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IS THE FAMILY DISAPPEARING? NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS VS. NATIONAL TRENDS IN FAMILY STRUCTURE

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ABSTRACT—This study compares recent trends in family structure between the nation and the northern Great Plains states of Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota, using census data from 1950 to 1990. I focus on patterns in two-parent and non-two parent families, and on married women in the labor force, to evaluate Popenoe's thesis that the American family has been declining since 1960. Two explanations for the differences from national trends have been proposed for families on the Great Plains: they are exceptions to national trends or they only lag behind national trends. Analysis of the rate of change from the previous decennial censuses 1930-1990 suggests that the experiences of families in the northern Great Plains states lagged rather than differed significantly from national trends. Finally, I discuss three major problems with Popenoe's thesis of "family decline": definitions, applications, and lack of historical context.

Introduction

When Popenoe (1988) decried the "decline" of contemporary families, he struck a responsive chord with others who shared his fears about the impact of modernization on American families (Blankenhorn et al. 1990; Blankenhorn 1995). Although Popenoe's hypothesis was questioned by both family sociologists and family historians (Stacey 1996:52-82; Gillis 1996:3-19, 225-40), his views resonated with many Americans.

Popenoe (1996:192) projected dire consequences from contemporary family patterns—"If present trends continue, our society could be on the verge of committing social suicide." When he elaborated on the declining American family, he focused on changes from 1960 to 1990 in three areas: family structures, non-two parent families, and married women in the labor

force (Popenoe 1993). He judged these as evidence of "unprecedented decline of the family as a social institution" (1993:528). Some family scholars criticized Popenoe's conclusions, characterizing them as "ranting about family decline" (Furstenberg 1997) or cautioning readers to "look past the Victorianisms" (Goldscheider 1997). Nonetheless, the wide acceptance of his ideas suggests that his thesis merits serious consideration.

After a summary of the "disappearing family" thesis, I compare recent trends in family structure at the national level with those of the northern Great Plains states. Two alternative hypotheses for trends in the northern Great Plains states are considered: social life and families in Great Plains are exceptions from the rest of the nation (Webb 1931) or their patterns simply lag. Neither is supported unequivocally. Finally I evaluate the "disappearing family" thesis and conclude that it is not appropriate for trends in the northern Great Plains. Families there have been and are more similar to national trends than is often believed, but families are not "disappearing" in either the region or the nation.

Popenoe (1993:530-33) postulated a decreasing commitment to family life from 1960 to 1990 in three major areas. First, he argued there was a decreasing commitment to nuclear family patterns. Married couple families declined as a percent of all families and women had significantly fewer children. Consequently, the proportion of children decreased dramatically. Popenoe (1993:530) blamed the decline in fertility primarily on the combination of an "unprecedented decrease in positive feelings toward parenthood and motherhood" and a "remarkable decrease in the stigma associated with childlessness."

The second major area that Popenoe (1993:533-34) cited as exemplifying the "decline of the American family" was the increasing frequency of non-two parent families 1960-1990. The proportion of both the marriage-age population that was divorced and the proportion of all households that were non-family households mushroomed. In addition, the proportion of births to unmarried women per 1000 births surged. Finally, because of the increases in divorce and in births to unmarried women, there was an upsurge in the percent of children not living with both of their parents.

The third area providing evidence for Popenoe (1993:531) was the changing composition of the labor force between 1960 and 1990. Both the percentage of married women in the labor force and the percent of married women in the labor force who had children under six years old jumped dramatically. Similarly, the proportion of families with men as the sole income earners decreased substantially.

Popenoe (1993) argued that the combination of the trends in these three areas—the decreasing commitment to the nuclear family, the increasing frequency of non-two parent family patterns, and the loss of the male breadwinner model—spelled almost certain disaster for families and American society.

Methods

The data analyzed are from the US Census Bureau decennial censuses (1930-1990) and the National Center for Health Statistics vital statistics (1960, 1970, 1980, 1990). Because the published decennial census data are cross-sectional and state-level, conclusions must be drawn with caution. There are several additional limitations on the data. Until 1960 the census did not report data on the percent of: children not living with both parents, married women in the labor force with children under six years old, or married couple families with men as sole income earners. The non-marital birth ratio, measuring the proportion of births to unmarried women per 1000 births, is based on state data and was not available from all four states until 1980.

In this study I analyzed the degree to which the northern Great Plains states of Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota were exceptional over several decades. First, where possible, I also examined census trends from 1950 to 1990, rather than just 1960-90, in order to dilute the effects of the baby boom on the trends. Second, in order to take a longer view, I examined the rate of change between each census from 1930 to 1990 in five areas of family structure where consistent published decennial census data exist: the married percent of marriage-age population, the fertility ratio, the percent of children in the population, the divorced percent of the marriage-age population, and the percent of married women in the labor force. I compared the rate of change from one census to the next between 1930-1990 for each variable and then calculated the Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) among the rates of change. The analysis of rates of change began with 1930 because I reasoned that starting prior to World War II, both rural electrification and an extensive system of good highways influenced the extent to which the physical environment on the northern Great Plains families here exceptions to national trends. This prediction seems to have been wrong, with one exception. Trends in basic family structures have been quite similar between the northern Great Plains states and the nation for at least sixty years.

Results

The hypothesis that the physical environment of the Great Plains has forced its inhabitants to make exceptional adaptations is widely identified with Walter Prescott Webb's (1931: 8) thesis that the "Great Plains have bent and molded Anglo-American life, have destroyed traditions, and have influenced institutions in a most singular manner."

In this study, I employed the definition of the Great Plains from the Great Plains Committee Report of 1936, which included approximately 400 counties in the ten states of Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming (1936:25). For the purpose of this study, I concentrated on the northern Great Plains states of Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Wyoming was excluded because I analyzed state level data from the published census, and the majority of Wyoming's counties were not included in the definition of the Great Plains above.

Because of the Great Plains' sweeping landscapes and harsh weather, it is often assumed that only a special, resilient type can thrive there. For example, a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article discussing the region's declining birth rate declared, "some of the nation's strongest families . . . have resulted from that soil" (Hyde 1997:45). The image of rural families, such as those of the Great Plains, as stronger than urban families is widely held (e.g., Roper 1992:38-39). For example, North Dakota, a typical Great Plains state, is often rated as among the best states in which to raise children (*The Forum* 1992; 1994; 1995; 1997; 1998).

When the data from the northern Great Plains states were compared with the national data, it appeared that these states still had more nuclear family patterns. For example, the percent of married couple families was higher in the northern Great Plains states than in the nation as a percent of all families (Table 1). And, both the percent who were divorced, and the proportion of children not living with both parents, were lower than the national percentage (Table 2). These statistics seemed to support the view that the Great Plains was, and is, more family-centered than the national norm.

However, focusing on only a single point in time can lead to unwarranted conclusions. My analysis of longer-term data sets here does not support the suggestion that the Great Plains are exceptional in family structure. Instead, the longer-term census data suggest that the trends in the northern Great Plains states were not radically different from national ones. State and national differences appear to reflect a lag between the Plains states and the nation.

TABLE 1
Popenoe's Indicators of Traditional Families

MARRIED COUPLE FAMILIES ¹					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	91.4	87.8	86.4	82.1	80.4
Northern Great Plains	91.6	90.7	89.9	87.4	85.2
Montana	91.4	90.7	89.6	87.0	84.2
Nebraska	91.4	90.8	90.0	87.4	85.1
North Dakota	91.9	90.5	90.0	88.3	86.3
South Dakota	90.8	90.6	89.8	87.1	85.6
FERTILITY RATIO ²					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	419	471	352	279	280
Northern Great Plains	481	563	365	328	308
Montana	505	567	362	322	299
Nebraska	438	532	357	314	304
North Dakota	525	601	380	342	309
South Dakota	506	588	372	351	329
CHILDREN ³					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	31.0	35.8	34.3	28.1	25.6
Northern Great Plains	32.8	37.5	35.5	29.1	27.6
Montana	33.0	38.6	36.5	29.5	27.8
Nebraska	30.8	35.4	34.2	28.5	27.2
North Dakota	36.1	39.8	36.6	29.3	27.5
South Dakota	33.9	38.5	36.2	29.8	28.5

¹ As a percent of all families. Source: United States Census Bureau, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

² The fertility ratio equals the number of children under five years old per 1000 women ages 15-49. Source: United States Census Bureau, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

³ As a percent of the entire population. Source: United States Census Bureau, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

TABLE 2
NON-TWO PARENT FAMILY PATTERNS

DIVORCED¹					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	2.19	2.49	3.40	6.30	8.50
Northern Great Plains	1.79	1.96	2.52	5.00	7.49
Montana	2.90	2.90	3.50	6.40	9.30
Nebraska	1.80	2.02	2.60	5.06	7.43
North Dakota	1.12	1.22	1.67	3.80	6.01
South Dakota	1.43	1.57	2.06	4.40	6.89
NON-FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS²					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	10.6	14.9	19.7	26.8	29.3
Northern Great Plains	13.1	15.5	20.8	27.5	30.4
Montana	17.0	18.0	21.7	27.6	30.4
Nebraska	12.6	15.6	21.4	27.9	30.6
North Dakota	10.7	13.6	19.0	26.8	30.5
South Dakota	12.2	14.2	20.1	27.0	29.9
NON-MARITAL BIRTH RATIO³					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	42.6	56.9	107.6	184.3	280.3
Northern Great Plains	20.3	28.4	71.0	115.8	208.9
Montana	21.0	—	—	128.2	241.8
Nebraska	—	—	75.2	114.7	205.3
North Dakota	20.5	25.3	62.8	85.4	161.9
South Dakota	19.4	31.3	69.5	135.3	227.3
CHILDREN NOT LIVING WITH BOTH PARENTS⁴					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	—	13.2	17.3	23.3	28.2
Northern Great Plains	—	8.2	11.8	17.0	21.2
Montana	—	9.9	13.7	18.9	24.1
Nebraska	—	8.1	11.8	17.0	20.7
North Dakota	—	6.9	9.7	13.6	17.8
South Dakota	—	8.3	11.9	18.0	22.0

¹ As percent of the marriage-age population. Source: US Census Bureau, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

² As percent of all households. Source: US Census Bureau, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

³ The non-marital birth ratio equals the proportion of births to unmarried women per 1,000 births. Source: National Center for Health Statistics, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

⁴ As percent of all children. Source: US Census Bureau, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

— Information not available.

Popenoe (1993) maintained that a declining commitment to marriage and children was indicated by: 1) the decreasing proportion of married couples as a percent of all families, 2) the decreasing percent of the population who are children, and 3) declining fertility. How do trends in the northern Great Plains compare with those for the nation as a whole? Married couple families as a percent of all families, declined both nationally and in the four states 1950-1990 (Table 1). The northern Great Plains states were close the national average for married couple families in 1950. Beginning in 1960, however, the gap between the regional and national averages grew slightly in each decade (Table 1). The pattern that emerged reoccurred in most of the variables assessed. The region, all four states, and the nation displayed similar trends from 1950 to 1990, in this case decline. The similar dynamics over time in state and national trends 1950-1990 suggests that the state patterns were not exceptions to national trends. Instead, the similarity in pattern, but lagged in time, suggests that social patterns in the more rural northern Great Plains simply followed national trends more slowly.

The fertility ratio for the region, all four states, and the nation increased sharply 1950-1960, because of the 1945-1965 baby boom (Table 1). After 1960 the national, regional, and state ratios have followed a downward and converging trend. Finally, the trend in children as percent of population paralleled the fertility ratio (Table 1). Both the nation and the states climbed in 1960, but fell and converged by 1990. For both the fertility ratio and the proportion of children in the population, the northern Great Plains states (except for Nebraska) increased noticeably 1950-1960. However, all four states showed quite similar trends from 1970 to 1990. These three variables (Table 1) do not support the hypothesis of a fundamental difference between the region and the nation. The results are consistent with a regional lag effect.

The increasing frequency of non-two parent families distressed Popenoe (1993). The four representative variables that I examined were: divorce, non-family households, non-marital births, and children not living with both parents (Table 2).

Divorce, as a percent of the marriage-age population (Table 2), showed a similar pattern to married couple families (Table 1). The states, the region, and the nation increased sharply 1950-1990. In each case, the most dramatic growth began after 1970. This was even true of Montana, which began and ended with a higher percent divorced than the nation. Additionally, the gap between the region's and the nation's averages in percent divorced actually decreased. In 1950, the average for the northern Great Plains states was 82%

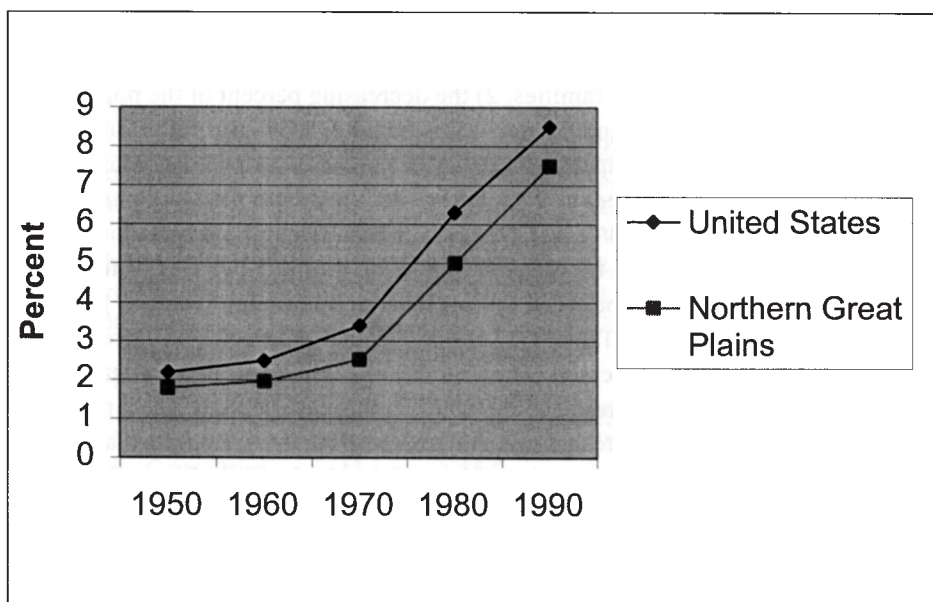


Figure 1. Divorced as percent of marriage-age population.

of the national level; by 1990, it rose to 88% of the national level (Table 2). A striking similarity between national and regional trends is evident (Figure 1). The parallel trends in this variable were typical of the patterns in most of the variables examined in this study.

The percent of non-family households was one of the few variables in which the nation's levels consistently lagged the region's (Table 2). Nonetheless, the temporal dynamics were basically similar for the states, region, and nation. The proportions increased consistently from 1950 and converged by 1990. There were substantial jumps in non-family households between 1960-1980 at all three scales, but relatively little change for 1950-1960 and 1980-1990 (Table 2).

The trends in the non-marital birth ratio paralleled those in married couple families (Table 1) and the divorce rate (Table 2). In 1950 and 1960 the ratios for the region were about half of the national average. Both national and regional ratios were reasonably stable until 1970, and then they began the sharp climb that continued to 1990. The region's ratio was not as high as

the nation's, but it increased from 50% of the national level in 1950 to 75% by 1990 (Table 2).

The regional trend in the percent of children that were not living with both parents also followed the national average (Table 2). As with the divorced percent of the population and the non-marital birth ratio (Table 2), the gap between the regional and national averages narrowed. From 1950-1990 the regional average increased from 62% to 75% of the national level (Table 2).

Thus, the northern Great Plains states generally paralleled but lagged national trends in marital and family statistics, with the exception of the percent of non-family households (Tables 1, 2), the pattern suggests the region will eventually replicate the national figures.

Labor force statistics showed a different relationship (Table 3). State and regional percentages of both married women in the labor force and of married couple families with men as sole income earners, began lower than national levels, but surpassed them in 1980-1990. The gap between national and state percentages of married women in the labor force with children under six years old actually increased noticeably in 1980-1990, except for Montana. Married couple families with men as sole income earners, were similar regionally and nationally in 1956, but dropped more regionally than nationally by 1990 (Table 3). Although the national percent of married couple families with men as sole income earners was lower than any of the states in 1960, this situation was reversed by 1990. The national and state patterns in the percent of married couple families with men as the sole income earners exhibited quite similar declines (Table 3). Finally, the percent of married women in the labor force with children under six years old was similar among the states and the nation in 1960. By 1990, however, all four states had a higher percent than the nation, and all states except Montana exceeded the national level by at least 10% (Table 3). Thus, none of the labor force data support the lag hypothesis.

Next I tested the lag hypothesis by examining the rates of change for five key variables: married as a percent of the marriage-age population, fertility ratio, children as a percent of the population, divorced as a percent of the marriage-age population, and percent of married women in the labor force (Table 4). The rate of change for all five variables demonstrated two patterns. First, the direction of the rate of change (positive or negative) generally matched for states, region, and nation. For example, when the married percent of the national population was decreasing, it was also decreasing in the states and the region (Table 4). Second, the magnitude of the

TABLE 3
LABOR FORCE

MARRIED WOMEN ¹					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	21.6	30.7	39.2	49.2	56.0
Northern Great Plains	17.9	28.3	37.7	50.0	60.7
Montana	18.7	28.9	37.7	47.8	56.6
Nebraska	18.9	29.0	39.3	51.7	62.5
North Dakota	15.4	26.4	33.8	47.3	60.0
South Dakota	17.1	28.0	37.6	51.0	62.2
MARRIED COUPLE FAMILIES WITH MEN AS SOLE INCOME EARNERS ²					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	—	59.6	41.5	31.7	34.3
Northern Great Plains	—	61.0	42.9	36.2	28.8
Montana	—	60.1	43.2	37.0	31.9
Nebraska	—	60.7	42.0	35.1	27.7
North Dakota	—	62.4	45.1	38.3	29.3
South Dakota	—	61.1	42.6	35.9	27.5
MARRIED WOMEN WITH CHILDREN UNDER 6 YEARS OLD ³					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
United States	—	19.2	28.2	43.9	55.5
Northern Great Plains	—	18.5	29.3	46.8	65.1
Montana	—	18.6	28.5	42.5	57.9
Nebraska	—	18.1	30.7	48.1	66.9
North Dakota	—	18.1	26.4	46.2	66.5
South Dakota	—	19.3	29.6	49.7	67.4

¹ In the labor force, as a percent of all married women. Source: US Census Bureau, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

² As a percent of all married couple families with employed husbands. Source: US Census Bureau, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

³ In the labor force, as a percent of all married women with children under six years old. Source: US Census Bureau, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

— Information not available.

TABLE 4
RATE OF CHANGE FROM PREVIOUS CENSUS

MARRIED¹							
	1930-40	1940-50	1950-60	1960-70	1970-80	1980-90	Pearson's r
United States	0.0093	0.090	0.0105	-0.0862	-0.0683	-0.0436	
Northern Great Plains	-0.08	0.09	0.01	-0.08	-0.04	-0.03	0.791
Montana	0.03	0.11	0.02	-0.07	-0.02	-0.02	0.979
Nebraska	0.01	0.08	0.03	-0.08	-0.03	-0.03	0.973
North Dakota	0.02	0.11	0.03	-0.06	-0.01	-0.02	0.970
South Dakota	0.02	0.11	0.03	-0.06	-0.01	-0.02	0.970
FERTILITY RATIO²							
	1930-40	1940-50	1950-60	1960-70	1970-80	1980-90	Pearson's r
United States	-0.17	0.43	0.12	-0.25	-0.21	0.004	
Northern Great Plains	-0.15	0.42	0.17	-0.35	-0.10	-0.06	0.959
Montana	-0.08	0.46	0.12	-0.36	-0.11	-0.07	0.951
Nebraska	-0.17	0.44	0.21	-0.33	-0.12	-0.03	0.971
North Dakota	-0.16	0.35	0.14	-0.37	-0.10	-0.10	0.939
South Dakota	-0.15	0.42	0.16	-0.37	-0.06	-0.06	0.940
CHILDREN³							
	1930-40	1940-50	1950-60	1960-70	1970-80	1980-90	Pearson's r
United States	-0.13	0.01	0.15	-0.04	-0.18	-0.09	
Northern Great Plains	-0.10	0.01	0.14	-0.05	-0.18	-0.05	0.985
Montana	-0.14	0.07	0.17	-0.05	-0.19	-0.06	0.982
Nebraska	-0.13	0.00	0.15	-0.03	-0.17	-0.05	0.990
North Dakota	-0.13	0.01	0.10	-0.08	-0.20	-0.06	0.970
South Dakota	-0.12	0.00	0.14	-0.06	-0.18	-0.04	0.978
DIVORCED⁴							
	1930-40	1940-50	1950-60	1960-70	1970-80	1980-90	Pearson's r
United States	0.20	0.49	0.14	0.37	0.85	0.35	
Northern Great Plains	0.19	0.31	0.09	0.29	0.98	0.50	0.926
Montana	0.11	0.38	0.00	0.21	0.83	0.45	0.950
Nebraska	0.19	0.25	0.12	0.29	0.95	0.47	0.905
North Dakota	0.22	0.33	0.09	0.37	1.28	0.58	0.924
South Dakota	0.22	0.27	0.10	0.31	1.14	0.57	0.895
MARRIED WOMEN IN LABOR FORCE⁵							
	1930-40	1940-50	1950-60	1960-70	1970-80	1980-90	Pearson's r
United States	0.14	0.70	0.42	0.28	0.26	0.14	
Northern Great Plains	-0.03	1.45	0.58	0.33	0.33	0.21	0.978
Montana	0.18	1.53	0.55	0.58	0.05	0.18	0.930
Nebraska	0.01	1.36	0.76	0.18	0.32	0.21	0.972
North Dakota	0.05	1.75	0.71	0.28	0.40	0.27	0.971
South Dakota	0.04	1.44	0.64	0.34	0.36	0.22	0.985

¹ As a percent of the marriage-age population. Source: US Census Bureau, 1930-1990.

² The fertility ratio equals the number of children under five years old per 1,000 women ages 15-49. Source: US Census Bureau, 1930-1990.

³ As a percent of the entire population. Source: US Census Bureau, 1930-1990.

⁴ As a percent of the marriage-age population. Source: US Census Bureau, 1930-1990.

⁵ As a percent of all married women. Source: US Census Bureau, 1930-1990.

rate of change was generally similar among states, region, and nation (Table 4). Rates of change were generally similar (Table 4). Thus, these two patterns modify the lag hypothesis. The similar direction and magnitude in the rates of change for all five variables suggest that the regional lag occurred because the trends in the states and the nation began at different times, rather than because these states and the nation were changing at different rates.

Although the general patterns in the rate of change in the five variables were similar, there were noticeable differences in the fertility ratio and the rate of divorce (Table 4). The rates of change in the fertility ratio for 1960-70 in the northern Great Plains states were actually earlier and more dramatic than for the nation as a whole (Table 4). The rate of change in the divorced percent of the population revealed that the rates of change were also more rapid in the northern Great Plains states, especially in the Dakotas, than in the nation as a whole since 1980 (Table 4).

Interestingly, the highest rates of change in three of the five variables examined—married as a percent of the population, the fertility ratio, and the percent of married women in the labor force—all took place 1940-50 (Table 4). That decade also had the second highest rate of change in divorced as a percent of the population. These trends are consistent with the familiar portrait of the dramatic changes that World War II and the baby boom brought to American families (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:151-201).

Discussion

Perhaps the most intriguing results concerned the participation of married women in the labor force. The rate of change in the percentage of married women in the labor force (Table 4) supports my inference that the modernizing forces of the 1930s and 1940s, plus the improving economy of the 1940s, strongly influenced families in the northern Plains states. At the same time, proportion of married couples in the Great Plains in which men maintained the traditional sole breadwinner role decreased by over 50% from 1960-1990 (Table 4). This is not consistent with the common view that rural areas, like the northern Great Plains states, are preserving traditional family patterns relative to the rest of the nation (Roper 1992:38-39). Thus, the labor force data (Tables 3, 4) suggested that the northern Great Plains environment and social and economic changes affected family structure.

The possibility that the modernizing economy of the northern Great Plains states was associated with the increased percentage of married women

in the labor force, the decrease in the fertility ratio, and the higher divorce rate is consistent with three prominent hypotheses that postulate economic change as the primary cause of fluctuations in the divorce rate. First, the independence (or interdependence) effect hypothesis maintains that marriage is primarily an instrumental arrangement, one that becomes less desirable for women as they gain economic independence. With economic independence, women may choose to have fewer children or leave unsatisfying marriages (Becker 1981; Cherlin 1992:51-54; Popenoe 1995:43). Second, the economic-opportunity effect hypothesis maintains that increased opportunities for working women provide a means of escape from intolerable marriages, instead of viewing greater independence of women in the labor market as the primary cause of increased divorce (Ruggles 1997a, 1997b). And, third, the income effect hypothesis maintains that the major cause of increasing divorce and decreasing marriage has been the relative decline in male income (Oppenheimer 1994, 1997). Unfortunately, the cross-sectional census data in this study did not provide a basis for differentiating among these hypotheses or for testing the cause-and-effect assumptions.

The majority of the differences between the variables examined for the nation and the northern Great Plains states implicate a "lag effect" with initially different starting points. Without additional research it is impossible to ascribe a precise reason for such a lag. However, the "lag effect" was evident in the earliest data from 1930-1940 (Table 4), a period when much of the rest of the nation was also still rural. This suggests that the lag cannot be explained as simply a rural-urban contrast. Comparative examination of other predominantly rural regions, such as the South, might reveal to what extent lag might due to economic, cultural, or ecological factors.

The variables that do not support the lag hypothesis fall into two groups: non-family households (Table 2) and married women in the labor force (Table 3). Further research is required to explain these findings; however, both trends may be examples of how the physical environment of the northern Great Plains influenced social or economic condition which then influenced family structure. For example, the trend in non-family households could be due to continuing rural depopulation (Albrecht 1993; Rathge and Highman 1998). Rural outmigration has left fewer middle age children with whom elderly parents might live. The trend in the labor force data may also reflect the influence of a harsh northern Great Plains environment. Lower average income, an economic difference for the Great Plains, could subsequently have led to the observed trend toward two-income families, even among married women with young children.

If Families Are “Disappearing,” Is There Reason For Concern?

The evidence suggests that the northern Great Plains states are not insulated from national family trends that have concerned some scholars (e.g., Popenoe, 1993). Should people in those states be concerned because their families are exhibiting the same trends as in the nation's? The first problem is that old conundrum—“What do we mean by ‘family’?” Bokemeier (1997: 9-10) noted, “rethinking of families . . . has generated new insights, but it has given us a measure of ambiguity as well. . . . To acknowledge the difficulty in finding a comprehensive definition or shared meaning of family is not a failure or shortcoming; rather it shows an awareness of the complexity of social phenomenon.”

For example, Popenoe used a limited definition of “the family” (Coontz 1992, 1997; Skolnick 1991; Stacey 1991, 1996). His definition was both narrow and broad. It was narrow in his insistence that a family must be a kin or kin-like relationship with at least one adult and one dependent person. He explicitly excluded married couples with no dependents—both the empty nesters and the childless. On the other hand, his definition was broad because he included single-parent families, nonmarried and homosexual couples, as long as they met the narrow criteria of kinship and dependency (Popenoe 1993:529). Popenoe presented his definition of family as universal. It might be asked, however, if his definition of family was really a general one, or if it represents a particular historical form of the patriarchal nuclear family.

Although Popenoe's definition of family emphasized structure rather than function, it can be argued that families can be defined by their functions of psychological and emotional support as by their structure of dependence. Furthermore, although Popenoe included single parents and homosexual couples as families, his assessment of “good” families using the percent of married couples excluded these families. If families are discussed in terms of the functions they perform, rather than the structure they manifest, then it is not at all clear that families are “disappearing” (Wetzel 1990:12). For example, a recent longitudinal study of a representative national sample of over 1,000 married persons with children (Amato and Booth 1997) concluded that maternal employment is generally positive for children and that egalitarian gender relations in families have relatively little negative impact.

A second problem in Popenoe's (1988, 1993, 1996) arguments becomes apparent when it is asked, “What is the appropriate framework for analyzing changing families?” Scholars have noted that other modern indus-

trialized nations have experienced comparable social changes and similar trends in families without becoming so alarmed (Stacey 1996:87). While histories and cultures differ, countries that are dealing better with these changes, such as Sweden and Germany, have socialized and extended traditional family functions to other areas of society (Skolnick 1991:128). These countries have much more extensive social safety nets, including child support payments, parental leave, and health benefits.

The final problem evident in the “disappearing family” argument is its lack of historical context. The trends that concerned Popenoe (1993, 1996) are “a continuation of what has been happening for at least several centuries” (Bumpass 1990:484). The family is only “declining” if it was somehow dramatically “better” in the past. Coontz (1992:9) concluded, “Like most versions of a ‘golden age,’ the ‘traditional family’ . . . evaporates on closer examination. It is an ahistorical amalgam of structures, values, and behaviors that never existed in the same time and place.”

For example, nostalgia for a lost “golden age” of the family ignores the impact of high mortality rates in the past. In 1900, 50% of all parents had a child die. In 1976, only 6% did. As Skolnick noted (1991:153), because of the “longevity revolution,” “a white baby girl today has a greater chance of living to be sixty than her counterpart born in 1870 would have had of reaching her first birthday.” Because of declining mortality rates, couples are actually more likely to celebrate a 40th wedding anniversary today than they were in 1900, despite the increasing rate of divorce (Skolnick 1991:156). Finally, nostalgia for the “disappearing family” tends to ignore the long history of change and conflict in traditional patriarchal families.

Conclusion

In this study, I examined evidence on family structures in the northern Great Plains states of Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota in relation to national trends to evaluate Popenoe’s (1993, 1996) suggestion that families in America are declining. Analysis of ten variables from the published decennial census showed similar patterns among the four states, the region, and the nation, and strong correlations in rates of change among the states, the region, and the nation. Reassessment of Popenoe’s theses about family “decline” suggested three problems: definition, analytical framework, and lack of historical context.

Regional lag and Great Plains exceptionalism were examined as alternative explanations for differences between patterns in family structures

between the northern Great Plains states and the nation. A lag effect was found for six of the ten variables. Although the exceptional nature of the Great Plains was indirectly supported by the failure of the lag explanation for four variables, the rates of change for all ten parameters in the northern Great Plains region were highly correlated with the national trends. The findings suggest that even if the harsh environment of the Great Plains accelerates or retards some structural trends in families, the direction and magnitude of change have been similar to those of the nation.

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