

Recent studies show the American family is more resilient to massive societal changes than previously thought.

Family survival against the system

By David L. Angus

In the Fall of 1975, I began to construct a data bank which I felt, when completed, would permit the most comprehensive examination of the pattern of relationships between school performance and family background variables yet attained for any historical period. What occasioned this was the discovery of school records for the village of Dexter, Michigan, dating from the 1880s. Though I was aware at the time that analyses of school attendance patterns could be and had been performed using nineteenth century census manuscripts, the discovery of these school records immediately suggested the possibility of a much richer **longitudinal** examination of these patterns. Further investigation uncovered similar, but incomplete, records from the village of Chelsea, and, knowing something about the similarities and differences between the two villages, I began to conceive of a comparative approach which might permit the isolation of some of the factors in the school-family-community relationship attributable to a degree of industrialization where community size (degree of urbanization) could be held relatively constant.

This brief review essay is an outgrowth of the literature review which I have been doing prior to the analysis of this data bank, now nearly complete. I have isolated a theme which appears to me to be one of the more interesting ones in this literature, yet one that can be handled in a short session. The main idea, which I have tried to allude to in my title, is that recent scholarship has shown the family in America to be far more resilient in the

face of massive societal change than we thought only a few years ago. The word "system" refers in a general way to the modernization process, more specifically to the tide of technological developments that transformed our lives so drastically and to the rapid growth of urban centers. To speak of families "against" this system, and of "survival," is not to posit a family pattern that is impervious to these changes, but one that is certainly not the passive victim that it has been portrayed.

I will begin by trying to place this particular argument about the family in the context of our escalating contemporary debate. Then I will locate it within a narrower, but deeper, debate among scholars. Thirdly, I will review a few recent studies which sharpen the terms of this debate, and finally I will suggest some elements of a new framework from which we ought to view family development in this country.

Between April and June of this year there were five books published in the United States with identical titles. The title of these books was **Family**,¹ and they were but a share of the over 40 books that have been published on the family in the last two years. Nineteen seventy-nine is to be the year of a White House Conference on the Family, though there is still a question as to whether this will ever be held.² All the major news weeklies ran cover stories on the family in the past few months, and **Psychology Today** ran a symposium issue. Articles abound. Entries in the Reader's Guide under the heading "Family" have soared from only 16 in 1975 and 1976 combined to 27 in 1977 and 23 in the first 8 months of 1978.

Perhaps the most significant indicator that the family is moving to the top of the charts is that many of our most noted "pop" sociologists have recently written a book or an article arguing some point of view about what's happening to the American family. Among these contributions are Christopher Lasch (1977), Richard Sennett (1978), Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977), Amatal Etzioni (1977), Robert Coles (1978), Michael Novak (1978), Nathan Glazer (1978), and Mary Jo Bane (1976). Miss Bane's book in some ways typifies the family genre. Like Governor Brown on tax cuts, Ms. Bane is a liberal who changed her mind when she learned the facts. Starting from the premise that the family is rapidly collapsing and therefore government should invent new institutional structures to carry out its functions, she set out to document the family's demise. She discovered instead that the family, though undergoing some important changes, is nonetheless a thriving and vital institution and that liberal government policy is perhaps the family's chief enemy. She makes a plea for governmental restraint and for basing public policy on fact rather than fancy.

Ms. Bane represents those who feel that the family is not in decline and that it is a good thing that it isn't because we need the family to survive. This view contrasts with that of most Americans, who seem to believe that the family is in decline and that that is a very bad thing for our society. In the rising debate about the family, two other possible positions will also, no doubt, be represented. One is that the family is in decline and that's a good thing because the family is really an anachronism in modern life.³ The other is that the family is **not** in decline but it ought to be because it is the chief barrier to mental health or the equality of women or some other social goal. This position has been represented by R.D. Laing (1971), David Cooper (1972), and for the radical feminists, Robin Blackburn (1969).

As disparate as are these positions, they nonetheless

share a common thread, and it is this that links the more public debate to a scholarly debate that has continued for two decades. Borrowing an idea from D.H.J. Morgan (1975) of the University of Manchester, we will call this common thread "soft functionalism." It is "soft" because it is implicit, not carefully worked out, and therefore not really debatable. It is "functionalism" because it absolutely assumes that the family should be seen as instrumental to some other end or purpose, usually the aggrandizement of individual personality or what has lately been called "narcissism." Seen in this way, the family is or isn't performing its critical functions and alternative "structures" need or needn't be created to see that these functions are performed.

Among scholars of the family, it is functionalism that has held the "center" position for at least a half a century. In fact, family theory has been almost a showcase for functionalism. Morgan points out that the functionalist perspective "appears to have been more deeply entrenched in the field of the sociology of the family than in some other sub-disciplines." Moreover, "functional statements are more likely to be presented as self-evident propositions in the study of the family than in any other area of sociology." Some have felt, therefore, that functionalist theory could be put to its severest test by empirical research on the family.

Talcott Parsons (1956) stands almost alone as the pre-eminent modern theorist on the family. His functional analysis is so sweeping that it touches nearly every aspect of family life. To briefly summarize his key points, he argues that the modern family is not facing dissolution but is merely experiencing the differentiation of its functions. Through a parceling out of these to other institutions, the family's functions are reduced to two, namely the socialization of the child and the "stabilization of the adult personalities of the population." Structurally, the family is seen as a unit of an "open, multilineal, conjugal system." It is, of course, nuclear, and Parsons often refers to the "relative isolation of the nuclear family." Internally, the family is seen as a four-cell matrix along two axes, leader/follower and instrumental/expressive. His description of the socialization process features a duality in which socialization is understood both from the view of the individual personality being prepared to assume an autonomous role and from the view of the internalization of a given culture as mediated by the family. The allocation of sex roles is also thoroughly discussed by Parsons, and in terms which send feminists up the wall. Males and females divide along the instrumental/expressive continuum. Can you guess who's on which side?

Some Limits Overlooked

Parsons' followers, as well as his critics, have often overlooked several important limits which he placed on the reach of his theory. It was not meant to be cross-cultural, not intended to include rural families, upper class families, or lower class families and the concept of nuclear family isolation was always qualified by the term "relative." However, the influence of Parsons went much beyond those who had carefully read his theory. Those of us who passed through universities sometime between 1956 and 1970, absorbed a host of Parsonian images of the family stripped of these qualifications and expanded outward to encompass "The Development of the Family in the Western World Under the Impact of Modernization."

According to these images, the family in pre-

industrial society was a large kinship network that "located" the individual in his society. Households were also large and usually included three generations of lineal descent as well as assorted unrelated individuals. This family was thought of as the basic building block of society and was so recognized and protected in the law. In addition to procreation and socialization, the pre-industrial family was also responsible for producing most goods and services, taking care of the sick and the elderly, rehabilitating the criminal, providing vocational training to the young, and a host of other "functions." With the coming of industrialization, all this changed. Perhaps it was the separation of the work place from the home that caused the greatest disruption. Whatever the main cause, the consequences are clear. During the 19th century the family became nucleated and mobile. One by one its "functions" were "assigned" to other emerging agencies and with the loss of these functions went the capacity of the family to regulate and control the lives of its members. What the family lost the individual partially gained as concepts of individual rights and bureaucratically defined justice began to prevail. These changes to the family were particularly marked in the cities where poverty, overcrowding, disease and other assorted ills destroyed family life altogether for some groups. By the mid-twentieth century the family was thought to have no function beyond bedding and boarding the young until they could be spun out to form new pairs. By the seventies, marriage itself was thought to be obsolete and most children were presumed to be unwanted.

This scenario is, of course, a straw man. Parsons wouldn't recognize it. Its main elements however can be found in countless books whose authors are expert on something other than the family, say "the modernization of the West," or "modern social work practice," or "the social contexts of schooling." It was the wide dissemination of these images among the "educated," then, that led to a two-pronged attack on Parsons, et. al., in the early sixties.

The frontal attack on Parsons was led by Litwak (1965), Sussman and Burchinall (1969). They contended that the modern family should not be thought of as an isolated nuclear family but as a modified extended family. The basis for this was their discoveries that families—even middle-class, urban families—maintained contact with and felt reciprocal obligations toward kinfolk, particularly their families of orientation. At about the same time, Michael Young and Peter Willmott published their study of *Family & Kinship in East London* (1962), which clearly established the importance of the extended kin network among British working class families.⁵ From these beginnings, a substantial literature on kinship in urban settings has grown. A discussion of this is beyond our scope here, except to observe that the debate on this side is not over whether such structures exist but over whether they are significant enough to throw over Parsons' idea of the "relatively isolated nuclear family."

The attack from the rear, so to speak, was kicked off by the Cambridge Family Study Group and in particular by Peter Laslett (1965), with the immensely important finding that the household in pre-industrial England was already nuclear and appears to have been so since the 16th century. This finding created a flurry of interest in family history and forced a reconsideration of the "origins" of the nuclear family in America. Beginning first with some excellent work on the colonial family and household structure,⁶ interest in family history has spread into the 19th

and 20th centuries and has linked up with at least four other inter-related interests of this generation of historians; ethnic history, women's history, working class history, and studies of social and geographic mobility.

Already, family history has made a major contribution to our understanding of what the issues are. Part of this contribution lies in simply sorting out the way we think and speak about families. An extended family and an extended household are two different things. A social group can have nuclear families and extended households or extended families and nuclear households, or both extended, or both nuclear. Family structures and family functions are quite different things as well. It's possible for structures to remain extremely stable over long periods of time while functions change dramatically. Family structures also pass through cycles, one phase of which can involve nuclear households, another extended ones.

The studies I wish to review do not reflect the whole gamut of contemporary interest in family history. I have limited myself in at least two ways; to the approximate time period indicated in my title, and to those studies attempting to test some facet of the general notions outlined above about the impact of industrialization and urbanization. While I do not pretend that this review is exhaustive, it would be extremely misleading to imply that for each type of study mentioned there are a dozen more that could be cited. This is in fact a limited literature, though one that is growing rapidly.

Ethnic Differences in Family Patterns

If the family is seen as a dependant variable in the social equation in which technological change and urban growth are thought to be the powerful determinants of all other social structures, one way to challenge this model is to look for **variable** family patterns where industrial/urban conditions are "controlled." This is one reason that considerable attention has been given to ethnic differences in family patterns.

A paper by Virginia Yans McLaughlin (1973) on the Italians of Buffalo, 1900-1930, challenges the idea that the increased opportunities for women to work outside the home associated with industrialism alters power relationships within the home and ultimately leads to "family disorganization," specifically the female-headed household. Utilizing census manuscripts and welfare records, Yans McLaughlin found that, unlike the women of some other ethnic groups, "Buffalo's South Italian women . . . expressed and acted upon, a decided preference for occupations which permitted minimal strain upon their traditional familiar arrangements (p. 138)." The vast majority of Italian women with children had no employment outside the home, and of those who did most had part-time work as members of family groups. She determined that in spite of irregular male employment and the frequent temporary absence of the father from the household, female-headed households made up an astonishingly low 4% of 2,000 first-generation families and that the Italians were the least likely ethnic group to apply for welfare due to neglect or desertion by a family head (p. 141). Coupling these findings she concluded that "South Italian values played an important part in determining family work patterns," and that "the family acted as an independent variable (p. 138)."

Louise Tilly (1974), an expert on the rise of out-of-household employment of women in 19th century Europe took Yans McLaughlin to task for one of her claims. Point-

ing out that married women often served as domestics in Southern Italy, she said "the answer as to why women were not servants in Buffalo lies not in Southern Italy, but in the economic and social structure of Buffalo (p. 454)." Tilly accepts, however, the general notion of familism acting as an independent variable.

In another study of Buffalo's ethnic groups at an earlier time period, Laurence Glasco (1977) looked for differences in the life cycles and household structures of the Irish, the Germans, and the native-born whites. Using the 1855 New York State Census manuscripts, he found that differences between the three groups of males were chiefly related to economics, that is to occupations and home ownership, while women's differences were reflected in household structural cycles. For example, he found that "despite high fertility rates and longer periods of childbearing, Irish families were not substantially larger than native-born families (p. 137)." The reason for this is that Irish families sent their children, particularly their girls, out for prolonged periods of domestic service, some as early as 11 years of age. German girls also served as domestics but for a shorter period, and they married earlier. Glasco suggests that these life-cycle differences represented functional adaptations to the urban-industrial environment in that they regulated family size, provided opportunities for girls to acquire some savings toward setting up their own households, and most importantly served as an effective acculturation for the ethnic girls who then taught the new behaviors to their children before they ever came within the reach of the school.

Modell and Haraven (1977) have added a great deal to this notion of a flexible household size reflecting adaptations to industrialism through a careful and imaginative study of boarders and lodgers in Northeastern cities in the late 19th century. By the 1890s, the practice of taking in boarders, while fairly common, had produced a spate of moralistic condemnation, particularly from Progressive housing reformers who spoke of the "lodger evil." Modell and Haraven show, through life-cycle analysis of census materials and comparisons with an 1891 U.S. Commissioner of Labor Report on working class family budgets, that the taking in of boarders correlated well with the loss of income as older children left home. To quote their key finding,

"Boarding in families in industrial America in the late 19th century was the province of young men of an age just to have left their parents' homes, and was an arrangement entered into and provided by household heads who were of an age to have just lost a son from the residential family to an independent residents. . . . It was, [in other words] a social equalization of the family which operated directly by the exchange of a young-adult person and a portion of his young-adult income from his family of orientation to what might be called his family of re-orientation—re-orientation to the city, to a job, to a new neighborhood, to independence (p. 177).

They concluded by saying, "the family was not fragile, but malleable." In attacking the practice of boarding, reformers were attacking "an institution that not only was a sensible response to industrialization but, in cushioning the shock of urban life for newcomers, was decidedly humane (p. 183)."

A further instance of testing fairly directly the impact

of urbanism on the family pattern of a particular group is Elizabeth Pleck's (1973) study of black family structure in late nineteenth century Boston. Using primarily the federal consensus manuscript of 1880, Pleck calculated the percentages of one- and two-parent households by place of birth (North vs. South are used as surrogates for urban vs. rural), literacy, and occupation. Testing Franklin Frazier's observation that "family desertion among Negroes in cities, appears, then, to be one of the inevitable consequences of the impact of urban life on the simple family organization and folk culture which the Negro has evolved in the rural south," Pleck found that two-parent households were **more** prevalent among migrant and rural born heads of household. She also found that the one-parent household was more strongly related to illiteracy of head than to other variables and that despite all categorical differences and despite the strong concentrations of black household heads in the unskilled and service jobs (87%), two-parent households dominated by a ratio of 8 to 2.

A very similar study of the black family in Atlanta of 1880, by William Harris (1976) presents figures that are comparable to Pleck's. The ratio of two-parent to one-parent households was 7 to 3 for blacks and 8 to 2 for whites. When occupation of head was controlled the ratio of nuclear to expanded households was almost identical for blacks and whites (75% to 25%), though the black expanded families included a much higher percentage of "augmented." School attendance rates, with occupation controlled, were also shown to be fairly similar to black and white children, though Harris did not present these rates in relation to household structures. Harris points out that black families were in no way "matrifocal" in 1880, and on the whole they were more like white families than they are today. These are but two examples of the substantial amount of work being done on the nineteenth century black family, all of it supporting the idea of a structure not unlike that of other groups at the time.'

One of Parson's disclaimers regarding his functionalist theory of the family was that it did not apply to upper class families. The reason for this is that Parson knew it to be well established that families whose wealth is based on ownership of property and the control of capital recognize a broad range of financial rights and duties among kin. Kitwak and Sussman were trying to expand on this loophole by showing that middle class family members also recognize helping obligations within what is referred to as a modified extended family. This line of attack has also been opened up by family historians who are looking at ways in which family relationships penetrated business activities up and down the whole spectrum of entrepreneurship.

An example is Sally and Clyde Griffin's (1977) study of the businesses in Poughkeepsie, New York, in the three decades after 1850. Using a variety of sources but primarily the credit reports prepared on Poughkeepsie firms by the R.G. Dun & Company, forerunner of Dun and Bradstreet, the Griffins looked at business turnover, partnerships between relatives, the passing of businesses from father to son or other relatives, the reliance on relatives for loan collateral or outright capital, and other forms of family involvement in business. They report that within a general climate of insecurity indicated by persistently high business mortality rates, entrepreneurs often sought to minimize risk and stabilize business activity by relying on family members in a variety of ways. They

also found, however, that in contrast to Landes' portrait of the family-owned firm in France, "The majority of business arrangements between family members in Poughkeepsie appear to have been expedient and temporary, designed for immediate profit or protection of individual property (p. 147)." Thus the main point to be derived from the Poughkeepsie experience is not that family-rooted values such as honor and reputation successfully competed with the more individualistic values of profit and proprietorship, but that family relationships were seen to be more trustworthy than those outside the family. This quite modest affirmation of family viability is almost exactly what is meant by Litwak and Sussman's concept of the modified extended family.

Sennett Study Flawed

The one study of the family which appears to most closely conform to the title of this paper is Richard Sennett's **Families Against the City** (1970). I do not rate it highly among the studies I have reviewed because it is flawed both methodologically and conceptually. In brief, Sennett's theme is that as middle class families replaced wealthier families in the section of Chicago called Union Park (1872-1890), some clear characterizations of middle-class family life were revealed in the census manuscripts, street directories and anecdotal accounts of this period. Middle-class families are shown to be mother-oriented, intensive, isolated and privatist. What's more, males raised in these highly protective environments are found to be less "successful," less upwardly mobile than males raised in the roughly 10% of the households Sennett classifies as extended.

The conceptual errors in Sennett's analysis are frequent and serious. For example, he fails to distinguish between an extended family and an extended household, he completely ignores even the possibility of extended kin relationships in the neighborhood, he does not distinguish between extension and augmentation. His entire chapter on "The Stages of Family Life" is flawed by his failure to recognize that you cannot carry out life cycle analysis from a single census of a particular neighborhood, especially one that is atypical of the city by design. There simply can be no basis in his data for such statements as "In almost all families, by the time the sons left home they had also married (p. 102)." There are lapses of logic as well. At one point Sennett raises the possibility that family extension might be a temporary phenomenon, an aspect of life-cycles rather than a permanent categorical difference. He then rejects this idea on the astounding basis that elsewhere his data show differences in mobility rates, residential patterns and inter-generational relations between the two forms (p. 77)! In short, Sennett's book is a novel posing as an empirical study. As a novel it's not bad.

In still another approach to the issue of the effect of industrial processes on the family, Haraven (1977) has studied Manchester, New Hampshire during the first quarter of this century. Founded by the Amoskeag Corporation as a textile mill community in the 1830s, it was still controlled by the company in the 1930s. During the period studied, the largest group in both the mill and the town was the French Canadians, who had begun to arrive in the 1870s. Using company employee files, marriage and insurance records, and oral interviews, Haraven found both the worker's families and the corporation to be flexible institutions whose relative strength vis a vis the other fluctuated.

tuated over time. "The family was most effective in making an impact on work patterns in two areas: (1) it facilitated the adjustment of its members by acting as a labor recruiter, a housing agent, and as a source of support in critical life situations, and (2) it exercised its own controls, even if limited ones, against the corporations by encouraging labor turnover, by influencing the job placement of its members, and by affecting job control in the daily routine of work (p. 193)."

John Bodnar's (1976) oral interview study of Slavic peasants who migrated to industrial settings puts forth a challenging hypothesis. He argues that "urban-industrial society nurtured behavior patterns such as limited horizons, familial cooperation, fatalism, and anti-materialism which were as functional for proletarians as for peasants." In the working class neighborhoods into which Slavic peasants settled "pre-industrial behavior neither disintegrated nor simply endured. It may have been reinforced." Bodnar shows that while many aspects of Slavic life, such as the roles assumed by individuals within families, appeared to be unchanged, they were altered in subtle ways. For example, within the family, which remained a strong patriarchal structure, the mother assumed the position of fiscal manager. Further, among peasants, "tribal" loyalties were essentially village loyalties. These were both transformed into loyalties to larger, regional or national allegiances and were also strengthened. Bodnar's idea, then, is that there were substantial continuities between pre-modern, peasant life and the particular strata of urban-industrial life which Slavic peasants sought out in this country which were more powerful than the litany of discontinuities we are more familiar with.

By now it should be clear that these "revisionist" images of the family in industrial America do not aspire to substitute a new rigid paradigm for the now discredited paradigm of the older modernization theorists. Haraven warns that "revisions of the stereotypes of family passivity and breakdown in the industrial process" is already engendering new extremes. The filiofetism which has been emerging over the past few years tends to exaggerate the strength of the immigrant or working-class family and its autonomy as an institution. For the time being, we are without a single comprehensive theory of the family that can take account of the seemingly endless variety of family forms which family historians are discovering. The most important implication of all this for educational theory is that we should consider the many ways in which our notions of secondary socialization, social mobility, and other aspects of school-family-community relations are built upon false images of the family which we have tucked away and taken for granted.

From 1880 to 1930, the American family resisted the social currents swirling around it. It did not succumb, neither did it triumph. It did however survive, and for better or for worse it is surviving still.

NOTES

¹ Donovan, *Family* (New York; Dell, 1978); McKenna, *Family* (New York; Carillon Books, 1978); Plante, *Family* (New York; Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1978); Rossi, et. al., *Family* (New York; Norton, 1978); Victor and Sander, *Family* (Indiana; Bobbs Merrill, 1978). Note also Howard, *Families* (New York; Simon and Schuster, 1978); Knafl and Grace, *Families Across the Life Cycle* (Boston; Little Brown and Co., 1978); Young, *Family Afoot* (Ames,

Iowa; Iowa State University Press, 1978); Stinnett and Birdsong, *Family and Alternative Life Styles* (Chicago; Nelson-Hall, 1978).

² See *Newsweek*, 91: 63-5 (May 15, 1978). The conference has been postponed until 1981.

³ See Moore, "Thoughts on the Future of the Family," in Edwards, ed., *The Family and Change* (New York; Knopf, 1969).

⁴ For examples see Reitman, *Foundations of Education for Prospective Teachers* (Boston; Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1977), ch. 8; Havighurst and Neugarten, *Society and Education* (Boston; Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975), 4th edition, ch. 7; National Conference on Social Welfare, Delliquadri, ed., *Helping the Family in Urban Society* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1963).

⁵ The British anthropologist Peter Firth published material on kinship networks in Britain as early as 1956, but this appears to have been much less influential than Young and Willmott's work. Firth, ed., *Two Studies on Kinship in London* (London; London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, No. 15, 1956).

⁶ See Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, New York; Cornell University Press, 1978) and Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (London; Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁷ In response to Glazer's assertion that "the Negro today is like the immigrant yesterday," Harris suggests that the far more relevant historical question is "why the todays of black Americans are so much like the yesterdays?"

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The Spread of Stupefaction

The extension of formal schooling to groups formerly excluded from it is one of the most striking developments in modern history. The experience of Western Europe and the United States in the last 200 years suggests that mass education provides one of the principal foundations of economic development, and modernizers throughout the rest of the world have tried to duplicate the achievement of the West in bringing education to the masses. Faith in the wonder-working powers of education has proved to be one of the most durable components of liberal ideology, easily assimilated by ideologies hostile to the rest of liberalism. Yet the democratization of education has accomplished little to justify this faith. It has neither improved popular understanding of modern society, raised the quality of popular culture, nor reduced the gap between wealth and poverty, which remains as wide as ever. On the other hand, it has contributed to the decline of critical thought and the erosion of intellectual standards, focusing us to consider the possibility that mass education, as conservatives have argued all along, is intrinsically incompatible with the maintenance of educational quality.

The Culture of Narcissism, American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations. Christopher Lasch. New York: W.W. Norton. 1978. p. 125.