

Is America Well Served by Its Family System?

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The issue I wish to raise in this brief contribution is whether the current state of the American family is suited to the needs of our modern industrial society.¹ This is admittedly a very vague and complex topic, but arguments on both sides of the issue have emerged over the years.

At least into the 1960s, there was general acceptance of the idea eventually enshrined in modernization theory, that the dominant patterns of family organization in America were well suited to and perhaps even required by the advanced industrial nature of our society. The arguments presented by Parsons (1943), Parsons and Bales (1955), Goode (1963), and many others are familiar.² The dominant pattern of nuclear families embedded in relatively weak extended kinship networks permitted and perhaps even encouraged the kind of geographic and social mobility required by our national labor market. Child-rearing patterns stressing independence training and individualistic achievement encouraged young people to orient themselves toward competition in this labor market rather than toward obedience to family and kin. Even the anxieties of adolescence, and the resulting gray hairs, gnashed teeth, and other consequences for parents, were seen by Parsons as "functional," as this stage provided a period of semiautonomy that was a necessary preparation for independent life in a rapidly changing society. Weak kinship bonds and independence training also made possible innovation and entrepreneurial behavior while helping to limit the nepotism that would otherwise interfere with rational behavior in modern bureaucratic organizations.

The same sorts of arguments can be found in the standard "melting pot" interpretation of family change among immigrants. In this view "traditional" extended families that stressed obedience to parents,

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respect for elders, and loyalty to the corporate family and its traditions would impede the chances of such immigrants, and particularly of their children, to succeed in America; for this reason, immigrant families had to begin to adapt toward dominant American family patterns. Assimilation therefore involved and even required family change.

A further wrinkle in this argument is expressed by Edward Shorter (1975), who claims that the American family was "born modern." In other words, the distinctive nature of the early colonization process in America produced families that were quite different from the norm in most agrarian societies and that were in many respects already quite "conjugal" (to use Goode's term). For example, nuclear families, youth-driven mate choice, and relatively weak kinship bonds were already characteristic of family life in colonial America (e.g., Demos, 1970). Some researchers even claim that the distinctive and quasi-modern features of preindustrial American family structure and child rearing at least did not hinder and may even have played a positive role in America's rapid industrialization by fostering mobility, innovation, entrepreneurial behavior, delayed gratification, and various other kinds of behavior seen as conducive to development (e.g., Whiting and Child, 1953).

These views have in recent years been challenged on a number of grounds. The criticisms of the conventional view and the alternatives offered might be termed a "revisionist/traditionalist" view. One of the most forceful advocates of this contrary view is Urie Bronfenbrenner (1967, 1970). Both through observing trends in American family life and, interestingly, through comparisons with the Soviet Union, Bronfenbrenner has come to feel that there are things seriously wrong with the American family, particularly with the way we go about the business of child rearing. In Bronfenbrenner's view the rising divorce rate, more working mothers, and pervasive television watching among the young have created a "split-level family." Young people spend less time in meaningful interaction with adults and they increasingly orient their lives toward peer group subcultures that reject adult values. Adolescence in contemporary America is seen not as a "functional" stage, but as a problem period that through poor transmission of societal values leads to antisocial behavior and poor preparation for life in our competitive society.

The conventional view is also attacked from another angle by proponents of the "new ethnicity." In this view many features of

“traditional” immigrant families were not obstacles but rather were contributors to the success of their members and to the vitality of American society. Strong family bonds and loyalties exert a powerful impact on members, and particularly on the young, motivating them to study hard in school, to excel in music, sports, and other activities, and to spend long hours and exert heroic efforts in work—all in order to repay the sacrifices parents and other kin made and to contribute to the welfare of the family as a unit.³ Recent press articles on the disproportionate success of new Asian immigrants in academic competition often stress the same theme—success in the terms expected by American society is the product not of overcoming “traditional” family loyalties and obligations, but of their mobilization. This argument would lead to the conclusion that if there is a “fit” between forms of family life and the “requirements” of modern industrial society, it has been misdiagnosed all along. America may be served best by having a high proportion of cohesive and tightly knit families and kin networks, rather than by having families stressing individualism and “universalism.” This view would lead to the conclusion that if the American melting pot does, as the conventional view predicts, produce subsequent generations in such ethnic families that come more and more to resemble the American middle-class family norm, neither those future generations nor American society will be well served.

A parallel note is struck in a work arguing that America is losing out in economic competition with Japan in part because features of Japan’s family system (previously seen by many other authors as reeking with “feudal remnants”) are better suited to modern society than is the American family. Ezra Vogel (1979) argues that the pattern of married women withdrawing from the labor force at marriage and devoting themselves to child rearing and serving their husbands, while closing themselves off from many of the outside social contacts that their husbands enjoy, has a positive consequence. Japanese mothers pour all of their energies and aspirations into encouraging, cajoling, and pressuring their children to do well in the vigorous academic competition that is a central characteristic of the society. The generally successful nature of this maternal pressure can be seen in levels of effort, aspirations, and academic achievement by Japanese students that American youths cannot come close to matching, and presumably there are also positive consequences for the diligence and skill those youngsters display once they join the

work force (Vogel, 1979). Japan, by not having "traditional" family customs "washed away" through rapid convergence toward the conjugal form common in America, is able to reap benefits in terms of societal dynamism and productivity that have contributed to the fall from economic dominance of the United States.

These various revisionists' views do not lead to the conclusion that America should return to some sort of traditional extended family system, for it is recognized that America never had such a tradition, even if many immigrant groups did. In any case, the issue is miscast if we think in terms of family structure. What seems to matter to the revisionist is not whether a nuclear or extended family structure is favored, but what the nature of the relations is among generations, and what sorts of orientations toward the family are fostered during child rearing. Nor is conceptualization helped by the influential line of research developed by Melvin Kohn and his associates (1959, 1969), which contrasts middle-class child-rearing values that stress independent thought and self-realization with working-class values that stress obedience and orderliness. Advocates of the revisionist/traditionalist view are not claiming that America would be well served by having most children reared to be obedient and well behaved. The central issue is how to rear children who possess the character traits that have long been valued by American society—a high need for achievement, a willingness to delay gratification, a desire to overcome obstacles, a curiosity about how things work, a quest for mastery and perfection, and so forth. The revisionists are arguing that the tendency in American family life for the parental home to be seen as a launching pad from which one departs in a quest for autonomy (perhaps without enough of the values guidance that adolescent "missiles" should have prior to launch) is not as effective at producing such character traits as a different set of family relations would be.

Criticisms of these revisionist/traditionalist views are not hard to find. Bronfenbrenner could be criticized for romanticizing the American past and ignoring the fact that youth autonomy and rejection of parental values go back long before the advent of television and other recent trends (e.g., Rapson 1965). Critics may also note ironically the apparent conflict between his present stance and his worry a couple of decades earlier that America's young were being "oversocialized" (Bronfenbrenner, 1958). Advocates of the "new ethnicity" may be faulted for ignoring other, nonfamilial

explanations of the success of certain ethnic groups in America.⁴ Bronfenbrenner and Vogel may be taken to task for not sufficiently emphasizing the enforced conformity that is stressed in Soviet and Japanese child rearing and the psychological toll and social costs that are produced by that style of child rearing.

Still, it may be worth pondering the arguments of the revisionist/traditionalists. Are there features of American family trends, particularly as they involve relations between the generations and child rearing, that are not or are no longer suitable to the contemporary world? Is there a class issue involved here, in which prosperity and the growing middle class in America have produced too many people oriented toward autonomy and creativity, but not enough toward diligence and discipline? Have we all along misdiagnosed what sort of family and child-rearing patterns are most suitable to a dynamic and successful modern society? And if any of these claims are at least partially accurate, is there anything we can do about it? Realistically, can American parents make qualitative changes of the kind indicated in the way they relate to and rear their children, or are the influences that are promoting and sustaining the trends the revisionist/traditionalists criticize simply too powerful? And if the latter is the case, do we simply adjust ourselves to the notion that America must gradually decline relative to other nations, in part at least because the nature of our family patterns is not suited to the continued vitality and competitive success of our society? Or should the lesson be that we need to open the gates wider to new waves of immigrants, particularly those with strong family bonds and loyalties, in the hope that they can provide descendants to replace our children and grandchildren on the American ladder of success and keep our society competitive in the world?

NOTES

1. I have taken quite seriously the editor's injunction in his call for contributions to this issue to "include value judgments, speculations, impressions, and half-baked ideas."

2. Limitation of space requires me to give truncated and no doubt oversimplified versions of the views of various parties in this debate and to ignore many relevant names and works.

3. On a related note, it is pointed out that through "chain migration," ethnic kinship loyalties were often used to facilitate migration, rather than serving as an obstacle to it.

4. Or, more broadly, skeptics may doubt that America's competitive difficulties have much of anything to do with family trends.

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