Perspectives on

The New Familism

Contents:

An Institute for American Values Working Paper

Publication No.: WP8

June 1991

THE NEW FAMILISM
Crossing the Cultural Divide

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

Over the past few months, the Institute for American Values has been getting calls from reporters who ask a question that goes something like this: "Are the values of The Eighties giving way to a new set of values? Is there a new zeitgeist out there?"

Clearly, there is plenty of evidence to prompt such a question. Michael Milken is in jail. The economy has slowed down. The word "yuppie" is fading from our vocabulary. So is the word "superwoman." The baby boom generation is settling down, getting grayer, and suddenly becoming fascinated with the exploits of middle-aged athletes like Nolan Ryan. The divorce rate has leveled off. There were 4.2 million new births in 1990, the highest number since 1964. The AIDS epidemic has altered our sense of the nature and meaning of sexual freedom, and the divorce revolution has hurt women and children in ways we never fully anticipated.

I won't pretend to know what deep changes might be taking place in the polity or the economy. But I do think that, within the culture, as shift is beginning to take place. It is a shift away from an ethos of expressive individualism and toward an ethos of family obligation and commitment. It is a shift away from the assertion of individual rights -- what Mary Ann Glendon calls "rights" talk -- and toward a recognition of individual responsibility. It is a shift away from a preoccupation with adult needs and toward greater attention to children's needs. It is a shift away from a calculus of happiness based on individual fulfillment and toward a calculus of happiness based on the well-being of the family as a whole. This emergent cultural ethos is what David Blankenhorn and I have called "The New Familism."

Many forces might be contributing to this shift, but I believe one of the most important has to do with the changing life cycle of large numbers of the baby boom generation and particularly those who hold professional and managerial jobs and stand on the upper third of the generation's socioeconomic scale.

During the seventies and eighties, there was a nice fit between the life stage of many baby boomers and the values of expressive individualism. Singlehood on the one hand. Individual freedom on the other hand. Career development on the one hand. An absorption with the self on the other. Getting your first credit card on the one hand. Expressing yourself through the marketplace on the other.

Today, a critical mass of baby boomers has reached a new stage in the life cycle. They've married. They are becoming parents. And they're discovering that the values that served them in singlehood no longer serve them in parenthood. What used to be a tight fit has now become a mismatch.

This is not to say that individualism is no longer a dominant force in American society. It certainly is. Nor is it to say that all is well with American families. Much of the current evidence would argue otherwise. Nor do I mean to suggest that this shift is now pervasive. It is not. It is concentrated in the middle class. But I do believe that we are entering a period when there is not only a growing recognition of the limits of expressive individualism but also an increasing commitment to family life.

To provide a rough framework for my discussion, I've divided the last 50 years into three distinct cultural periods. (See Appendix I.)

The first is the period of what we might call Traditional Familism, the period extending from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s. Demographically, this period of family life was characterized by the overwhelming dominance of married couples with children, high birth rates, low divorce rates, a high degree of marital stability. Economically, it was marked by a robust economy, a rising standard of living, and an expanding middle class. Culturally, it was defined by individual conformity to social norms, the ideology of separate spheres for men and women, and the idealization of family life. Younger adults in the post-war period tended to have strong identities and small egos. The television emblem of post-war family life was, and still is, *Ozzie and Harriet*.

The second period might be called the period of Individualism, extending from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s.

It was characterized by greater demographic diversity, a decline in birth rates, accelerating divorce rates, individual and social experiment, the breakdown of the separate spheres ideology, the creation of a singles "lifestyle," the idealization of career and work life, and the search for meaning in life through self-expression. Younger adults in this period could be said to have big egos and weak identities. The emblematic television shows of this period were *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the '70s and *LA Law* in the '80s. Both shows treat work relationships and the workplace as the primary realm of intimacy, nurturing, and fulfillment. Children do not exist in the workplace world at all.

The third period is the period we are now entering: the period of the New Familism.

Demographically, it features a leveling off of the divorce rate, a leveling off of work force participation among women, and the highest number of births since 1964. Socially, it is a lot less uptight than the first period but a little more uptight than the second period. Culturally, it is shifting away from expressive individualism and a fascination with self and toward greater attachments to family and commitment to others. I'm not sure we have an emblematic television show yet.

Let me illustrate these three cultural periods with a recent newspaper story. It's a story about high-powered lawyers who have become mothers for the first or second time. One of the women had left her full-time job as a trial lawyer because her younger child was emotionally

distressed at being left with a babysitter so frequently. The woman didn't want to give up her professional work, so she became president of Greater Boston Legal Services, continued her *pro bono* work for the Boston Bar Association, and ran for the select board in her town. Her husband left his partnership at a law firm and took a judgeship that gave him more manageable hours. Both parents agree that their family life is better and their children are happier; the mother says this was the most satisfying arrangement for her, although she might return to a law firm when her children were older.

In the period of Traditional Familism, this woman probably would not have had a law degree nor the opportunity to create a flexible and satisfying arrangement of family and work responsibilities. Her husband probably would not have resigned his law partnership to spend more time with his daughters.

In the period of Individualism, the woman might have faced severe criticism and experienced great self-doubt if she left a highly successful career to raise her daughters. Her decision would have been condemned as "selling out" her sisters or "giving in" to the male power structure. And, of course, her contributions to the community, through her *pro bono* work, would have been considered a waste of her time and talent. She and her husband might have split up.

In the period of the New Familism, both parents give up something in their work lives in order to foster their family lives. The woman makes the larger concession, but it is one she actively elects and clearly sees as temporary. She does not give up her professional life although she does give up some money in order to get greater control of her time. She makes this choice based on a vision of what she sees as a complete life, rather than a life defined by traditional male models of career and success.

Interestingly, there is very little "rights" talk by either the women or the men interviewed in this story. They describe their work and family arrangements in language that seems to place the happiness and well-being of the family before their individual desires or ambitions.

It would be foolish to try to make too much of one story clipped from the pages of the *Boston Globe*. But it is worth considering for several reasons. First, such arrangements are increasingly common. Several recent surveys suggest that a growing number of men and women want to cut back on work in order to devote more time to children. A number of the experts and scholars we polled also say that they see evidence that women are revising their career plans in order to raise young children. In addition, my own field research with middle-income parents of young children confirms this trend. These parents' job decisions are heavily influenced by a consideration of how best they can maximize the time they spend with their own children. Many choose tag-team arrangements with a spouse; weekend work; or shift work over traditional 9-5 work schedules.

As I said before, The New Familism is strongest in the baby boom generation. This is a huge generation: It is a generation that invented singlehood as a "lifestyle," that cohabited and

delayed marriage and childbearing. But this generation has now settled down into family life.

Particularly important are the babyboomers who occupy the upper third of the generation's socioeconomic scale. These are the influential and relatively affluent professionals and managers -- the people that Ralph Whitehead calls "bright collars," Daniel Yankelovich calls "strong formers," and Robert Reich would call "symbolic analysts." A decade ago, they were some of the most committed exponents of careerism and expressive individualism. They saw their own lives as a work of art. The self was their subject. Today, family life is becoming their subject. Where they used to paint self-portraits, they're now painting murals.

These members of the generation have a disproportionate impact on the media culture. They are screenwriters, advertising executives, journalists, movie directors, ministers in megachurches, novelists, book editors, television producers. Since much of our culture today is a media culture, they have an enormous influence on what values and behaviors are depicted, what values and behaviors are affirmed and celebrated, and what roles are held up as models.

(In fact, I believe that one of the reasons we have such an explosion of media interest in the family today is that many journalists belong to this segment of the baby boom generation and are settling into family life themselves.)

If there is a single common experience that contributes to The New Familism, it is parenthood. A majority of the baby boomers -- roughly 45 million -- are now parents. Becoming a parent is a defining individual and social event. Across time and across cultures, it is nearly universally understood as a radical and transformative experience. As any grandmother will tell you, becoming a parent changes you. It makes you settle down, think ahead, become less selfish.

The cultural psychologist David Gutmann offers an important theoretical argument to support the wisdom of our grandmothers. Gutmann argues that parenthood brings about one of the most potent transformations of narcissism in the entire life cycle. He writes:

"New parenthood marks the point at which the conjugal couple routinely and ... automatically surrender a large piece of their narcissistic claims to personal omnipotentiality and immortality (and concede) them instead to the child. The result is the routine, unexamined heroism of parenting, which even renders mothers and fathers willing to die in their child's stead."

Becoming a parent also changes your relationship to the larger society. Raising children is a social task. It requires the support and participation of many adults in non-contractual, non-exchange relationships. Consequently, it is hard to be a social isolate or even a shy person when you are engaged in raising children. Parenthood inevitably leads one beyond the spheres of both the home and the workplace and out into the neighborhood and community.

I realized this in a very personal and vivid way not long ago as I was having a pleasant, low-key lunch with an old friend. We're about the same age. We share common interests and background. We both work outside the home. We've both been married for a long time. The main difference between us is that I have children and she does not. In any event, when we met for lunch, we spent a lot of time talking about our summer plans.

My friend was looking forward to a vacation to California wine country ... to working in her garden ... to taking tennis lessons ... to helping her husband to build a new deck for their house.

My summer plans included helping my son and his school friends put on a play; hosting a visit from cousins; carpooling to a playgroup; trading babysitting with a neighbor; dealing with bugbites, deer ticks, and swimmer's ear; going to softball games; making weekly visits to the children's room at the library; patching together a summer routine that involved some work (but never as much as I hoped for), some time with my kids (but never as much as I wished for), and some time simply to enjoy the summer.

Without suggesting that my summer is any better or worse than my friend's, I will note the differences. Her plans are almost entirely individual, and mine are social. Hers are elective, and mine are obligatory. Hers are based on exchange relationships, and mine are more heavily dependent on non-exchange relationships.

Parenthood also changes your view of the workplace. Throughout the '70s and '80s, we saw an idealization of the workplace that very much paralleled the idealization of family in the '50s. Work life replaced family life as the realm of self-fulfillment and intimacy. Careers replaced children as the central focus for adult time and energy. Of course, this coincided with a time when baby boomers were developing strong attachments to the workplace. Today, as the baby boom generation becomes involved in parenthood, we see a reassessment of work life, particularly among babyboomers and especially among baby boom mothers.

Much of this critique of the workplace is driven by the time squeeze on family life. More and more parents of young children are realizing that work life and family life conflict, that time is scarcer than money, and that time and attention are the chief currency of family life.

Parenthood also changes your view of what makes for happiness. We all know people who are single-minded in their pursuit of career, who profess no interest, much less affection, for children -- until they have one of their own. Alice Rossi reminds us that the love most adults feel for a newborn child is totally irrational. There is no way to describe it in the language of choice, the language of individual self-interest, or the language of cost-and-benefits. "Here is this demanding, fragile, totally dependent 6 to 8 pound creature that disturbs our sleep, disrupts our plans, produces unpleasant odors from its orifices, turns red in the face and screams despite our care. Yet we submit to it, do without sleep, feed and clean it every few hours around the clock, and, in a few weeks' time, have fallen totally in love with it."

The cultural challenge to Traditional Familism, particularly the assault on pronatal norms, left elites wary about any discussion of parenthood, much less a celebration of the pleasures of raising children. Some of this wariness grew out of a still powerful and often expressed fear that any recognition of the pleasures of raising children might somehow backfire and work against women -- put them back into what Betty Friedan once called the comfortable concentration camp of the home.

What remains, unspoken, at least at the level of elite discourse, is that children bring joy as well as sorrow, rewards as well as sacrifice into adult lives. Experience, on the other hand, speaks eloquently of these pleasures. It is no small thing to have so many adults finally experiencing first-hand the pleasures of loving and caring for a child.

Finally, parenthood changes your view of the culture. Parents are responsible for instilling values, and many parents find that the culture, particularly the mass media, promotes values that assault and undermine their efforts. As Christopher Lasch puts it, "to see the modern world from the point of view of a parent is to see it in the worst possible light." In focus groups I've conducted, parents consistently cite a culture that celebrates sex, violence, and materialism as the major obstacle to childrearing. Indeed, it is possible that in the coming decade we will see a strong critique of the culture led by the champions of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.

Accordingly, to enter parenthood is to cross a cultural divide. On one side is the individual and the domain of the self. On the other side is community and the domain of the civil society. For individual parents, this life passage requires a willingness to set aside individual desires in obedience to the insistent needs of a dependent other. For the generation as a whole, this cultural passage may lead to a shift of social energies from the self to the larger society.

If there is a new familistic ethos emerging, then that's good news for children. There are many positive aspects to the social and cultural changes of the past 25 years. Greater choice for adults. Greater freedom and opportunities for women. Greater tolerance for difference and diversity. But, overall, the period has not been positive for children. The most compelling reason for welcoming and fostering The New Familism is that, by doing so, we may be able to make life better for children.

I will close with one final observation.

Any meaningful effort to strengthen family life must come to terms with the culture and with the cultural sources of family well-being. This is not to deny the importance of family-friendly public policies or workplace policies. Nor is it to say that economic and political and technological forces do not affect the family for better or worse. They certainly do.

However, I believe that the principal source of family decline over the past 25 years has been cultural. It has to do with the ascendancy of a set of values that have been destructive of commitment, obligation, responsibility, sacrifice, and particularly destructive of the claims of children on adult time and attention and commitment.

Over the past 25 years, the family has been weakened as an institution because many Americans changed their minds about staying together for the sake of the children; they changed their minds about the necessity of putting their children's needs before their own needs; they changed their minds about marriage as a lifelong commitment; they changed their minds about what it means to be unmarried and pregnant. And many American men changed their minds about the obligation of a father to provide for his children.

At the moment, we have a political conversation about the family that's giving rise to public policy solutions.

We have an economic conversation about the family that's giving rise to workplace solutions.

We do not yet have an equivalent cultural conversation about the family that's giving rise to cultural solutions. That, it seems to me, is where an opportunity for leadership lies in the decade ahead.

The author: *Dr. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a social historian, is a Research Associate at the Institute for American Values.*

Three Cultural Eras

TRADITIONAL FAMILISM: 1940s - 1960s	INDIVIDUALISM: 1960s - 1980s	NEW FAMILISM: 1990s
Relatively low divorce rate	Rising divorce rate	Divorce rate stabilizing; evidence of harmful effects
Early marriage, parenthood deferred	Marriage, parenthood deferred	Baby boom cohort engaged in parenthood
Nuclear family dominant	Rise of postnuclear families	Stabilizing family forms
High birth rate	Declining birth rate	Largest number of births since 1964; stabilizing birth rate
Rapid economic growth	Slow economic growth	?
Obligated self	Expressive self	Recognition of limitations of expressive self
Separate spheres ideology	Breakdown of separate spheres	Shared responsibilities for work and home
Child-centered	Adult-centered	More child-centered
Conformity to social norms through	Rebellion against social norms	Reassessment/sorting of norms; renewed appreciation of value of social norms
Sex/procreation/marriage linked	Attenuation of these linkages	?
Home: realm of fulfillment	Work: realm of	Shift from work to home as

fulfillment realm of fulfillment

The New Familism:

The Experts Respond

To explore "The New Familism" hypothesis, the Institute polled 300 people drawn equally from four professional categories -- family scholars/analysts, family service providers, family doctors/therapists, and business and civic leaders. As of June 6, we received 40 responses.

Among the respondents, there was general consensus that a shift toward the family was taking place. There was also consensus that such a shift was taking place within the middle class, but not among the very rich or the very poor. Several people drew a distinction between attitudes and behaviors noting that while they do see more familistic attitudes, they have not yet seen an increase in familistic behavior.

The evidence cited in favor of "The New Familism" includes:

Divorce rate stabilizing; birth rate increasing; growing awareness of the harmful social effects of divorce; increasing concern about "societal" child abuse; social services shifting from individual to family as basic "unit of service"; growth of family therapy; desire of women to stay at home with infants and young children; a left/right ideological convergence on the importance of family stability; men taking more responsibility for childcare; demand for more flex-time, part-time, job-sharing, and home-based work.

The evidence cited against "The New Familism" includes:

Divorce remains at historically high levels; individualism still strong; epidemic of teen-age pregnancies, drug abuse, and sexually transmitted disease; number of "unmarried couples" growing at an accelerating rate; continuing decline in the rate of "first marriage"; recovery in the birthrate due exclusively to rising number of out-of-wedlock births.

A sampling of responses:

"While the family is not in fundamental danger, the trends and pressures are towards individualism, not familicentrism. Adult Americans appear to have adjusted to the less family-centered society, but the impact on children is questionable."

"Nobody can yet know, but I too have seen signs of a revival of emphasis on family strength/stability and of something of a left-right convergence on this point. I believe we've

reached the point of understanding that so much that's important to a healthy society cannot be done by government or public policy if the essential institutions are shaky."

"I see a greater ritual invocation of family values but I do not see a greater commitment of social resources to make good on that invocation."

"I see several things which point in that direction ... (toward the New Familism.) Some educated women are beginning to realize that, as one could most dishearteningly put it, women's liberation meant, in fact, men's liberation. The consequences of traumatic divorce ... are one illustration. ... I see some recognition of the costs of extreme individualism, and the recognition that the notion of a disconnected, completely autonomous freedom is an invitation to disillusionment."

"Individuals are verbalizing about family values, family togetherness, activities that build positive memories. There is little evidence, however, that any of this has really been incorporated by these individuals. It's like it is a separate issue that can be delegated to Tuesday afternoon rather than being ... encompassing -- a way of life."

"I see this hypothesis in light of a general belief that our society is moving toward increasing polarization -- richer and poorer; healthier and sicker; more peaceful and more violent. The erosion of 'the middle' is a general phenomenon. In this light, I see increased familism and increased atomism."

"I see evidence of the 'new familism' in the middle class society. More emphasis on children and family than solely trying to get ahead (for men). For women -- more part-time, job-sharing, flex, child care at the workplace all seem to support this trend. More professional women opting to take time out to care for young children."

"I see more evidence of a change in attitude than behavior; that is, more and more Americans have a sense that one cannot indefinitely put premiums on everything <u>but</u> family and are seeking ways to restore it. Whether this will mean a serious effort to support behavior patterns which reinforce the family -- parental work schedules; mobility -- moving in order to advance careers, thus dislocating children --; arranging more meals at home, including conversing and reading time; working harder to cut divorce rates -- we cannot yet tell. But a shift in attitudes is important since it can lead to some behavioral rearrangements."

"I believe your hypothesis is correct. The dynamic is, in my view, as follows: In the 1960s, there was radical social change in the US, centering around a vast transformation of individualism.

The new individualism caused lots of disruptions -- but none more serious than those involving the family. Now, among scholars and broad segments of the general public, there is growing recognition of these problems -- and from this recognition a shift in values and behavior 'back' to the family. While the problems are profound, and corrections will come slowly, there

are now a number of encouraging signs. Among the latter I would call attention to the broad mix of social attitudes among young people today, which involves a significant drawing away from some of the destructive elements of the new individualism."

To: May 17, 1991

From: Barbara Whitehead Ref:

The "New Familism" hypothesis says that today we are seeing the beginning of a cultural tilt -- a shift in values and behavior, and a change in cultural ethos -- toward a greater emphasis on the importance of family commitment and family stability. I would value your answer to these two questions:

1. If you do see evidence of such a change, please describe briefly what you see as the dimensions, nature, and likely consequences of this trend.

2. If you see little or no evidence of such a change, please describe briefly your view of the current trends in our society regarding family.

Please mail or FAX your reply before June 1 to:

Institute for American Values, 1841 Broadway, Suite 211, New York, NY 10023
Phone: 212 246 3942. FAX: 212 541 6665

THE NEW FAMILISM
Some Comments on Recent Survey Data

Norval D. Glenn

I would like to address specifically what survey data can tell us about the "new familism" -- about any reversal of the anti-familistic trends discussed in my earlier paper for the Institute for American Values, *The Family Values of Americans*.

Those data cannot tell us as much as we would like to know. The surveys of American adults of all ages contain a dearth of repeated questions that deal with "familism." The few questions that have been repeated -- such as those dealing with ideal family size, the moral rightness or wrongness of extramarital sex relations, and the like -- simply cannot tell us whether or not Barbara Whitehead's hypotheses about the new familism are correct, because they do not tap the attitudes and values with which she deals.

However, they provide a little evidence of a recent return to familism, though the evidence they provide is rather subtle. In general, responses to family-related questions repeated on such surveys as the *NORC General Social Surveys* and the leading commercial opinion polls show little change since around 1980. It is only when the data are broken down by age that some return to familistic values is evident, and the change is largely among the youngest adults. The result is the pattern of variation shown in Table 1. The post-baby-boomers seem to be a bit more familistic than the baby boomers, but they are not as familistic as the pre-baby-boomers. Since the oldest adults are the most familistic (according to these limited indicators), their dying off (cohort succession) exerts an influence against familism, and that is apparently why little or no pro-familistic trend is evident in the total adult population.

Since the evidence from surveys of the total adult population is so limited, I have turned to two series of surveys of youth and young adults to gain better evidence. These are the *Monitoring the Future Surveys* of high school seniors conducted annually since 1975 by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and the annual *American Council of Education-UCLA Surveys* of college freshmen conducted since the late 1960s. I present some of the data from the latter surveys on Table 2. The time period I have selected is 1987-1990, because it is only since 1987 that there have been changes in a pro-familistic direction. Prior to that year, the responses to the family-related questions had been almost stable for several years, and the reported importance of objectives that may compete with family ones had been increasing (since the early 1970s).

There appears to have been some moderate changes in a familistic direction. I say "appears to have been" because the indicated changes from 1987 to 1988 may be at least partially an artifact of some changes that were made in the order in which the different objectives were presented. However, it is unlikely that all of the indicated 1987-1988 changes

are question-order effects, and there were some continuing changes in a familistic direction through 1990, for instance, in the importance assigned to raising a family. The sample sizes are so large that almost any indicated change is statistically "significant" or "reliable." It is also important that there was a decline in career objectives, which tend to compete with family ones. The importance attached to being very well off financially remained almost stable, but this lack of change was itself a change, since the importance given this objective had been going up for around 15 years prior to 1987.

A limitation of the data on college freshmen is that the respondents are an unrepresentative sample of their birth cohorts -- an elite sample. Samples of high school seniors do not include persons who dropped out of school before the last year of high school, but they are much more nearly representative of the cohorts from which they are drawn. I have not prepared a table to show data from the *Monitoring the Future Surveys* because the post-1986 data are not strictly comparable with the 1975-1986 data; but I will summarize those data in general terms.

These data show some pro-familistic trends beginning earlier than 1987 -- in some cases as early as the late 1970s, but more typically in the early to middle 1980s. At the same time, expressed attitudes toward gender roles continued to change in an anti-traditional direction -- an indication that the "new familism" is not the same as the familism of the 1950s and earlier.

For instance, the percentage of high school seniors who said it was very likely they would want to have children went from 59 in 1975 to 63 in 1986 to about 66 in 1989, and the percentage who said they would likely choose to get married went from 74 in 1975 to 78 in 1986 to about 80 in 1989. The percentage who said they would definitely prefer to have a mate for most of their lives went from 53 in 1975 to 58 in 1986 to about 61 in 1989, and those who disagreed with the statement that having a close intimate relationship with only one partner is too restrictive for the average person went from 34 percent in 1975 to 41 percent in 1986 to about 45 percent in 1989. These changes are not very substantial, of course, but they are statistically significant and large enough to be of some importance.

(Interestingly, as interest in and expectation of marriage went up, those who said it was very likely they would stay married to the same person for life went down, from 65 percent in 1975 to 59 percent in 1986 to about 57 percent in 1989.)

On the other hand, the kind of changes Barbara Whitehead has perceived among the aging baby boomers -- such as a growing realization that neither men nor women can maximize their career success and still do justice to their families -- are not evident among high school seniors -- and of course if Barbara is correct, they will not be evident until these persons become parents. For instance, the percentage who agreed that mothers should spend more time with their children than they do went from 34 in 1975 to 24 in 1986 to about 22 in 1989, and the percentage who agreed that a preschool child is likely to suffer if the mother works went from 36 in 1975 to 22 in 1986 to about 21 in 1989. And as I said earlier, approval of traditional gender roles continued to decline among young persons. For instance, agreement that "it is usually better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of

the home and family" went from 21 percent in 1975 to 14 percent in 1986 to about 11 percent in 1989.

In brief, the surveys of youth and young adults do indicate that there has recently been some increase in the strength of family values, but they also indicate that the "new familism" is indeed new -- not just a return to the values of the 1950s and earlier.

The author: *Norval D. Glenn is Ashbel Smith Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin.*

Table 1:

Expressed Attitudes of Pre-Baby Boomers, Baby Boomers,
and Post-Baby Boomers on Selected Family Issues,
Combined Data from the 1985 through 1990 *General Social Surveys*

	Pre-Boomers (n = 2,246)	Boomers (n = 1,928)	Post-Boomers (n = 716)
Percentage who said that ideal number of children for a family is two or fewer	51.1	61.8	55.5
Percentage who said that a married person's having sex with someone other than the spouse is always wrong	81.6	68.5	73.8
Percentage who said that divorce should be more difficult to obtain than it now is	57.7	44.9	45.0

Table 2:

Percentage of College Freshmen Considering Specific Objectives to Be Essential or Very Important

	1987	1988	1989	1990	1987-1990 Change
Raise a Family					
Men	55.9	66.5	68.5	68.2	+12.3
Women	59.5	67.3	69.0	70.6	+11.1
Get Married					
Men	57.1	66.0	*	*	--
Women	62.4	68.4	*	*	--
Help Others in Difficulty					
Men	50.0	46.3	49.0	50.9	+ 0.9
Women	66.5	65.0	68.7	71.4	+ 4.9
Be Very Well Off Financially					
Men	79.5	77.8	79.5	77.7	- 1.8
Women	72.1	69.7	71.9	70.3	- 1.8
Be an Authority in My Own Field					
Men	78.1	73.6	67.8	67.4	- 10.7
Women	76.4	70.6	64.1	63.6	- 12.8
Obtain Recognition from Colleagues					
Men	59.5	56.9	56.1	56.0	- 3.5
Women	57.3	53.6	54.0	54.0	- 3.3

* Not included in list of objectives.

Source: Cooperative Institutional Research Program of the American Council on Education and the University of California, Los Angeles. Responses are from about 100,000 men and 100,000 women each year.

FOSTERING THE NEW FAMILISM*
A Goal for America

David Popenoe

In the past thirty years the American family has been buffeted by a series of what many observers refer to as social revolutions. Sex has become separated from procreation through the contraceptive revolution, sex has become separated from marriage through the sexual revolution, and marriage has become separated from parenthood through the divorce revolution. The American public is alarmed, and most Americans now believe that something is seriously amiss with our nation's family system.

But is there anything really to be alarmed about? After all, Americans have worried about "family decline" for the past 100 years or more. For example, many turn-of-the-century Progressives, deeply concerned about "free love," lower fertility, and several decades of steep divorce increases, deplored what President Theodore Roosevelt called "race suicide." And then there were the famous studies of Middletown (Muncie, Indiana) in the 1920s and 1930s, in which Robert and Helen Lynd uncovered strong signs over a 30-40 year period of growing marital discord, increasing generational conflict, reduced parental authority, and declining dominance of the home. And in 1939, the famous black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier documented with alarm the great damage done to black families in the move to cities. It appears that only in the 1950s was American society relatively sanguine about its family trends (which is one reason why so many conservatives today long for that era's return.)

The basis for today's public alarm is that the family as an institution has progressively weakened since the '50s. A host of statistics support this fact, the same statistics that have generated the term "revolution." These statistics, now well known, document the unprecedented increases in such phenomena as divorce, single-parent families, and nonmarital teenage pregnancies. Indeed, the family's decline since the 1950s has been particularly dramatic because that era was an especially familistic period, a time of very high marriage and birth rates and relatively low divorce rates.

If recent family trends were merely a continuation of long-term shifts, we could perhaps rest more comfortably. In many ways the family has been weakening since the beginning of recorded time, first through a "loss of functions" to other institutions, such as schools, religious organizations, and governments, and second through a weakening of the extended kin network in which most families traditionally have been imbedded. These trends have led in the Western world to the modern "isolated nuclear family." It is the case, however, that in the past thirty years a new dimension of family decline has been added--the voluntary breakup of the isolated nuclear family on a vast scale. Over thousands of years the institution of the family has stripped down to

its bare nucleus, and now that nucleus appears to be splitting apart.

Despite this disturbing new development, many things in our society have markedly improved over the past thirty years. Women now have an equality and an independence that they never had before. Men, too, now have more freedom and are less subject to the strain of being the family's only breadwinner. More people than ever before may be enjoying a good sex life. And, in general, life today is more fair, a much wider range of individual lifestyles is tolerated, cultural diversity is celebrated rather than despised, and people who simply get a bad draw in life are less stigmatized. For most people, life provides more opportunities than ever. So why should recent family change be a cause for alarm?

In one word, children. Unfortunately, the kind of society that maximizes opportunities for adult expressive individualism (and many of the benefits I just mentioned are of that nature) is not a society that enhances healthy child development. It is a fact that much of the voluntary family breakup occurring recently has had a negative impact on children. Certainly, I have never met the child who did not want to be raised, if possible, by both biological parents who stayed together and cooperated in childrearing at least until the child's maturity (and hopefully for life). Yet the chances of that occurring today are rapidly diminishing, currently standing at about 50-50. I have also never heard of a successful childrearing approach that did not involve a tremendous amount of contact time between adults and children--for good childrearing there is absolutely no substitute for positive adult-child relationships. Yet the amount of time parents and other adults spend with children is rapidly diminishing. However one looks at the issue, maintaining strong families and successfully rearing children conflicts to some degree with the pursuit by adults of opportunistic individualism.

The consequences for children of recent family change can be seen all around us, and the picture is not a pretty one. There are record high, and in many cases increasing, rates among juveniles and adolescents of delinquency, suicide, depression, obesity/anorexia, drug abuse, and nonmarital pregnancies. In studies of these problems, the social factor that invariably emerges as the prime cause is the disintegrating condition of the family. Intact nuclear families can clearly be dysfunctional, but the weight of the evidence strongly points to the generally lower quality of postnuclear families, especially single-parent and step families.

This mounting evidence is in keeping with the popular view of the situation. In my Marriage and the Family classes at Rutgers, for example, there is seldom a student who comes from a divorced home who does not dearly wish that the divorce could have been avoided, and who does not simultaneously pledge to do everything possible to prevent divorce from happening in his or her own future family. A female student raised by her biological mother and the mother's boyfriend, and whose father was divorced and remarried three times and now lives with his girlfriend, had this to say: "I will be very careful when selecting a husband because I intend for my marriage to last forever. I never want to get divorced. I am really looking forward to starting a 'traditional' nuclear family of my own because I think that will add an aspect of peace

* Luncheon address, symposium on "The New Familism," sponsored by the Institute for American Values, Brandeis House, New York City, June 11, 1991.

and stability to my life." A male student from a broken home who is estranged from both parents and was raised by his grandfather said: "I would like to have two children and give them the family setting that I didn't have...the family means everything...I will do my best to obtain the precious family experiences."

In spite of the abundant negative evidence that has accumulated, many among the nation's scholarly and intellectual elite have shown tremendous resistance to the notion that the family revolution of our time should be cast in a negative light. The most commonly heard bottom-line phrase of this resistance is that "the family is not declining, it is just changing," the implication being that it may even be changing for the better. Many scholars have worked overtime to demonstrate that everyone has benefited from recent family changes, even including children; at least, they argue, children have not been seriously hurt. Why has such a resistance developed?

First, many recent family changes have been for the good. With easy divorce available, a married women who is seriously abused by her husband can now get out of the relationship; she is not stuck in it for life. Thanks to increased tolerance, adults and children who through no fault of their own end up in "non-traditional" families are not marked for life by social stigma. Based on a companionship of equals, many marriages today are more emotionally satisfying than ever before.

The major resistance, of course, has come from women. For one hundred and fifty years, during the reign of what we now call the traditional nuclear family, women were relegated for most of their adult lives to the "separate sphere" of the home as mothers and wives. Especially with declining fertility and the changing nature of work, this role came to be confining for many women. The whole point of the modern women's movement has been to change the role of women as prescribed by this traditional family type so as to secure a more equal place for women in work and public life. This movement has been highly successful, and for most women it represents progress, not decline. It is no wonder that many women are frightened at the mere thought that society could shift back and undo all of their hard-won gains.

Fundamentally, the family problem today is one of cultural overreaction. The good life is always a delicate balance of conflicting values and forces, and it is not difficult for societies to lose their footing. In the family realm, our society's overreaction has grown increasingly serious. The pendulum has swung too far. In seeking to rid ourselves of the traditional form of the nuclear family, something only a few now wish to recover, we have come close to rejecting the very ideal of the nuclear family itself. This is a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Yes, we can probably get along without the traditional form of the nuclear family. But it is hard to discern a real alternative to the nuclear family--a mother and a father living together and sharing responsibility for their children, and for each other--as the best structure for child development and the smooth continuity of generations. Although the case can be made that it is better still, at least for children, to have some larger structure like an extended family as society's basic childrearing unit, such larger structures today seem entirely out of the question. If we find

it difficult to live with just one spouse, how could we ever think of going back to living with grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Other alternatives have been tried, including communes, group marriages, and collective houses, but all have been found seriously wanting (where are they today?) Some single-parent and step families are very effective, but the overall success rate of these family types is grim.

It is becoming increasingly clear that if we want successful childrearing, strong local communities, and a smooth continuity among the generations, most children will have to be raised by nuclear families. There are no viable substitutes for families that simultaneously are able to combine--as nuclear families do--emotional intimacy, sexuality of the parents, and the nurturing of children. The nuclear family is not just a social ideal, it is a social essential.

But in view of all that has happened in recent decades, how can we as a society begin to reconstruct the nuclear family as our basic unit? How can we uphold the virtues of the nuclear family without returning to the lifestyles of the 1950s, compromising the movement of women toward full participation in the economy and in public life, and stigmatizing those who are not fortunate enough to have strong nuclear families? That is the task that lies before us, the task, using the title of a recent book, of "rebuilding the nest."

Fortunately, our task is made easier by what appears to be the beginning of an important cultural shift toward what can be called "the new familism." In recent years the issue of "family values" has been the ideological captive of right-wing groups like the Moral Majority. This has polarized the nation's intellectual elite on family matters, causing the left both to react defensively and to defer to other issues. The left-wing rejection of the "family values" issue was strongly encouraged by the fact that the right-wing version of this issue meant not just support for the nuclear family but specifically for the traditional nuclear family, something the left could not abide. And the left was pulled further away from this issue by radical feminist and gay and lesbian groups, who naturally were promoting their own family, or nonfamily, agendas. Roughly at the time of the Moral Majority's demise, however, a new constellation of ideological forces was seen to be emerging. Today, in a very exciting cultural development, profamily values are again being openly espoused by the nation's traditionally left-leaning elite.

What is the source of this immanent cultural shift? The simple answer is that there has been a generational change. Last year more babies were born in America than in any year since 1964, the birth rate having returned almost to the replacement level, and there is nothing like having children to shift one's ideology in a profamily direction. Many of the nation's intellectual elite were among those giving birth. Thus, while the dominant elite ideologies of the past few decades have been generated by the huge cohort of baby boomers who delayed marriage and enjoyed a singles lifestyle as no generation had before it, this cohort has now moved into the thirty-something parental years (the peak of the baby boom was 1957; persons born that year are now 34 years old!).

The evidence is growing that the new familism of young adults is also being promoted by the children of the baby boomers, that is, the children born to the early cohorts of baby boomers in the heavily divorce prone 1970s who are now in their teens and coming into adulthood. A solid case can be made that the baby-boom generation, coming from the strong families of the 1950s, took the family for granted. To this generation, self-expression and self-fulfillment were the pressing values of the age--at least in their years of prolonged youth. To their children, however, often battle-scarred from family turmoil, the world looks quite different. As many national studies--as well as the sentiments of my students--have indicated, the children of divorce, although their statistical chances of a successful marriage may not be so great, are outspokenly supportive of the importance of marital permanence and strong, divorce-free families.

Each of these indicators bespeaks of a certain dialectical quality to cultural change. Many scholars have noted that key cultural values tend to shift in importance over approximately thirty year cycles, or the length of one generation. It may be no coincidence, therefore, that we are seeing the rise of a new familism just thirty years after the momentous cultural changes of the 1960s. Other contributors to the new familism should also be noted, however: AIDS and the quieting of the sexual revolution, the decline of radical feminism, and growing evidence--now widely dispersed in the media--that recent family changes <u>have</u> hurt children.

Whatever its sources, the new spirit of familism could become a powerful bulwark to the national task of rebuilding the nest. I see this task in primarily cultural rather than in political or economic terms. Government family policies are important, and some economic redistribution is necessary, but ultimately the nest can not be rebuilt unless a new culture of familism overtakes the out-of-balance absorption with self that now dominates American society. Such a cultural transformation can not easily be manipulated, but when the time is right it is amazing how swiftly attitudes and values can change. Witness the enormous changes over the past thirty years in deep-seated cultural attitudes toward blacks, women, the natural environment and, let's add, smoking.

The time is precisely right, in my opinion, for the development of a new culture of familism in America. Here are a few steps that could foster it:

1. Scholarly analysis and expert inquiry should bring the issue more to public attention. We are proposing a national Commission on the Family in America to do just that. Combining new research on family values among a cross-section of American families with the expert opinion of about fifty distinguished scholars, we hope to influence the national debate and establish a national family agenda.

2. The national family debate should be reshaped. We must break away from the polarized debate (mostly among the elite) that has pitted right against left, the stern moral traditionalists against the free-wheeling advocates of new lifestyles. The overwhelming majority of Americans, whose lives are governed more by personal experience than by ideology, fall

between these two poles. They seek a reasonable adaptation to social change, but not one that means giving up the basic family and child-centered values that maintain social order and continuity. They value the nuclear family as society's fundamental institution, but they don't wish to be straightjacketed by rigid moralists.

3. One elite group should be singled out for special attention--the "family life experts." Belying their professional title, many of these experts have been especially vulnerable to the persuasions of those who would undercut the nuclear family. Their textbooks and advice literature are filled with the call not just for more sensitivity to, but actually open advocacy of, "family diversity." Again, I have yet to meet the child--or even the single mother or step parent--who desires "family diversity" nearly as much as these experts.

4. Finally, a mass movement among parents should be promoted. If a Green Movement can reshape America's environmental attitudes, why can't a New Familism Movement reshape America's family attitudes? Concerned parents across the nation, together with their allies, must find more effective ways to band together at the grass-roots level. Not only do parents need new social networks in a society that increasingly isolates them, but a more collective voice on their part could become a powerful force for cultural change.

In the national task of rebuilding the nest, there is one goal that the new familism movement should not pursue--the goal of trying to reconstruct the traditional 1950s family. That family had two characteristics a growing number of younger Americans today--both men and women--are no longer willing to accept: the lingering male dominance, a legacy of centuries; and the lifelong removal of women from the labor force, a legacy of the past one hundred and fifty years. The goal should be to foster a new form of the nuclear family in which there is a fifty-fifty division of power and decision making between wife and husband, and a firm understanding that both women and men will share a common (though not necessarily identical) commitment to the work force over the course of their lives.

Two key characteristics of the traditional nuclear family should be restored or preserved at all costs, however: an enduring sense of family obligation, and the desire to put children first. Without these two qualities, the nuclear family becomes a hollow shell. They must be a *sine qua non* of the new familism.

I will conclude by returning to the voice of my students. In discussing their future family plans, here is a fairly typical passage: "I firmly believe in the small nuclear family as the best way to raise children. I do not believe that the husband has to be the breadwinner. Nor do I believe that the wife has to give up everything in order to have a baby. A happy marriage with a lifetime commitment with no divorce is the most important thing." That's the new familism--as stated by one of my male students.

Here's the new familism--as stated by one of my female students: "My marriage will ideally consist of the modern version of traditional roles. I want to work before I have kids, and after, I hope to be able to stay home and raise them. However, my husband will also help me in

all aspects of home life...Child care will be a joint responsibility...All decisions regarding everything will also be made jointly...And although I only have a 50/50 chance, I believe that my marriage will last forever."

The author: *David Popenoe is Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University.*

The New Familism

June 11, 1991

The Brandeis House
12 East 77th Street, New York City

9:00 Welcome and Introductions

9:30 Defining the New Familism

- Barbara Whitehead: *Crossing the Cultural Divide*
- Questions and Discussion

11:00 Symposium: Beyond Individualism?

- Norval Glenn: *The Family Values of Americans*
- Ann Swidler: **Habits of the Heart** *Revisited*
- William Galston: *The Politics of the New Familism*
- Questions and Discussion

12:30 Luncheon

- David Popenoe: *Fostering the New Familism*
- Questions and Discussion

2:00 Reports from the Future

- Jean Bethke Elshtain: *The Family in Civil Society in the 1990s*
- David Blankenhorn: *An Agenda for Research and Public Education*
- Questions and Discussion

3:00 Adjourn

Attendees at "The New Familism" Symposium

New York City, June 11, 1991

Steven Bayme, *Director, Jewish Communal Affairs, American Jewish Committee*
David Blankenhorn, *President, Institute for American Values*
Donald S. Browning, *Professor of Religion and Psychology Studies, Divinity School, University of Chicago*
Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Centennial Professor of Political Science, Dept. of Political Science, Vanderbilt University*
William A. Galston, *Professor, School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland*
Norval D. Glenn, *Ashbel Smith Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin*
Elenore Hangley, *Executive Vice President, The Advertising Council, Inc.*
Betty Heller, *Vice President and Secretary, North Star Foundation, Inc.*
Cheryl A. Keller, *Program Officer, The Smith Richardson Foundation, Inc.*
Harry R. Moody, *Deputy Director, Brookdale Center on Aging, Hunter College*
Chris K. Olander, *Executive Director, The J. M. Foundation*
Theodora Ooms, *Director, Family Impact Seminar, American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy*
David Popenoe, *Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University*
Lee Salk, *Child Psychologist and Author*
Ann Swidler, *Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, University of California at Berkeley*
Arland Thornton, *Professor of Sociology, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor*
Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Research Assistant, Institute for American Values*
Kenneth Woodward, *Senior Writer, Newsweek Magazine*

About the Institute for American Values

The Institute for American Values, founded in 1987, is a private nonpartisan organization devoted to research, publication, and public education on issues of family well-being, family policy, and civic values. The Institute's primary mission is to examine the status and future of the family as a social institution. Its more general mission is to examine the social sources of competence, character, and citizenship in American society. Accordingly, Institute activities are more than debates about policy. They are also conversations about culture.

By providing forums for scholarly inquiry and debate, the Institute seeks to bring fresh ideas to our national discourse on the family and on civic values. Through its publications and other educational activities, the Institute seeks to bridge the gap between scholarship and leadership, bringing new analyses to the attention of policymakers in government, decisionmakers in the private sector, and opinionmakers in the media.

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Other Publications Available from the Institute:

Books

Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family, edited by David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme and Jean Bethke Elshtain. (Family Service America Publications, 1990.) Cost: $16.95. To order, call the publisher toll-free: 1-800-852-1944.

Working Papers

"Public Attitudes Toward the American Family: An Overview of Survey Responses Covering 1963-1991," by Mary Komarnicki, 1991. Cost: $10.00.

"The Family Values of Americans", by Professor Norval D. Glenn, University of Texas, 1991. Cost: $10.00.

"Life in the Express Lane: America's Time-Starved Families with Children", by William R. Mattox,

Jr., Family Research Council, 1991. Cost: $10.00

"American Households in Demographic Perspective", by Dr. Christine Winquist Nord and Dr. Nicholas Zill, Child Trends, Inc., 1991. Cost: $10.00.

"Noble Failures: A Critical History of Family Commissions", by Dr. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Institute for American Values, 1991. Cost: $10.00.

"Man, Woman, and Public Policy: Difference and Dependency in the American Conversation", by David Blankenhorn and Dr. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Institute for American Values, 1991. Cost: $10.00

"Maryland Focus Group Report on Family Time", by Dr. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Institute for American Values, 1990. Cost: $10.00.

"How the Child Care Market Works: An Economic Analysis", by David Blankenhorn and Ivan Sacks, Institute for American Values, 1989. Cost: $5.00.

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