
REFLECTIONS ON

FAMILY

A CONVERSATION WITH DOUGLAS BESHAROV

Douglas Besharov, Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, in Washington, D.C., and a professor at the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs, has devoted much of his attention to aspects of family life and family's needs, as they have evolved over the years. Director of AEI's Social and Individual Responsibility Project, he is the author of several books on children, education and the poor. At present, he is working on his next book, *America's Families: Trends, Explanations and Choices*, the focus of the following conversation.

Q: What is the condition of the family in the United States, taken as a whole, according to your findings thus far?

A: I think the American family is in the throes of what you could call seismic change. On the one hand, people see the changes going on reflecting catastrophe and social breakdown. Others see licentiousness. I see a more progressive and evolutionary process, caused by a combination of greater wealth, individuality and mobility. The traditional marriage, I think, is being reshaped. But traditional attitudes about the importance of family — and only to a somewhat lesser degree marriage — continue. The reason I say a somewhat lesser degree in relation to marriage is that I think marriage is less important in contemporary America, and that will continue as time goes on.

Q: As you've noted, there are these contrasting points of view — some seeing the family in sunnier terms, and others much gloomier.

A: I don't think data support the notion that the family is as strong as ever. It's clearly going through some changes. You can't have three-and-a-half decades of high divorce rates — as we have — and as many as five decades of rising out-of-wedlock births and not see change. Change is in the air. The only question is whether it is catastrophic or just evolutionary.

Q: Change, evolution, the impact of external forces and influences can be positive phenomena. What are examples of developments that have been smoothly incorporated into family life — enhancing it?

A: In terms of what has gone smoothly, there are two massive changes that have occurred within intact families. The first is fewer children. The second is that mothers of school-age and younger children have joined the labor force, either full-time or part-time. That transition has occurred really quite smoothly. We have reduced the amount of parenting time involved in raising children. Some like it, some don't. But everybody accepts the fact that it's gone relatively smoothly.

Q: Would you say kids have adjusted well to that?

A: I think that's an open question.

Q: What are the developments that raise concerns — and can they be modified or reversed?

A: I think the greatest concern is that young people — usually poor, uneducated teens — are



having babies outside of marriage without the wherewithal to take proper care of them. We used to call this "children having children." I still think that is what is going on. It has had a poverty overlay — a high component of poverty that helps drive it. It's a bad development for the children, and not good for their mothers either. It holds them back. That is the most serious problem facing post-industrial society worldwide, because as you may know, out-of-wedlock births are up everywhere.

Q: Don't recent statistics indicate that chastity, or abstinence, is beginning to take hold in some quarters?

A: They do, on a limited basis. The trend line is going in the right direction, but it's very tentative. Since 1992 or so, birth rates have started changing. But that means we're only back to the 1983 or 1984 level.

Q: Within families today, you have these diverse stews of sorts — grandparents, stepparents, single parents — with different values, one would think. What happens when these different value systems confront one another? Is a consensus reached? How do they play themselves out?

A: I'd call them alliances. The traditional, hierarchical, multigenerational family had those roles clearly demarked. Grandparents always thought they knew better how to raise kids, but at some level, they realized the parents had "first say" in what happened with the children. These new relationships you've mentioned create situations in which the right of the adults in the household to have an opinion and to have their opinion listened to is unclear. The responsibility of different adults in the household is unclear and uncertain. This creates additional opportunities for friction within the contemporary family, because the relationships aren't so clearly understood by all concerned.

Q: And that uncertainty affect the lines of authority.

A: Right.

Q: Is the older generation still regarded with respect — however that generation is represented within a household?

A: I think it gets complicated, especially within the framework of divorce. You sense — especially for the men who have left the home — less authority. The women who've remained in the home sometimes

seem in the eyes of their children to be damaged goods. I think that part of the moral or familial authority that the older generation enjoys comes from the fact that they have successfully navigated marriage and family life. If this is not the case, it undermines their authority.

Q: It would appear that part of the reason grandparents are taking over households from time to time is that life expectancy has increased.

A: We have two different trends at the same time. Middle- and upper-income families are witnessing the advent of the sandwich generation. Grandparents are too old to raise their grandchildren, and also end up having to be cared for by their children. In low-income families, the distance between generations is shrinking. You can have a 15-year-old mother with a 30- or 35-year-old mother herself. So Grandma can take a more active role with her grandchildren, but, being younger, she may feel that she has more of her own life to live. It's very class-related, and that can be cause for great stress.

Q: What can we look for in the near future in terms of the changing workforce — more at-home dads, a greater need to focus on child care, other elements?

A: It's hard to say. The percentage of mothers who work hasn't really gone up in the last decade, so it could be that we've reached some level of stasis. This is to say that women who want to work — including mothers — are now working. Mothers who don't want to work aren't doing so. I'm speaking of middle class women, who have something of a choice. In the case of low-income households, because of welfare reform and a stronger economy, substantially more mothers are now working.

Q: Let's focus for a moment on the impact of religious values on the household — amidst data showing that religion is becoming more of a factor in people's lives. To what degree do you see any inculcation of these values into family life?

A: I don't know how to answer. The only evidence I've seen is that for some families, the intensity of religious beliefs, experience and tutelage has increased. Beyond that, I just don't know. Clearly there is some resurgence of religious feeling across denominations and faiths. I just don't know how widespread it is.



Q: When we speak about the public and private sector's responsibilities with regard to families, in what sphere do you believe government has a role to play, and where should it keep hands off?

A: Based on the last 100 years, one would have to say that families would be better off if the government kept its hands off, period. I don't know too many examples of situations or policies in which government has helped families. Some people might say housing policy — mortgage deductions — have been positive in that they have made private-home ownership more possible. But I think the evidence is unclear.

Q: At the outset of this new century, what do you foresee for the family life in the United States?

A: The picture I see for the family in the future is, first, later marriage — which is to say that more young people will wait until they're a little older

before getting married. I also see somewhat less marriage, which means that not only will people wait until they're a little older, but an increasing number won't get married at all. It won't be a very large number — perhaps about 10 percent of all women will not marry. Divorce rates are about as high as they're ever going to get; they may go down a bit. We'll see smaller families. And we'll see much more in the way of cohabitation and temporary relationships between people. Overall, what I see is a situation in which people — especially children — will be much more isolated, because not only will their parents both be working, but they'll have fewer siblings, fewer cousins, fewer aunts and uncles. So over time, we're moving towards a much more individualistic society. ■