

Book Review: Continuity and Change in the American Family

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Continuity and Change in the American Family, by Lynne M. Casper and Suzanne M. Bianchi (2001)

Reviewed by Madeline Holler

Individuality is overrated. I love knowing I'm among a statistically significant number of people whose income or marital status or house rules regarding TV-viewing match mine. I like neat categories with plentiful populations, and I like fitting squarely into one of them. Numbers help defend my choices when I'm too exhausted or guarded to discuss the deeply personal. And numbers are disarming to those who, uninformed, call for a return of perceived traditional behaviors.

So the tables, graphs and charts that fill Continuity and Change in the American Family, by sociologists Lynne M. Casper and Suzanne M. Bianchi, provide a welcome pinpointing of just where and with whom my allegedly non-traditional family belongs. Written against the backdrop of the "family decline" debate--the back-and-forth struggle between traditionalists bemoaning the dissolution of the American family and scholars who say it is the definition of family, not family itself, that's actually undergoing radical change--the sociologists sort the last 50 years of family data into cohesive categories and comparisons by date. They then examine data from the past two decades in relation to family-related behaviors (such as cohabitation, fathering, single-parenting, grand-parenting, work and family) to search for causes of change in the American family and consequences of those changes.

The book is academic in purpose and tone--a textbook likely intended for sociology of the family, poverty studies and perhaps family and public policy courses. Written clearly, with the intention to inform and not entertain, it is also accessible for researchers interested in, for example, cohabitation (a majority of cohabitators now are over the age of 35 and are likely to have been previously married); or the changing roles of fathers (almost 20 percent more never-before married fathers are raising their children alone in 1998 than in 1978). The researchers also show that the phenomenon of unmarried parents, single parents or grandparents acting as primary caregivers has not had a deleterious effect on the well-being of children, as is often presumed. (From the 1970s to the '80s when divorce rates shot up, academic performance of students from all races actually increased a few percentage points. In 1998, all races and income levels of children showed increases in achieving a higher education than their parents, despite high divorce rates remaining nearly unchanged since the 1980s).

The authors often link data to income statistics, which makes that fact that most of the more recent data ends with the results of the US Census released in 1998 annoying. How do the data illustrating, for example, that cohabiting and married individuals are becoming more alike reconcile after events such as the dot com bubble burst, policy reform that kicked countless families off welfare roles and a skyrocketing housing market that's left an increasing number of families squeezed or bankrupt?

While Continuity and Change sets the record straight on the American Family of the very recent past, it is the authors' potential future project that may be a more urgent read. The authors foreshadow an alarming trend with little explanation for why: economic status, more than change in societal norms, determines how we are living as families. Data show there may be increasing nonmarriage and lack of involvement of both parents in the raising of children if they are low income. That's a blow to policymakers' claims that economic safety nets harm families. It also undermines arguments that providing incentives for poor parents to marry will make their families better off, and instead suggests policy must first fix poverty in order to make a lifelong legal commitment enticing.

Like 37.1 percent of all cohabiting women (in 1998), Madeline is raising her daughter with her cohabiting partner (one of the 54.6 percent of never-before married cohabitating men raising kids that same year).

Opinions expressed are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Alternatives to Marriage Project.

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Madeline Holler