nuclear family.

While such legal restrictions are rare in this country — only Connecticut and Oklahoma explicitly prohibit the use of donor insemination by unmarried women — 21 states require that artificial insemination be performed by a physician, and the medical establishment has generally served as the gatekeeper of reproductive technology, restricting its use to people it perceives to be fit parents — specifically, married couples.

Despite such laws, this medical monopoly has started breaking down. Largely because of the ease and safety of self-administration, donor insemination without the assistance of a physician is increasingly being employed by people who wish to raise children out-

side of traditional marriage. In most cases, the alternative families created in this way have not been hampered by the absence of legal recognition, since the adults forming them have long relied on informal norms to regulate their lives. However, in cases where disputes have emerged over parental rights, the courts have often taken the opportunity to try to provide the child with as close an approximation to a nuclear family as circumstances allow. One result of this tendency is that the rights of biological fathers — which have little force in cases of donor insemination involving a married woman — have more often been affirmed.

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For example, in *C.M. v. C.C.*, a New Jersey court held that a donor who had been dating a woman at the time she inseminated herself was entitled to "the privileges of fatherhood." The court based its decision on "a policy favoring the requirement that the child be provided with a father as well as a mother." Other courts may not have relied so explicitly on that policy, but they have generally recognized the parental rights of a semen donor who was acquainted with the recipient and agreed to inseminate her.

A further legal question confronting some alternative families is whether the lesbian partner of a woman who has received donor insemination can claim parental rights to the resulting child. Until recently, most courts were reluctant to grant such rights, but this may now be changing. According to the Lesbian and Gay Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, lesbians seeking to become the adoptive parents of their partners' children have won at the trial court level in "probably hundreds of cases," most of them on the West Coast. In Vermont and Massachusetts, two states in which lesbian partners have been refused permission to adopt a partner's child, appellate courts will be reviewing the cases and issuing rulings later this year. Two other states, Florida and New Hampshire, have laws specifically prohibiting adoptions by partners of the same sex, but the Florida law is currently under legal challenge.

Meanwhile, alternative families have begun to win formal recognition from employers, insurers, and government agencies, and they will continue to receive

judicial assistance in defending their arrangements against the claims of third parties and in resolving their own disputes about those arrangements.

### Two Parents, Not Three

The extension of legal recognition to alternative families has sometimes been criticized on the grounds that such recognition erodes the privileged status of the nuclear family. But the challenge posed by new family structures may not lie primarily in the legal realm at all. For example, such structures may offer a model of child-rearing that is a more modest, and therefore more acceptable, alternative to the nuclear family than the collective child-rearing arrangements of communes or kibbutzim. Critics of such arrangements have worried that the child of many is the child of none; they cite the findings of psychologists suggesting that children do better having a stable, intimate relationship with at least one adult.

Yet there is no reason to think that a cooperative child-rearing arrangement among three or four adults would preclude the child's attaining stable intimacy with one or all of them. Now that reproductive technology makes it possible for more than two adults to have a biological role in the creation of a child, why shouldn't social arrangements develop that acknowledge this reality? In custody cases involving surrogacy, most courts have assumed that the child could only belong to one conventional family or the other, rather than to an extended family created by the surrogacy arrangement. Although this assumption may reflect the way the options have been framed by the contending parties, it does not necessarily reflect the best interests of the child.

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Other observers are concerned that even the modest proliferation of parents in "uncontested" surrogacies will lead to confusion for children and adults alike. The procedures established to maintain the anonymity of genetic parents in adoption and donor insemination are attempts to avoid such confusion — to ensure that the legal parents are the child's only parents. But confusion does not necessarily lead to conflict; and although it is certainly destructive for a child to be subject to protracted custody battles, there are no grounds for assuming that such conflicts will be more

frequent or harsh with three- or four-parent families than with two-parent families. For all we know, role ambiguity may actually ease conflict. The participants in a surrogacy arrangement sometimes struggle for custody, but at other times they evolve warm, if unconventional, relationships. In some successful surrogacies, the participants describe themselves as forming an extended family, in which the surrogate becomes an aunt or godmother to the children she gestates and her own children become their cousins. If it is indeed true that such arrangements threaten the monopoly of the nuclear family, that is a problem for its defenders, not for the children brought up in alternative families.

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To a large extent, the defense of the nuclear family as an institution rests on two claims: that it is the most effective means of satisfying the emotional and practical needs of children, and that it can best accommodate the desire of adults to have children. Yet in practice, the nuclear family can fall short in two typical ways. In some cases, children would do better being raised in families other than their own; in other cases, adults would do better having children other than their own as companions, protégés, or heirs. Moreover, the two justifications for the nuclear family sometimes conflict: the child's interests may be ill-served by giving the biological parents the satisfaction of raising that child. Assessing whether the nuclear family makes good on its claims is a matter of fact, interpretation, and value; it depends on how well children and adults fare under its auspices, on what alternatives we compare it to, and on how we understand the needs and desires that it is supposed to satisfy.

### Avoiding Extremes

It is true that the greater reproductive freedom made possible by technology has its dark side. In states where surrogacy has been outlawed, critics have successfully argued that it too easily leads to the exploitation of less affluent women, who are induced to sell not only their gestational services, but also their as-yet-uncreated children. There are concerns that in vitro fertilization, by separating conception from the rest of the gestational process, may strengthen a growing trend toward viewing the pregnant woman and her

fetus as separate entities, often with adverse interests. And although the development of reproductive technology was spurred by the desire of infertile couples for children, there are fears that children procured through this technology will be wanted for the wrong reasons, as market goods whose characteristics may be selected in advance, rather than as uniquely valuable persons.

In order to guard against such harms, we may decide that reproductive technology ought to be more strictly regulated. The challenge we face is to avoid the two extremes described by Will Kymlicka: on the one hand, "a Hobbesian world of markets in bodies and services," and, on the other, "an Orwellian world of parental licenses and judicial restrictions." If we respond successfully, the role of reproductive technologies in facilitating alternative parenting arrangements may prove to be healthy and liberating. The flourishing of families will depend on the capacity of our legal and social order to accommodate new forms of parenting, and on the capacity of the nuclear family to survive and flourish without a legal monopoly.

— David Wasserman and Robert Wachbroit

This article is adapted and condensed from an essay that first appeared in *Clinics in Laboratory Medicine*, vol. 12, no. 3 (September 1992). Sources: Victor N. Weedn, "Reproductive Patients," in American College of Legal Medicine, *Legal Medicine: Legal Dynamics of Medical Encounters* (C.V. Mosby, 1990); Ferdinand Schoeman, "Rights of Children, Rights of Parents, and the Moral Basis of the Family," *Ethics*, vol. 91, no. 6 (1980); H. LaFollette, "Licensing Parents," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 182 (1980); Elizabeth Bartholet, *Family Bonds: Adoption and the Politics of Parenting* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993); US Congress OTA BA-358, *Infertility: Medical and Social Choices* (1988); "Comment: The Unwed Father's Rights in Adoption Proceedings," *Albany Law Review*, vol. 40, no. 543 (1976); Rochelle Cooper Dreyfuss and Dorothy Nelkin, "The Jurisprudence of Genetics," *Vanderbilt Law Review*, vol. 45, no. 2 (1992); Robin Herman, "France Defines the Ethics of High-Tech Medicine," *The Washington Post* (April 20, 1993); D. Wikler and N.J. Wikler, "Turkey-Baster Babies: The Demedicalization of Artificial Insemination," *Milbank Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 1 (1991); "Gay Adoption Cases Go to Appeals Courts," *The New York Times* (April 18, 1993); Ethics Committee of the American Fertility Society, "Ethical Considerations in the New Reproductive Technologies," *Fertility and Sterility*, supplement (1990); J. Goldstein, A. Freud, and A. Solnit, *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child* (The Free Press, 1973); L. Andrews, *Between Strangers* (Harper & Row, 1989); M. Field, *Surrogate Motherhood: The Legal and Human Issues* (Harvard University Press, 1988); Barbara Katz-Rothman, *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society* (W.W. Norton, 1989); Will Kymlicka, "Rethinking the Family," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 77 (1991).

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## Thinking About Teenage Childbearing

Last December, the Baltimore city health department announced a pilot program designed to make the long-term contraceptive Norplant available to sexually active teenage women who could not otherwise afford it. The new program, funded by a private foundation, began in a public high school for pregnant teenagers and young mothers, and during the first four months, nine students received the contraceptive implant. In August the city health commissioner proposed extending the program to five additional school-based clinics which already offer an array of birth control methods.

Consisting of five small capsules inserted into the inner side of the upper forearm, Norplant achieves its

contraceptive effect by releasing a hormone (levonorgestrel) gradually over a period of five years. Reported side effects include weight gain and irregular bleeding. Because Norplant contains no estrogen, it does not present many of the health risks associated with oral contraceptives. If a woman decides to have the capsules removed, fertility is restored more quickly than with other hormonal methods. According to the Population Council, which sponsored the research leading to the development of Norplant, 1.8 million women have used the method worldwide, and clinical trials involving 30,000 volunteers have been conducted in 44 countries.

Baltimore is the first city in the nation to provide

Norplant in school-based clinics, and its program has become the center of a national debate focusing renewed attention on the problem of teenage childbearing. During this debate, people with a wide variety of political views and policy orientations have made themselves heard, longtime alliances have splintered apart, and new coalitions have sprung up between disparate constituencies. In this context, it is worth asking why teenage childbearing is such a persistent source of controversy, and how the Norplant debate in Baltimore illuminates the issues that surround it.

### Interpreting the Numbers

Since 1960, the *teenage birth rate* in the United States — that is, the percentage of teenage women who bear a child — has declined substantially, although there has been a slight reversal in this downward trend since 1985. This means that even as concern about teenage childbearing has intensified during the past three decades, the probability that a teenage woman from virtually any racial, ethnic, or economic category will become a mother has actually diminished. How can we account for the discrepancy between levels of concern and the actual demographic trend?

We might start by noting that there are other indicators, apart from the teenage birth rate, to suggest how large a problem teenage childbearing might be. For example, the teenagers of the 1960s and early 70s were members of the baby boom generation, and this group was so enormous in size that, even with a smaller percentage becoming mothers, the *absolute number of babies born to teenagers* went up. This made teenage childbearing more visible than it had been before. At the same time, birth rates among older women were declining, and doing so more quickly than the birth rates among teenagers. As a result, births to teenagers began to comprise a larger *percentage of total babies born* than in the past. The pregnancy rate for teenagers has also risen steadily over the past three decades — a trend almost wholly attributable to the sharp increase in sexual activity among young people. The main reason that the teenage birth rate has not kept pace with the rising pregnancy rate is that teenagers as a group are having a great many abortions. According to one estimate, the proportion of teenage pregnancies ended by abortion increased from 20 percent in 1972 to 40 percent in 1987.

Even as the teenage birth rate has proven to be an incomplete measure of the problem of teenage childbearing, the nature and meaning of the problem have changed over these past thirty years. In the first place, teenage childbearing is increasingly concentrated among the inner-city poor. The various indicators I have cited are often twice as high among urban residents as they are in the population as a whole.

Moreover, the likelihood that a teenage mother is also a single mother has increased dramatically over this same period. Non-marital childbearing is a major factor contributing to the increase in the number of people — especially children — who live in households headed by unmarried women, and who for this reason are more likely to live in poverty. Moreover, the educational deficits which have always been associated with teenage childbearing have become more troubling than they once were, in view of increased expectations that women will enter the labor force to support or help support their families.

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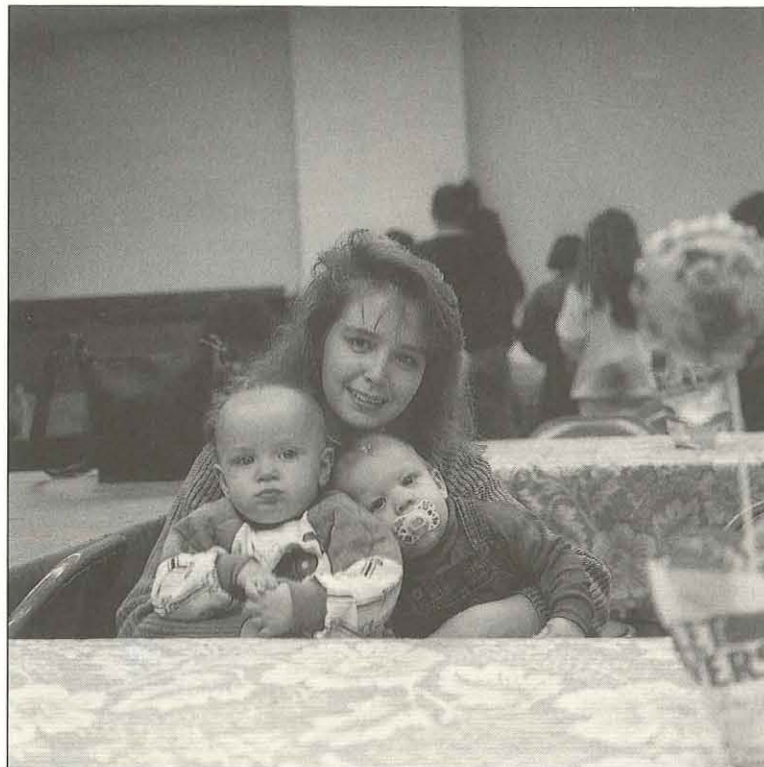
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As teenage childbearing has come to be seen as a social problem, various schools of thought have arisen among those who are trying to find a solution. Although many individuals may not feel entirely at home in any one of these schools, and will blend ideas from one or more of them in devising their own response, we may nonetheless identify four different perspectives, which I will present as characteristic of conservative traditionalists, public health practitioners, critics of welfare dependency, and liberal activists. Each school is distinguished by a particular world view concerning the fundamental nature of human beings and what motivates their behavior. These world views lead their proponents to adopt widely divergent ideas about why teenagers have babies and what, if anything, to do about it.

### Conservative Traditionalists

Conservative traditionalists believe that teenage childbearing is part of a larger failure, both moral and cultural, that has undermined the stability of American society. They link the increase in sexual activity among teenagers to the prevalence of sexually explicit images in the popular media; they lament the breakdown of once-powerful taboos against sexual relationships outside of marriage; and they argue that the bonds of sexual attraction have taken precedence over those between parent and child and among kin and community. In addition, conservative traditionalists criticize what they see as the family's loss of privacy and autonomy before the encroachments of the state. Thus they oppose sex education in public



schools, arguing that their right to transmit moral values to their children is undermined by programs that aspire to be "morally neutral."

Many conservative traditionalists wish to establish a social and moral consensus about the formation and conduct of families, so that religious teachings, the civil code, and the content of school curricula would be virtually identical with respect to ideas about family life. For others, the primary goal is to return to an earlier understanding of gender roles. If only implicitly, they favor a return to the "separate spheres" for men and women that were characteristic of Victorian society, and they object to changes in social and familial arrangements that they associate with contemporary feminism. Kristin Luker, in her study of pro-life and pro-choice activists, points out that many women among the conservative traditionalists are homemakers who feel that their roles *as* homemakers, as community builders, and especially as mothers have been unfairly denigrated since the 1960s; their decision not to seek self-validation in the workplace has made them marginal figures in the new society.

The social criticism offered by the conservative traditionalists has won a hearing even among people who do not share their religious views or their ideological commitments. In particular, a growing number of "outsiders" to this perspective concede that the pursuit of individual happiness as a primary goal has weakened the sense of commitment necessary to sustain families. But these outsiders are also quick to point out that conservative traditionalists are not in the forefront of efforts to enact legal and political reforms on behalf of children and troubled families. Wary of

government intervention, and intent upon maintaining conventional lines of authority within the family, conservative traditionalists tend to favor the rights of parents over the rights of children, or indeed to deny that children *have* rights. This is one reason why the issue of parental notification emerges in debates such as the one in Baltimore over the provision of Norplant. Instead of making family planning services more widely available, conservative traditionalists favor drastic restrictions on access to contraception and the outlawing of abortion.

### Public Health Practitioners

The world view of public health practitioners begins with faith in the possibility of human flourishing, and with optimism about each person's ability to overcome both harmful inclinations and unfavorable circumstances. This world view developed at the turn of the century when, fresh from the technological achievements of the Industrial Revolution, Western nations set out to reduce the incidence of infectious disease among their citizens. Remarkable success in this endeavor led to new efforts on two fronts: an attempt to repeat the performance in less developed countries, where infectious disease was still the major cause of death; and a new focus on degenerative diseases, which had taken the place of infectious diseases as the major killers in Europe and among the overseas European populations.

It was in connection with this second effort that public health practitioners first began to think seriously about behavioral change as a component of public

health intervention. This idea was all the more influential by mid-century, when the focus of public health efforts had expanded yet again to include not only the prevention of degenerative diseases (such as lung cancer), but also a reduction in other causes of death and injury (such as automobile accidents). Such efforts required interventions that would motivate people to adjust their *habitual* behavior — to quit smoking, for example, or to use seat belts. The techniques adopted for this purpose included mass communications and one-on-one interactions targeted to members of specific groups. Public health practitioners had, of course, advocated and promoted behavioral change in the past. But in former times, the needed changes were more often made at the collective level — as when a town decided to install a proper drainage system— or else they involved isolated actions, such as having a child vaccinated, rather than habitual ones.

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*Public health practitioners assume that people often act against their own best interest — out of habit, ignorance, addiction, or insufficient motivation to change.*

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Public health practitioners take two assumptions for granted in their approach. First, they assume that people often act against their own best interest — out of habit, ignorance, addiction, or insufficient motivation to change. Second, they assume that technical experts, be they doctors, epidemiologists, or social scientists, are in a position to know what is good or bad for people and to promote certain behaviors over others. The latter assumption clearly reflects the fact that public health practice was forged in order to conquer disease, a complex phenomenon that most lay people do not pretend to understand.

Public health practitioners tend to believe that they should respond to teenage childbearing much as they have responded to automobile fatalities and lung cancer. That is, they believe that the solution is to provide interventions modeled on those they have used to prevent disease or injury. In order to change the habitual behavior of sexually active teenagers, they would provide sex education and access to effective contraception. They also favor, as a backup measure, making abortion services available to teenage women.

### Welfare Reformers and Liberal Activists

Though they belong to different schools of thought, critics of welfare dependency (hereafter referred to as “welfare reformers”) and liberal activists share a fun-

damental conviction about human nature: they believe that the majority of people perceive their own best interest, and act in accordance with it, most of the time. In this respect, they might justly claim to be even more optimistic than public health practitioners (though welfare reformers, as proponents of the “dismal science,” are seldom perceived that way). Members of both these groups argue that the problem of teenage childbearing is rooted in an economic and normative social context which provides too few incentives to delay parenthood until after marriage (and therefore until adulthood), and too few disincentives to avoid early childbearing.

The key differences between welfare reformers and liberal activists emerge when we consider their intellectual influences and the policies they recommend. Though both groups may include scholars, politicians, and what have come to be known as “policy wonks,” welfare reformers tend to affirm middle-class values and the free market, whereas liberal activists are usually motivated by a commitment to a liberation movement, such as feminism or civil rights. In their policy agenda, welfare reformers usually advocate *disincentive* measures: making eligibility for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) contingent upon contraceptive use, for example, or eliminating the increase in benefits which now occurs when a woman on AFDC bears a child conceived after benefits have begun. Those who favor such measures have been largely responsible for the recent tightening of paternal child support enforcement. In contrast, liberal activists more often focus on *incentive* programs, as when feminists propose increases in women’s wages, or anti-poverty activists support jobs programs, job training, and better schools.

On the issue of teenage childbearing, welfare reformers and liberal activists tend to agree on two things. First, they believe that the restricted access to contraception and abortion favored by conservative traditionalists would result in an increase in the teenage birth rate. Second, they agree that efforts to change the behavior of individual young women are misguided if they occur in the absence of structural changes in the young women’s social and economic circumstances. But whereas the welfare reformers view the efforts of public health practitioners as well-meaning but ineffective, the liberal activists are more likely to see them as paternalistic, or even (in the absence of structural change) immoral. “Of what use is it to persuade young women to succeed in school, when even women’s jobs that require high levels of education pay so poorly?” asks the feminist. “Why set up a clinic in a school when most young women who bear children as adolescents drop out of school more than nine months before the birth?” asks the anti-poverty activist.

### The Norplant Controversy in Baltimore

With this background, we can begin to understand the controversy over the Norplant program for school-based clinics in Baltimore. The distribution of contraceptives in such clinics is a prototypical public health intervention. Opposition to such programs is now coming mainly from conservative traditionalists, who regard the provision of contraceptives in schools as a signal to students that sexual activity is condoned by school authorities. However, as we shall see, there is also opposition from a coalition of liberal activists.

Public health practitioners respond to the conservative challenge by arguing that the provision of contraceptives is primarily a health issue, and not a moral or political one. This response is entirely in keeping with the belief underlying the public health approach: that teenage childbearing should be addressed as if it were a disease. From a public health standpoint, a program that makes contraceptives available in schools is morally neutral, just as a program distributing clean needles to heroin addicts in order to prevent the spread of AIDS is morally neutral. But conservative traditionalists insist that such interventions are not morally neutral at all — and some liberal activists agree with them.

In fact, the voices of liberal activists have been especially prominent in the Norplant debate. Many feminists, who generally support efforts to expand access to contraception, are uneasy about providing Norplant in school-based clinics. Specifically, they question whether earlier Norplant safety studies are applicable to inner-city teenagers, many of whom smoke, are in poor health, and have limited access to health care. African-American community leaders have similar concerns — which should come as no surprise since African-Americans, like women, have a history of being used as guinea pigs by the medical establishment. In addition, some African-American leaders have accused the city health department of “targeting” their community for fertility reduction out of racist or “genocidal” motives. Others have pointed to studies and statistics challenging the view that teenage childbearing diminishes the life prospects of poor African-American women; given the risk factors that these women already confront, some research suggests that early parenthood does not appreciably worsen their condition.

There is also a broader political context which helps to explain the liberal activist opposition to Baltimore’s Norplant program. Shortly after city health officials announced their plans last December, the governor of Maryland suggested that he was willing to consider targeting certain groups, such as prisoners and women on public assistance, for long-term contraceptives and sterilization as part of a comprehensive agenda of welfare reform and crime prevention. The governor

specifically mentioned Norplant in his State of the State address to the General Assembly in January. The measures he proposed for consideration are strikingly similar to those that feminists and other activists have judged to be coercive when adopted by family planning programs in less developed countries. Such measures also fall squarely into the category of disincentive approaches typically favored by welfare reformers. In opposing the Norplant program in Baltimore, liberal activists were also taking a stand against what they see as a broader attempt to control the reproductive lives of the minority poor. It is certain that the prominence of Norplant in the governor’s remarks had an impact on the debate about providing the contraceptive to teenage women in Baltimore’s school-based clinics.

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### Implications

What are the implications of this widely noted debate for government policy regarding teenage childbearing — or family policy generally — in the 1990s?

First, the results of the 1992 election signaled the end of sweeping federal support for the agenda of the conservative traditionalists. Among those who hold other views, the neutralization of a common adversary is likely to cause a series of ruptures and realignments. Welfare reformers and liberal activists will differ more sharply on the question of whether incentives or disincentives are the best way to cultivate civic virtue and personal responsibility. More important, liberal activists will intensify their criticism of public health initiatives that they deem to be paternalistic or implicitly racist. They may not hesitate to form alliances with conservative traditionalists in opposing these programs, especially if they believe that the programs are vulnerable to cooptation by welfare reformers. In the African-American community, where Christian and Muslim clergy and activist leaders often have closer ties than in other settings, new alliances of this kind are especially likely to develop.

The political debate in this country over how to address social problems, including teenage childbearing and other objects of family policy, has been largely suppressed, at least at the national level, for more than a decade. As long as conservative traditionalists dom-

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 have demonstrated that family forms are socially and historically constructed, not monolithic universals that exist for all times and all peoples.*

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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.

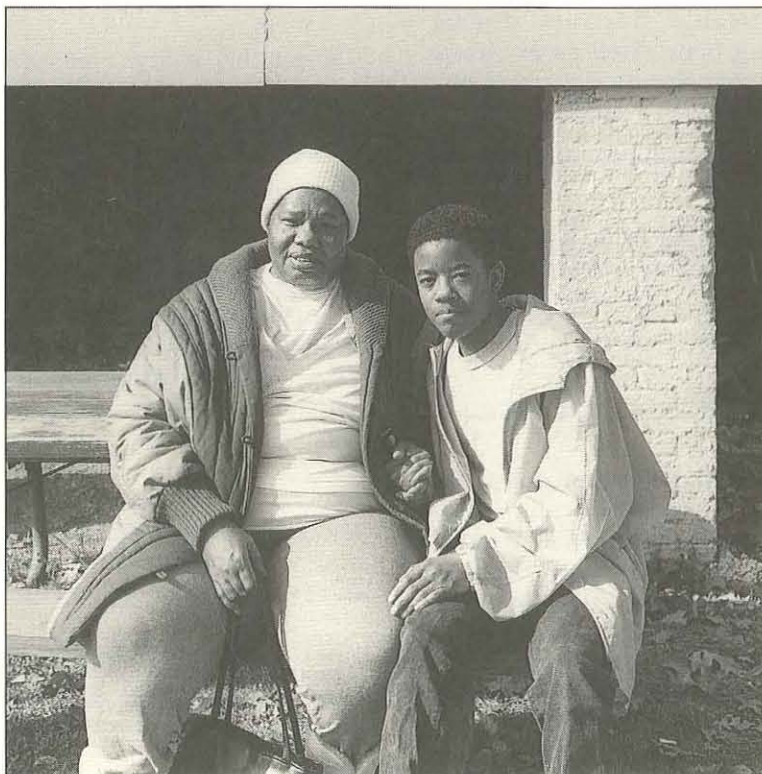
Women's family roles combine with their race and class to influence their position in the labor force. As a group, women are concentrated in a limited number of occupational categories; they earn less than two-thirds of what white males earn, and their opportunities for

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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*For many years, unfortunately, social policies have rewarded and promoted primarily suburban nuclear families, while extended families were viewed as a historical relic.*

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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

Bonnie Thornton Dill, professor of women's studies and affiliate professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, and Maxine Baca Zinn, professor of sociology and senior research associate at the Julian Samora Research Institute at Michigan State University, are the co-editors of the forthcoming *Women of Color in U.S. Society* (Temple University Press, winter 1994). Sandra Patton is a doctoral candidate in the American Studies department at the University of Maryland.

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## Family Practice and Family Policy: Mixing Work and Parenting

American families today are struggling to reconcile their need to earn a living with the needs of their children. As wages stagnate and housing costs rise, parents — whether single or coupled — find themselves torn between competing demands on their time: they can work less and have less income but more time to spend with their children, or work more and use the extra income to buy goods and services (such as child care) for their children. Surveys show that most parents feel ambivalent about these trade-offs. While they believe that they are doing their best under difficult circumstances, and cling to the notion that their children will benefit from the sacrifices they have made, they lament the loss of “family values” and criticize the parenting skills of others.

Families today are also straining to reconcile two competing cultural themes of the American experience: the drive for economic independence and material affluence, and the importance of family ties. The first theme is a prominent part of the American identity. It permeates and underpins our approach to public assistance and our emphasis on equal opportunity rather than equal outcomes. The second theme, the importance of family, resonates less powerfully in upwardly mobile, immigrant America; it is a tune periodically drowned in the pounding refrain of *individual* achievement and *individual* choice.

Recent economic trends have been forcing individuals to pool their resources, since a middle-class lifestyle now requires having more than one earner in a household with children. At the same time, however, cultural changes have made family ties more tenuous and conditional. Over a single generation, we have seen a major transformation in social attitudes toward sex, marriage, childbearing, and parenting practices. Expectations about gender roles have changed dramatically. Individual Americans are in the process of negotiating their place in a more fragmented, flexible social world and a rapidly changing labor market, and a clear normative consensus about what constitutes good parenting or a healthy family has yet to emerge.

The major family policy issue of our generation is how (or whether) the government can help parents — coupled or single — mix earning and child-rearing

responsibilities. This is an issue that cuts across the boundaries of class and ethnicity. But because of ongoing changes in the labor markets of advanced industrialized countries, it is an especially urgent issue for the least educated parents in our society. If they are to fulfill their dual responsibilities, they must have the assistance of a government actively committed to promoting their success in both endeavors. By leaving individuals to rely on private resources and support networks, U.S. public policies exacerbate existing inequalities and leave already-marginalized citizens little opportunity to improve their life chances or those of their children.

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### Working Mothers

Two changes in family relationships are at the core of the family policy debate: the increase in work force participation among mothers, particularly mothers of young children, and the tenuousness of marriage. These two developments are intertwined. Women who work may be better able to leave unhappy marriages. Husbands may feel more free to leave a woman with an independent income. But the causal relationship also works in the other direction: as marriage becomes less secure, women feel the need to maintain their individual ties to the labor market.

Since women were traditionally expected to be the nurturers in a family, complaints about “family breakdown” tend to be directed at their behavior. Conservatives often fault working women for putting their individual interests (career, personal fulfillment, and so on) above those of “the family.” Some defend-

ers of working mothers counter that economic necessity alone is responsible for women's increased labor force participation. Both groups tend to ignore the change in cultural expectations about women's work behavior. Today, most *men* as well as most women expect wives to contribute to the economic support of their families, especially if the children are of school age or older. In 1991, three quarters of all mothers of school-aged children, 60 percent of mothers of preschool children, and over half the mothers of children under two, were in the labor force.

Yet our public policies have done little to help working mothers combine earning and child-rearing responsibilities. In stark contrast to other Western nations, the U.S. grants little protection to women who temporarily leave the workplace for childbearing. The Family Leave Act, which was signed into law only this year, mandates that employers allow workers three months of maternity leave, but does not require them to pay mothers during that leave. In European countries, maternity leave is paid and employers are often required to hold a job open for an extended period, in case a mother decides to return to her previous position after a year or two at home with her child. In Sweden, mothers also have a right to reduce their work time to 30 hours a week.

Although women, many of them mothers, constitute a disproportionate number of part-time and temporary workers in the United States, we have been slow to extend workplace protections (such as health benefits) to such workers. Here again, the U.S. differs from countries with extensive welfare state systems, where women who work part-time often hold public-sector service jobs through which they enjoy a full range of work rights and benefits.

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European nations also provide supplemental income assistance to working mothers — especially single mothers — in a way that helps them combine work with child-rearing. Most provide some kind of child allowance or benefit for any family with a child, regardless of family income. In the U.S., the Earned Income Tax Credit does provide income assistance to families whose earnings place them above the poverty level. But families must apply for this credit, and unless they make special arrangements with their

employer, they can only receive it at the end of the year. For these reasons, it is not an effective safeguard against hardship. The principle behind the tax credit is that "Hard work should be rewarded," and thus that working parents should have a significantly higher income than non-working ones. A more generous policy would ensure that the material needs of *all* children are adequately met.

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*Despite a decade of moralizing about "deadbeat dads" who don't support their children, only one in four lone mothers in the United States regularly receives the full amount of child support owed to the family each month.*

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The challenge of combining work and child-rearing is particularly hard on lone parents, and it has become more difficult as the economic security of households with children increasingly demands earnings from more than one source. Most working mothers need some kind of support from the absent fathers of their children in order to make ends meet. If this help is not forthcoming, they are often forced to rely on their families or government assistance.

Despite a decade of moralizing about "deadbeat dads" who don't support their children, only one in four lone mothers in the United States regularly receives the full amount of child support owed to the family each month. Although a number of federal reforms to improve child support collection were established in the 1980s, there is still little uniformity in state laws regarding divorce, child support, and custody, and the obstacles confronting interstate collection efforts are enormous. The decentralization inherent in a federal system, coupled with the fact that conflicts over child support require court action rather than simple administrative remedies, makes it difficult and costly for lone mothers to collect the money owed to them by absent fathers.

In many other industrialized countries, the situation is different: the state advances child support payments to lone mothers, and then collects whatever earnings it can from the father. If an absent father cannot pay, the state provides income support to the family. This system places the burden of determining whether or not a father will pay on an administrative agency, not on a mother pursuing her case in the courts. As a result, it increases the income, and improves the economic security, of working mothers.

Under our Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, the government only provides

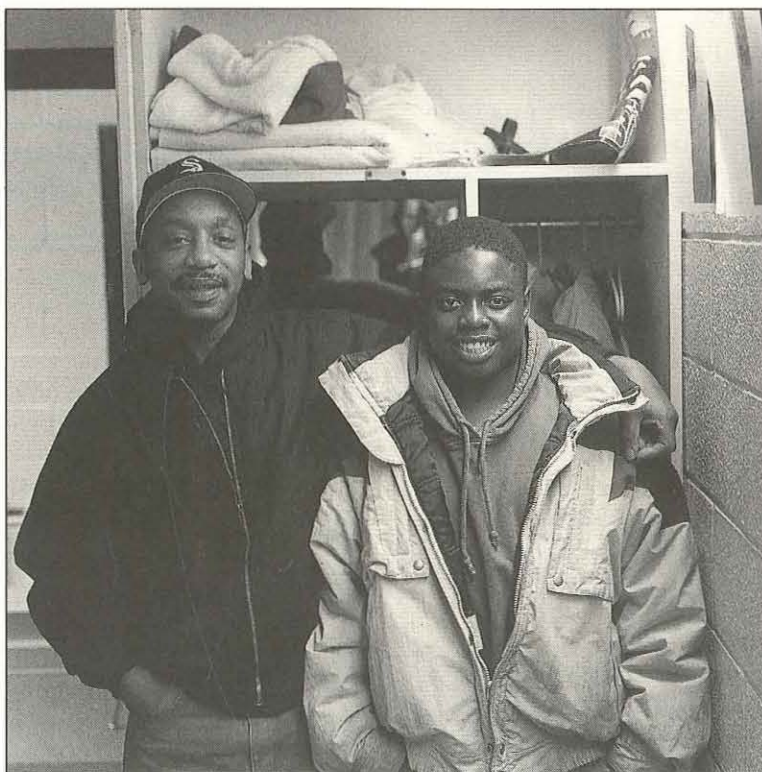
income support to a mother who is entirely without assets, and it reduces the income assistance and medical benefits available to the family if she earns "too much." (In most states, "too much" is between \$7,500 and \$15,000 a year for a family of three.) Medicaid coverage ceases when the family's income reaches about \$15,500. Our strict means-testing of poor families with children leaves little economic incentive for poor mothers to work part-time or in low-wage jobs. A poorly educated mother, or one who lives in an area with few opportunities for employment other than service jobs, may find that working reduces the economic support and services available to her children. For women in this situation, the desire to be economically independent and the desire to provide for the material needs of their children conflict.

Current debates over welfare reform have focused almost exclusively on the issue of economic dependence, rather than on the needs of poor children. This is ironic, given the history of the AFDC system. Thirty years ago, black women were more likely to be in the labor force than white women, and poor women were more likely to work than middle-class women. The AFDC system was amended and expanded in the 1960s in response to the argument that poor mothers

should be able to stay at home when their children were small, just as middle-class women at that time usually did.

But patterns of work behavior among women have changed. Middle-class married women are now more likely to be in the labor force than poor or unmarried women. These working mothers may feel ambivalent about the way in which they are juggling career and parenting responsibilities, but they feel no ambivalence about demanding that poor women join them in their struggle to find child care, sympathetic employers, and affordable health care. However, there is little recognition that if job growth is too slow to absorb potential workers, the rising labor force participation of educated middle-class women is likely to leave less educated women out of the labor market.

The public policy spotlight on the work behavior of poor mothers only peripherally addresses the key issue for all working parents: child care. A generation ago, when working-class women had high rates of labor force participation, they lived in tightly-knit neighborhoods where older female relatives or trusted neighbors were available to help care for their children. But as American families have become increasingly mobile, and as older women have entered and



remained in the labor force for longer periods, this source of informal, low-cost child care has disappeared. Today a majority of working mothers, both married and single, rely on non-relatives for child care, and surveys consistently show that parents worry about the quality of the care their children receive.

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*The failure to make high-quality preschool programs a central component of national family policy has serious implications for the social and economic integration of future generations.*

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Unfortunately, our public policies do little to ensure that young children have safe, secure environments in which to grow. State and local licensing regulations for child care providers vary significantly across jurisdictions. Most areas lack effective inspection mechanisms. There are no uniform professional standards for child care workers. Training and compensation are poor. There have been no attempts to link child care with systematic access to child health services.

Federal subsidies for child care do not encourage or enable working parents to choose high-quality child care options. Working parents can deduct only \$2,400 a year for day care expenses, though a national survey conducted in 1991 reported that average yearly child care costs were between \$3,600 and \$6,000 a year. The same survey highlighted differential use of preschool programs according to family income. It found that three quarters of all three- to five-year-olds with parents who earned more than \$75,000 a year attended such programs, while only 40 percent of young children from families with incomes under \$30,000 a year did so. Head Start, our sole government-sponsored preschool education program, is available only to poor children (and serves only 28 percent of the children eligible to participate). The program operates on a part-day basis and doesn't operate at all during the summer, and thus is not designed to meet the needs of working parents. The failure to make high-quality preschool programs a central component of national family policy has serious implications for the social and economic integration of future generations.

### Higher Standards of Competence

Current family policy debates fail to highlight the fact that *our standards of "adequate" child-rearing have risen*. To establish themselves or to remain in the middle class in the next century, young people will have to be more socially competent, more adaptable, and bet-

ter educated than their parents. They will have to master electronic and computer skills and learn to negotiate working and residential environments that are more culturally diverse.

An increasing body of research tells us that early education and child-rearing practices during the formative years are critical in producing children who can "learn to learn." It is not enough to teach a child to sit still and respect authority; we are no longer trying to create manual laborers for assembly-line work. Rather, we want children with greater problem-solving abilities, analytic powers and interactive social skills. This means that we must have a higher quality of child-rearing than in the past.

Since the need for more and better early education has come at a time when wage stagnation and changing cultural expectations have brought more women into the labor force, the task of providing this education will fall to professional child care workers. But because child care and related services must be purchased at market prices, with the best care available only to those who can afford it, economic inequalities are increasingly translated, even among the youngest children, into inequalities in educational opportunities. And these early differences are only compounded by the huge disparities in the quality of public schools across districts.

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Parents pass on to their children the skills that they possess. *But we cannot expect parents to pass on skills and learning that they do not have.* A new Department of Education survey has found that 90 million Americans — 47 percent of the nation's adult population — are functionally illiterate, and we have no coherent, accessible remedial system of education to help these citizens (re)join mainstream society. Educated, middle-class professionals expose their children to the kinds of skills they will need as adults in an evolving workplace. They use their disposable income to hire experts to teach their children other skills (sports, music, and so on). Working-class and poor parents live in districts where safe, socially stimulating after-school activities are no longer freely available, and they have neither the personal experience nor the disposable income to provide their children with such opportunities. Indeed, available research suggests

that important class and racial differences in child-rearing patterns persist and that working-class and poor parents may be socializing their children to fit into occupations and a social world that are rapidly disappearing.

Family policy debates should focus on this process of *child socialization*. Policymakers should be defining the positive characteristics that the next generation of Americans will require in order to function effectively as workers, parents, and citizens, and then set about restructuring a range of public and private institutions to provide the support needed to accomplish these objectives.

In spite of our peculiarly American emphasis on individuals, we live in an increasingly interdependent social and economic environment. We can no more go back to the Ozzie and Harriet family of the 1950s than we can return to the pioneer families of the last century. Public policies must assist parents in effectively balancing the competing demands of work and parenting as their children grow up and as the economy re-creates itself. This will require continually rebuilding and adjusting our institutions in order to promote the development of citizens able (and willing) to support us in our old age. We cannot leave the socialization of children to market forces and the luck of the genetic draw; the socialization of children is a *collective* responsibility. This is the principle that should undergird future reforms of American family policy.

— Katherine McFate

Katherine McFate is Associate Director of Social Policy at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C. Sources: *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*, Final Report of the National Commission on Children (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991); Robin L. Jarrett, "A Comparative Examination of Socialization Patterns Among Low-Income African-Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Whites: A Review of the Ethnographic Literature," Social Science Research Council Working Group on Communities, Family Processes, and Individual Development Working Paper, (1991); Katherine McFate, *Poverty, Inequality and the Crisis of Social Policy: Summary of Findings* (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1991).

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