

Review of NEW FAMILIES, NO FAMILIES? THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE AMERICAN HOME, by Frances K. Goldscheider and Linda J. Waite

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New Families, No Families? The Transformation of the American Home.

Frances K. Goldscheider & Linda J. Waite. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1991. 303 pp. ISBN 0-520--07222-7. \$34.95.

The central question of this book, captured succinctly in its clever title, is whether American families are disappearing due to singlehood, childlessness, and divorce ("no families"), or becoming more egalitarian as a result of rapid changes in gender roles, women's increasing participation in the paid labor force, and a more balanced division of domestic labor ("new families"). The issues are important and complex, requiring the authors to perform extensive analyses of data collected over the past three decades. Their ambitious analysis relies on The National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience, specifically the NLS samples of Young Men and Young Women (aged 14 to 24) and Mature Women (aged 30 to 44), interviewed from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s.

The book addresses a host of critical family issues and is important reading for a wide range of family scholars, from social psychologists interested in family dynamics to sociologists, demographers, and public policy analysts. Among the issues that serve as major themes throughout the book are the "decline" of the family versus its restructuring since the baby boom; the transitions to marriage, parenthood, and divorce; husbands' and children's involvement in the domestic economy; the lifelong consequences of childhood family structure and socialization experiences; the effects of traditional versus egalitarian gender role attitudes on family formation decisions; the consequences of nonfamily living experiences in early adulthood; and variation in family dynamics associated with social structural location (principally parents' race, education, region, and children's gender).

There are many new and important findings. As evidence of movement toward "new families," Frances Goldscheider and Linda Waite document that both husbands and children increase domestic work when wives/mothers are employed outside the home, and that the contributions of husbands and children increase as women's earnings increase. Fathers' education also increases their housework, thus indirectly lowering children's share, but the net effect of husbands "substituting" for children is that women (even when employed outside the home) still do more than their husbands and children combined. Children in black two-parent families do more housework than their white counterparts, southern children do less, and girls (especially teenage girls) do substantially more. Many nontraditional family experiences also are propelling "new families." Factors facilitating more egalitarian family roles and a more balanced division of domestic labor include childhood experiences in a mother-only or stepfamily, maternal employment in the family of origin, nonfamily living experiences in early adulthood, female employment, divorce, and remarriage.

Throughout the book the authors present and discuss the results of extensive analyses in a readable, even leisurely way. This accomplishment is laudable given that they undertake an ambitious analysis of demographic trends and further complicate their task by integrating measures of important social psychological processes. It is in this regard that the book's limitations are noteworthy. It is disheartening that the analyses are not more directly tied to theory, rendering many of the findings difficult to interpret. A related and sometimes glaring problem is conceptual confusion, including the equation of households with families. The authors claim that nearly a fourth of American households consist of individuals living alone, who thus represent "no families." Yet large segments of this population, including divorced individuals who either live alone or cohabit, nonetheless have families consisting of parents, siblings, children, and perhaps grandchildren. We also know that being a single householder is often temporary, as most of those who divorce remarry, often quickly, forming another variety of "new families."

Unfortunately, the NLS data and the classification schemes the authors impose on the data are too crude to permit careful tests of the most relevant hypotheses. For example, the authors characterize two-parent families as "stable" and "intact," while one-parent families are "broken;" they exclude never-married families from their discussion of "new families;" and they equate an egalitarian division of labor with family cohesion. Perhaps most problematic, however, is that they consider women who endorse the importance of employment for their self-esteem and the economic well-being of their families as less family-oriented. In this way, the book perpetuates the myth that work and family are separate spheres, and denies the possibility that many women value employment, reject traditional family roles, and desire to have fewer children because they are pursuing nontraditional families rather than "no families."

Although the authors interpret the bulk of their evidence as indicating the emergence of "new families," their data provide even more compelling evidence for this trend than they recognize. In the end, the real issue is one of recognizing and appreciating family diversity and plurality. The authors' unwillingness throughout the book, but most explicitly in the concluding chapter, to consider childless couples, mother-only families, gay and lesbian families, and alternative family forms as viable family systems that can coexist alongside traditional ("old") and "new" families detracts from an otherwise valuable piece of research.

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