DISTRIBUTION OF FAMILIES IN THE U.S., BY SEX OF HEAD AND PRESENCE OF CHILDREN UNDER 18, 1975

Source: "Household and Family Characteristics: March 1975," Table I, *Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics,* Series P-20, No. 291, issued February 1976, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

The Changing Family

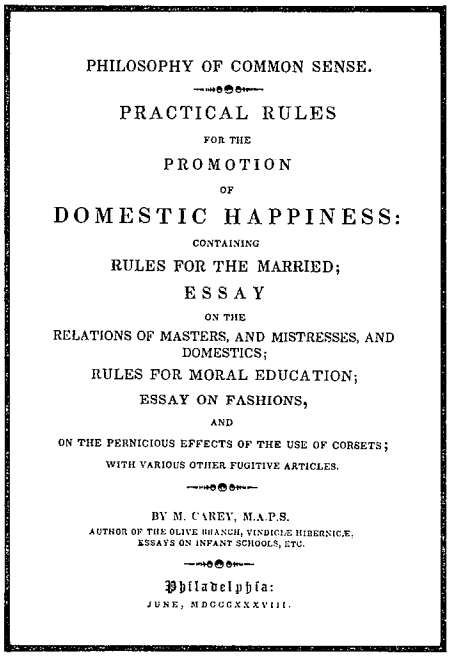
Alexis de Tocqueville saw the American family, so different from the European, as an exemplar and bulwark of sober democracy. Writing in the 1830s, he noted the "species of equality [that] prevails around the domestic hearth," the informality between parents and children, the early independence of sons and daughters, and the general belief that "though their lot is different," men and women are "beings of equal value" to society.

Since Tocqueville's visit, of course, much has changed. The family has been affected, like other American institutions, by the shift from farm to city, by technology, by individual mobility. Of late, something like a family upheaval has taken place, widely publicized but only dimly understood. The new statistics on marriage and remarriage, working wives, fertility rates, divorce, "female-headed" households are dramatic. But the change has been accompanied by little comprehensive analysis by scholars of its social causes and effects. There has been a trickle of specialized studies—on women, on child care, on family welfare policy. The futurologists have been busy. But solid research is scarce.

On the following two pages, as a reminder of Tocqueville's time, we reproduce part of an 1838 guide to "domestic happiness." Next, as an indication of the current scholarly "state of the art" we present some basic statistics and three essays on the family as an institution in the 1970s. Economists Heather L. Ross and Isabel V. Sawhill survey the family's changing role. Educator Mary Jo Bane discusses the children most affected—those in "female-headed" families. Finally, from yet another perspective, social psychologist George Levinger examines the trends, reviews the research, and notes some of the unanswered questions.

"DOMESTIC HAPPINESS" IN TOCQUEVILLE'S TIME

In 1838, shortly after Tocqueville's visit to America, a Philadelphia publisher issued Practical Rules for the Promotion of Domestic Happiness. *The author, a Mr. Carey, described himself as a father of seven children who "never struck one of them with a rod," yet found them obedient. And he deplored contemporary writers who depicted wives as "mere housekeepers." We present here some pages from Mr. Carey's guidebook.*



PHILOSOPHY OF COMMON SENSE.

PRACTICAL RULES

FOR THE

PROMOTION

OF

DOMESTIC HAPPINESS:

CONTAINING

RULES FOR THE MARRIED;

ESSAY

ON THE

RELATIONS OF MASTERS, AND MISTRESSES, AND DOMESTICS;

RULES FOR MORAL EDUCATION;

ESSAY ON FASHIONS,

AND

ON THE PERNICIOUS EFFECTS OF THE USE OF CORSETS;

WITH VARIOUS OTHER FUGITIVE ARTICLES.

BY M. CAREY, M.A.P.S.

AUTHOR OF THE OLIVE BRANCH, VINDICIÆ HIBERNICÆ, ESSAYS ON INFANT SCHOOLS, ETC.

Philadelphia:

JUNE, MDCCCXXXVIII.

1

RULES FOR HUSBANDS.

I. Always regard your wife as your equal; treat her with kindness, respect, and attention; and never address her with the appearance of an air of authority, as if she were, as some misguided husbands appear to regard their wives, a mere housekeeper.

II. Never interfere in her domestic concerns, hiring servants, &c.

III. Always keep her properly supplied with money for furnishing your table in a style proportioned to your means, and for the purchase of dress, and whatever other articles she may require, suitable to her station in life.

IV. Cheerfully and promptly comply with all her reasonable requests.

V. Never be so unjust as to lose your temper towards her, in consequence of indifferent cookery, or irregularity in the hours of meals, or any other mismanagement of her servants; knowing the difficulty of making many of them do their duty.

2

VI. If she have prudence and good sense, consult her on all great operations, involving the risk of very serious injury, in case of failure. Many a man has been rescued from ruin by the wise counsels of his wife; and many a foolish husband has most seriously injured himself and family, by the rejection of the advice of his wife, stupidly fearing, if he followed it, he would be regarded as henpecked! A husband can never consult a counsellor more deeply interested in his welfare than his wife.

VII. If distressed or embarrassed in your circumstances, communicate your situation to her with candour, that she may bear your difficulties in mind in her expenditures. Women sometimes, believing their husbands' circumstances better than they really are, disburse money which cannot be well afforded, and which, if they knew the real situation of their husbands' affairs, they would shrink from expending.

VIII. Never on any account chide or rebuke your wife in company, should she make any

3

mistake in history, geography, grammar, or indeed on any other subject. There are, I am persuaded, many wives of such keen feelings and high spirits, (and such wives deserve to be treated with the utmost delicacy,) that they would rather receive a severe and bitter scolding in private, than a rebuke in company, calculated to display ignorance or folly, or to impair them in their own opinion, or in that of others.

"To sum up all you now have heard,
Young men and old, peruse the bard:
A female trusted to your care,
His rule is pithy, short and clear:—
'Be to her faults a little blind;
Be to her virtues very kind
Let all her ways be unconfin'd,
And place your padlock on her mind.'"

RULES FOR WIVES.

I. Always receive your husband with smiles—leaving nothing undone to render home agreeable—and gratefully reciprocating his kindness and attention.

4

II. Study to gratify his inclinations, in regard to food and cookery; in the management of the family; in your dress, manners, and deportment.

III. Never attempt to rule or appear to rule your husband. Such conduct degrades husbands—and wives always partake largely in the degradation of their husbands.

IV. In every thing reasonable comply with his wishes with cheerfulness—and even as far as possible anticipate them.

V. Avoid all altercations or arguments leading to ill humour—and more especially before company. Few things are more disgusting than the altercations of the married, when in the company of friends or strangers.

VI. Never attempt to interfere in his business, unless he ask your advice or counsel; and never attempt to control him in the management of it.

VII. Never confide to gossips any of the failings or imperfections of your husband—nor any of those little differences that occasionally arise in the married state. If you do, you may rest assured that however strong

5

the injunctions of secrecy on the one hand, or the pledge on the other, they will in a day or two become the common talk of the neighbourhood.

VIII. Try to cultivate your mind, so as, should your husband be intelligent and well-informed, you may join in rational conversation with him and his friends.

IX. Think nothing a trifle that may produce even a momentary breach of harmony, or the slightest uneasy sensation.

"Think nought a trifle, though it small appear;
Small sands the mountain, moments make the year,
And trifles life. Your care to trifles give,
Else you may die ere you have learn'd to live."
Young.

X. If your husband be in business, always, in your expenditures, bear in mind the trying vicissitudes to which trade and commerce are subject; and do not expose yourself to the reproach, should he experience one of them, of having unnecessarily expended money, of

6

which you and your offspring may afterwards be in want.

XI. While you carefully shun, in providing for your family, the Scylla of meanness and parsimony, avoid equally the Charybdis of extravagance, an error too common here; as remarked by most of the travellers who visit this country.

XII. If you be disposed to economize, I beseech you not to extend your economy to the wages you pay to seamstresses or washerwomen, who, particularly the latter, are too frequently ground to the earth, by the inadequacy of the wages they receive. Economize, if you will, in shawls, bonnets, and handkerchiefs; but never, by exacting labour from the poor, without adequate compensation, incur the dire anathemas pronounced in the Scriptures against the oppressors of the poor.

WHAT THE STATISTICS SHOW

As can be seen from the graph on the opposite page, the three basic measures of American family formation and dissolution have changed in recent years.

The first-marriage rate is approaching an all-time low.

The divorce rate is at an all-time high.

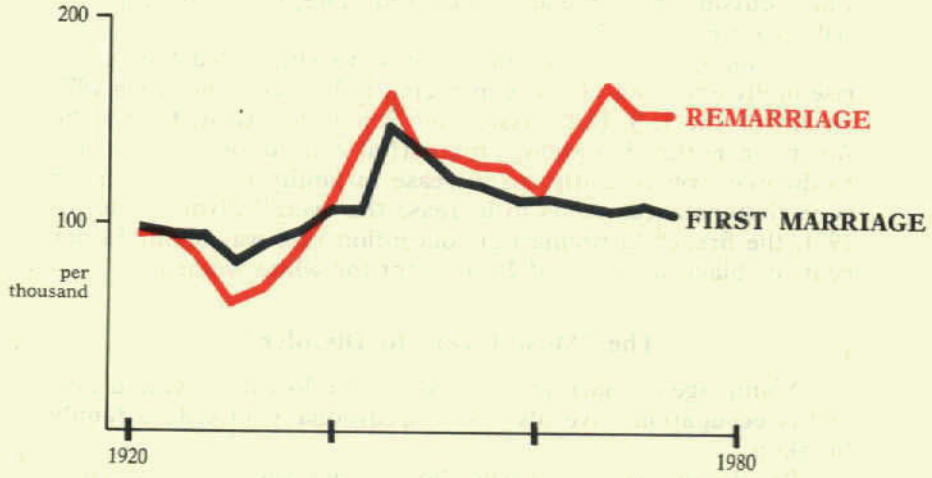
The remarriage rate is down slightly.

Until the end of the 1960s, all three trend lines followed a roughly parallel pattern. They dipped together to simultaneous "lows" during the Depression years, rose rapidly to "highs" immediately after World War II, declined together in the 1950s, and then began to part company. During most of the 1960s, the divorce rate and the remarriage rate continued their parallel rise (this is not surprising, given the fact that three-fourths of all divorced women and five-sixths of all divorced men remarry). But the rate for persons getting married for the first time leveled off, then dipped slightly between 1970 and 1974. In the 1970s, the divorce rate began to climb spectacularly, and the remarriage rate declined modestly.

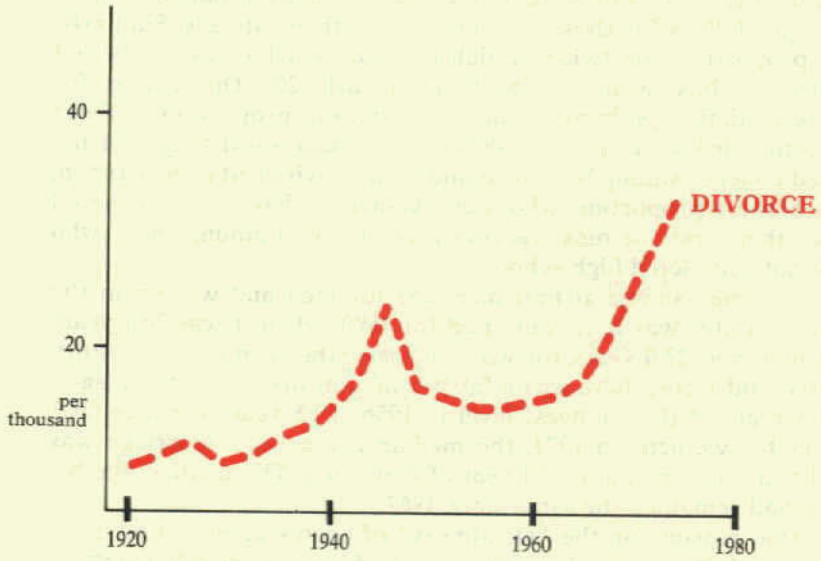
While there may be no agreement about the reasons for the divorce rate being 2.5 times what it was at the end of the 1960s, it is clear—as can be seen from the graph opposite—that the realities of particular time periods affect the disposition of people to marry, divorce, or remarry. In the 1930s, the Depression's pinch created a downturn in all three rates. The mood of relief and release following World War II generated a temporary but substantial increase in all three rates. In the 1960s and 1970s, it seems clear that the changes in the rates have been due, in part, to new perceptions of the institution of marriage itself.

A declining fertility rate may also have contributed to the rise in the divorce rate. Women with small families are more likely to be in the labor force and therefore financially more independent of their husbands. And as family size has declined, the proportion

FIRST-MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE RATES



DIVORCE RATE



Note: The first-marriage rate is based on first marriages per 1,000 single women 14 to 44. The divorce rate is based on divorces per 1,000 women 14 to 44. The remarriage rate is based on remarriages per 1,000 widowed and divorced women 14 to 54.

Source: Arthur J. Norton and Paul C. Glick, "Marital Instability: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1976.

of children in the average family who are of pre-school age has declined. This development has tended to free the mother to earn wages outside the home and, more and more, to become a potential divorcée.

Among other factors which may have stimulated the recent rise in divorce is an increase in premarital conceptions. As a 1972 study for the U.S. Commission on Population Growth and the American Future has shown, premarital conception is conducive to divorce; consequently, an increase in family formation under such circumstances tends to increase the overall divorce rate. In 1971, the first-child premarital conception rate was about 58 per cent for black women and 20 per cent for white women.

The "Most Likely to Dissolve"

Young age at marriage, low education, low income, and low-status occupation have also been traditionally linked to family breakup.

Results of the 1970 census showed that among persons who married for the first time between 1901 and 1970, the proportion of men divorced was twice as high for those who married before the age of 20 as for those who married in their late 20s. Similarly, the proportion was twice as high for women who married before 18 as for those who married in their early 20s. One reason for these statistics, perhaps, is that a substantial proportion of those who married at a later age delayed marriage until they had finished college. Among both men and women who had ever married, the highest proportion who were known to have been divorced after their first (or most recent) marriage was among those who had not completed high school.

The median age at first marriage for men and women in the United States was first computed for 1890, when it was 26.1 years for men and 22.0 years for women. From the turn of the century to the mid-1950s, there was a fairly constant decline in these ages. They reached the youngest level in 1956—22.5 years for men, 20.1 years for women. In 1974, the median age at first marriage was 23.1 years for men and 21.1 years for women. The median age for men had remained the same since 1967.

One reason for the "steadiness" of men's ages at first marriage, and the continuing "olderness" of women, is what demographers call the "marriage squeeze." Given the tradition that women marry men a few years older than themselves, a squeeze situation arose in the mid-1960s because more women 18 and 19 years old were entering the marriage market than were men 20

and 21. The women were products of the post–World War II baby boom, whereas the men were born during the war years, when birth rates were down.

The marriage squeeze may also have contributed to a recent pattern of delayed marriage, particularly among young women, beyond ages that have traditionally been considered prime years for first marriage. In 1960, 28 per cent of the women between 20 and 24 were single; in 1974, 40 per cent were.

The proportion of persons in the "ever divorced" category is highest for relatively disadvantaged groups, although the increased incidence of divorce has been occurring at all socioeconomic levels. According to data from the 1970 census, men 35 to 44 with low incomes and a low level of educational attainment were more likely to have been divorced than men in the same age bracket who had higher incomes and more education. Yet between 1960 and 1970, the increase in the proportion of divorced men was more rapid among men in the upper than in the lower levels. Thus there is less difference than there used to be in the divorce rates for poor men and well-to-do men.

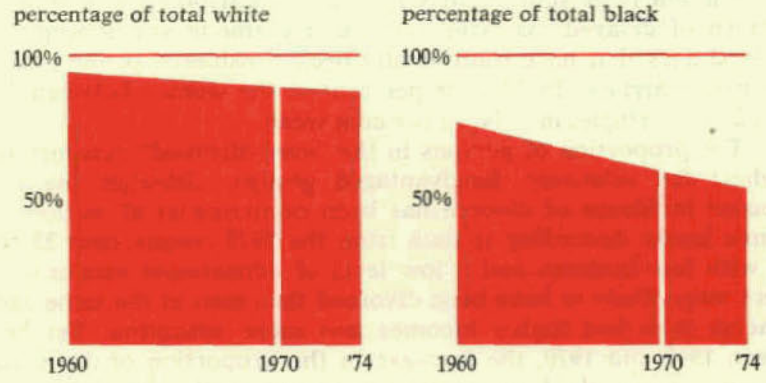
There is also less difference among women—but not for the same reason. Although the proportion of divorced women in the 35-to-44 age bracket went up by nearly one-half during the 1960s, the percentage of divorced women in the highest income brackets rose more slowly than among other women. In other words, the percentage of divorced among upper-status women was converging with that of other women by increasing *more slowly* than the average, whereas for upper-status men the percentage of divorced was converging with that of other men by increasing *more rapidly* than the average.

These trends show that the recent increase in divorce has been pervasive with regard to social and economic levels and that socioeconomic differences in divorce are now smaller than they used to be.

Divorce: The Racial Differences

The incidence of divorce is uniformly higher for blacks than for whites, although both display generally similar patterns by social and economic characteristics. In 1970—again in the 35-to-44 age bracket—19 per cent of black men who had ever been married were known to have had a divorce (compared with 15 per cent among white men) and 23 per cent of black women who had ever been married were known to have had a divorce (compared with 17 per cent for white women).

CHILDREN UNDER 18 LIVING WITH TWO PARENTS, BY RACE



Sources: *U.S. Census of Population: 1960, Detailed Characteristics, U.S. Summary*, Final Report PC(1)-1D, table 185; U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 271, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1974," tables 4 and 5; U.S. Bureau of the Census. *1970 Census of Population*, Vol. II-4B, *Persons by Family Characteristics*, tables 1 and 8; U.S. Bureau of the Census.

A further indication of the higher rate of marital disruption among blacks is the difference in the proportions of people who reported themselves as separated but not divorced. In 1970, eight per cent of all black men between 35 and 44, and 15 per cent of all black women in that age group, were reported as separated, whereas the rate for both white men and white women was less than two per cent.

Although there is an increasing similarity in the pattern of marital disruption displayed by the two racial groups, differences continue. For example, the percentage of children who are living with two parents has been declining steadily among both races, but is consistently lower among blacks. In 1974, 50.7 per cent of all black children under 18 were living with two parents, compared with 86.7 per cent of the white children. (See graph above.)

The Working Mother

Although the sharp rise in the divorce rate is most dramatic, the family is changing in several other ways, some of which have remained relatively obscure.

The first and most widely recognized trend is the increase in the number and percentage of working mothers. Here are some

statistics about one type of working mother—the one who lives with her husband and children:

¶ As of March 1974 (the latest time for which figures are available), 51 per cent of such women with children aged between six and 17 were in the labor force—that is, either working or seeking work. In 1948, the figure was 26 per cent.

¶ Since the early 1950s, mothers of school-age children have been holding jobs at a greater rate than have married women without children.

¶ The most rapid (and recent) increase in entry into the job market has been among mothers of pre-school children. In 1974, one of every three such women was in the labor force; in 1948, it was one of nine.

¶ Two-thirds of all working mothers had full-time jobs in 1974.

It is now the younger mother—particularly the one under 25 years of age—who is most likely to enter the labor force. One reason for this is that younger mothers feel the need to supplement the relatively low earnings of a young husband just beginning his career. In general, it is in households in which the husbands have incomes below $5,000 that the wives are most likely to be working. In families at this income level, almost half the mothers are under 25. And all of these working mothers—including the youngest ones with the youngest children—work because they have to.

But this does not mean that all the mothers whose families need the extra income have jobs. Only mothers with at least a high-school education are likely to find work. Because the overwhelming majority (68 per cent) of family heads below the poverty line have not completed high school, this means that the wives in families which most need the extra income tend to be the least able to get a job.

Yet mothers in middle- and high-income families are showing the most rapid increase as job-holders—entering the work force at a higher rate than married women from *low*-income families did in the early 1960s.

The working mothers with the highest rate of labor-force participation are the single parents. And here, too, it is among the younger generation that single parenthood has been growing the most rapidly. By 1974, among parents under 25 heading a family, one out of four was without a spouse (it was one out of about seven just six years earlier). Their incomes are usually low.

In sharp contrast, the proportion of single-parent families in the "over $15,000" income bracket has remained consistently be-

low two per cent. But it would be a mistake to conclude that a well-to-do intact family runs little risk of disruption. This is because the breakup of the family usually results in a lower income for the new, single-parent head (in the overwhelming majority of cases, the mother).

There are few single parents with incomes as high as $10,000. In 1973, the median income for all families headed by a male with a wife present and at least one child under six was $12,000; the corresponding figure for a single-parent female-headed family was $3,600 (far below the poverty line). In the small proportion of father-headed, single-parent families with pre-school children, the average income was $9,500.

In other words, it is the single-parent mother who finds herself in severely strained financial circumstances. And if she is under 25, her degree of economic deprivation is likely to be extreme. Such a mother, when all her children are under the age of six, must make do with a median income of only $2,800. There are more than 1.5 million mothers in this age group, and they

Drawing by Lou Myers. © 1976 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

constitute one-third of all female-headed families with children under six. (See further discussion on pp. 87–92.)

As for the future, no one can tell for certain how many children will be born to American families, but there are a few indications.

The fertility rate for American women—the number of babies born per 1,000 women—dropped 25 per cent between the start of the 1970s and November 1975.

Other fertility patterns show that women born between 1935 and 1940 had an average of 1.0 children by age 22, while women born in a four-year period 15 years later were estimated to have an average of only 0.5 children by the same age. This is at about the same level as for women whose childbearing occurred during the Depression.

In 1975, three out of every four American wives aged 18 to 24 said they expected to have no more than two children, whereas in 1967 the proportion was only 45 per cent. Moreover, one-third of the women aged 40 to 49 in 1975 already had given birth to four or more children; among women who were in their 20s in 1975, only one out of 10 said she expected to have four or more children.

If such women live up to their expectations, the percentage of children who come from large families will be relatively tiny, and the fertility rate will be close to the minimum required for replacement of the population.

EDITOR'S NOTE. *The bulk of the material in the foregoing article was drawn from "Marital Instability: Past, Present, and Future" by Arthur J. Norton and Paul C. Glick, in volume 32, no. 1 of* The Journal of Social Issues, *and from "Reality and Research in the Ecology of Human Development" by Urie Bronfenbrenner in volume 119, no. 6 of the* Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society. *Mr. Norton is chief of the Marriage and Family Statistics Branch of the U.S. Bureau of the Census; Mr. Glick is senior demographer in the Population Division of the U.S. Bureau of the Census; Mr. Bronfenbrenner is professor of human development and family studies at Cornell University.*