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The Future of the Family

Daniel P. Moynihan*

Timothy M. Smeeding[†]

Lee Rainwater[‡]

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‡,

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BOOK REVIEWS

Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions

The Future of the Family. Edited by Daniel P. Moynihan, Timothy M. Smeeding, and Lee Rainwater. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004. 384 pp. ISBN 0-87154-625-6, \$39.95 (cloth).

In 1965, the nation was rocked by the Moynihan Report, a document that highlighted the decline of marriage and rise of out-of-wedlock birth among African-Americans (“The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor). The facts were indisputable, but the report was extremely controversial because it traced child poverty largely to illegitimacy instead of to public policy and the economy.

The Future of the Family, published posthumously, represents Moynihan’s last hurrah on the topic. It provides a careful review of the demographic shifts, policy changes, and relevant research subsequent to the original report. The core chapters begin with David Ellwood and Christopher Jencks documenting the rise of single-parent families, about half of whom are the result of out-of-wedlock births, with rising divorce rates in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s also playing a major role. For researchers, concerns regarding single-parent families are rooted in the well-known findings that child poverty is higher and child development is stunted in such families, and that the phenomenon is far more widespread in the African-American community than among other groups. These findings are all as Moynihan foresaw.

But there is also a moral element floating like a mist around much of the relevant research and policy—a conservative Christian belief that single, co-habiting, or gay parents are morally inferior to heterosexual, married parents, and that extra-marital sex, birth control, and abortion are sins. I shorthand that belief structure here with the term “conservative.” That Moynihan favored marriage then explains why conservatives took up his challenge, while liberals were ambivalent at best about his views of family and poverty policies.

From the rise of single-parent families in the United States, the work turns to an examination

of the parallel though distinct rise of single-parent families in Europe. That rise, and the varying paths across nations, confirm Moynihan’s earlier claims that culture is partly responsible and that public policies matter as well. The following chapter, by Lee Rainwater and Timothy Smeeding, uses cross-national data to highlight and help to understand the links between single-parent families and child poverty. The United States stands out in terms of extreme poverty rates (over 50%) for the children of single mothers. Rainwater and Smeeding attribute this result partly to the high levels of income inequality found in the U.S. economy, as well as meager governmental supports for the poor.

A piece by Wendy Sigle-Rushton and Sara McLanahan asks whether the absence of a father reduces child well-being. This question gets close to the core of the conservative claim that heterosexual, married parents are superior to other parents. Basically, we know that the answer is “yes” to the extent that men provide additional family income. Beyond that, there is some evidence that the loss of a father is associated with poor child outcomes regardless of income, though we also know that children do poorly in intact but high-conflict families.

Janet Gornick next connects gender inequality in the household division of labor inside intact families to the problem of father absence in families that have experienced divorce or separation. Her argument—that we will only counter father absence effectively when married and partnered men take greater responsibility for child care and housework—is both simple and compelling. The need for men to do more follows partly from the increased labor force participation of women and mothers, but could also facilitate greater gender equality, and better outcomes for children within various types of families.

P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale follows with a brief statement of the advantages of marriage-strengthening programs. These initiatives are, on their face, non-controversial: if conflict is bad for marriages and for children, then reducing conflict through training in interpersonal skills might help. Such training might also reduce the rate of divorce, again improving child outcomes. Douglas Wolf next provides a summary of some relevant trends ignored in much of the work—the rise in childlessness, in

living alone, and in delayed child-bearing. These findings provide important context for efforts to improve our treatment of children—many individuals have no direct stake in such efforts.

Wade Horn's chapter outlines and defends the current U.S. administration's effort to promote marriage in the context of evidence showing that children are generally better off economically and developmentally inside two-parent families. Will Marshall and Isabel Sawhill present an alternative policy approach, arguing that a consensus is developing around efforts to reduce early childbearing by unwed women, support early childhood education, and provide paid parental leave. Their argument is that each initiative helps children directly and could also indirectly promote healthy marriages by reducing the strains of balancing work and family. That chapter is followed by Nancy Folbre's call for placing higher value on the work (typically unpaid) of caring for children, the elderly, and the disabled, in part because children are a "public good" and generate benefits far into the future.

The authors of the three chapters in the final section reflect on the earlier portions of the book. Samuel Preston notes that we need to accept the reality of single-parenthood but have not yet done so. He also gently suggests that Moynihan's original focus on out-of-wedlock births may have been misguided, in large measure because problems surrounding child development and poverty—and appropriate policy solutions—are much more complex. Preston concludes that our policy-making should give more precedence to children and their care. Frank Furstenberg then argues that marriage promotion will likely generate minimal gains for children: few divorces would be averted by training of the proposed kind. He believes we should support children and that, in doing so, we will concomitantly strengthen marriage by reducing the financial and time binds facing poor families. Irwin Garfinkel's chapter completes the volume with a call for a reduction of income-testing for various anti-poverty programs, such as TANF and Food Stamps, because, he argues, these tend to provide an incentive for single mothers not to wed. He is careful to add that such expansions should not reduce benefits for the poorest—mainly single mothers.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the sheer volume of high-quality research undertaken since the Moynihan Report, the causes and consequences of out-of-wedlock childbearing remain poorly understood. We do know that current U.S.

policies fail a majority of children in single-parent households by the simplest measure available—poverty. And the question haunting this work is why we have not improved the situation.

Given that poverty, by definition, could at any time be eliminated, at least symptomatically, through government transfers—allocations equal to a mere fraction of (for example) those for the Pentagon—why do we permit children to remain poor? "We" in this case must mean, to a large extent, conservative policymakers. Just as liberals could not dodge all responsibility for the failure (or incomplete success) of Johnson's War on Poverty, conservatives cannot wholly disown the disappointing or even retrograde results of poverty-related policies that they have played a major role in shaping in recent years.

Central to the problem may be the conservative belief that single motherhood should be both discouraged and penalized. Since mothers cannot be punished economically without delivering the same punishment to the children in their care, the only way to single out the "transgressors" is to first physically separate the children. There is evidence that the government's poverty-alleviation policies are consistent with such reasoning. As Folbre notes, in cases where children have indeed been removed from their single mothers—through the foster care system—federal expenditures are far higher than for the care of children in poor families. Relatedly, the conservative politician Newt Gingrich explicitly floated a proposal for public orphanages in the 1990s. But the public's recoil from that suggestion demonstrated that we are not yet prepared to accept the idea of systematically separating children from their mothers. The question for conservatives thus becomes, "Is widespread child poverty an acceptable price to pay in order to penalize single mothers?" So far, judging only by policy, their answer seems to be yes.

As Stephanie Coontz has noted (*Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 2005), Moynihan's fears regarding the rise of out-of-wedlock births among African-Americans, and the claim that the trend should be reversed, left us ill-prepared for what in fact eventuated: the same dramatic rise among whites. Conservatives have no answer here except to promote marriage, an effort that will almost certainly fail to significantly alter family form. Like many of the contributors to *The Future of the Family*, I believe that any substantive solution will focus not on

family form, but squarely on the needs of children.

Robert Drago

Professor of Labor Studies and
Women's Studies
Pennsylvania State University

Adequacy of Earnings Replacement in Workers' Compensation Programs. Edited by H. Allan Hunt. Kalamazoo, Mich.: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2004. xi, 159 pp. ISBN 0-88099-314-6, \$16.00 (paper).

In the early part of the last century, a social contract between labor, employers, and government was achieved, the like of which, arguably, has never been replicated. Workers were barred from suing their employer for work-related injuries and diseases in return for expeditious, though limited, compensation. Central to striking the compromise was mutual agreement that the workers' compensation system would provide adequate medical treatment, vocational rehabilitation, and recovery of lost earnings.

However, recent reforms, frequently motivated by cost control considerations, have, in the view of some in the workers' compensation advocacy community, seriously reduced the adequacy of benefits and undermined the social contract. Especially sobering is a decision from the Supreme Court of Canada on a matter challenging the tort bar. The language of this decision suggested that further erosion of workers' compensation benefit adequacy could be sufficient to void the social contract and force the court to re-open the door to litigating work injury compensation.

Whether workers' compensation benefits were ever adequate, and whether adequacy has diminished, are ultimately empirical questions. Step 1 in addressing these questions is defining "adequacy" and step 2 is measuring adequacy. This book takes readers a very long way on this two-step journey.

The authors note that while benefit adequacy is central to perceptions of the fairness of workers' compensation, there is no single definition of adequacy. Should adequacy be relative to a poverty standard or a policy standard, such as the proportion of lost earnings replaced by indemnity benefits? If a wage replacement standard is chosen, how might the proportion of lost wages replaced by workers' compensation

be assessed for a worker whose injury has compromised his or her ability to be employed in the future? The central problem in such a case is that it is impossible to know what that injured worker's lifetime earnings would have been but for the accident.

A number of alternative measures of adequacy are proposed and critiqued, with the strengths and limitations of each clearly set out. The various approaches to measuring adequacy are illustrated with appropriate simulations, based on the benefits prescribed by each state's workers' compensation statute. One of the valuable contributions of the analysis is its demonstration that the adequacy of a particular state's earnings replacement can vary widely depending on the measure used. Another contribution is the excellent discussion, expanded upon in appendices, of the data, methodology, and judgment calls necessary to perform each of the calculations, highlighting the fact that the assessment of adequacy can also be influenced by the initial assumptions. Further, the measures of expected benefits—both averages across all injury types (temporary, permanent, and fatal injury) and averages broken out by injury types—are very carefully done, and truly represent the state of the art for performing this type of analysis.

The authors also review the evidence from the small number of wage loss studies, based on data from a very few states, that measure the extent to which benefits actually paid to injured workers (as opposed to what the statute prescribes should be paid) replace lost earnings (a) immediately following the accident and (b) into the future. The amount the worker would have earned, but for the accident, was estimated in these studies using either matching methods or regression techniques (since this figure is otherwise unknowable). A central conclusion is that studies measuring actual wage losses are superior to the statutory benefit studies, principally because they measure actual benefits received, which may in part reveal information about how the workers' compensation statute is administered.

Whether based on studies measuring expected benefits payable under a workers' compensation statute or on studies measuring benefits actually received, the verdict for benefit adequacy is the same. Relative to the authors' preferred yardstick, which is that indemnity benefits should replace at least two-thirds of lost wages, benefit adequacy typically falls well short. Among the more alarming results are the dismal earnings replacement rates for fatal and