

Commitment and Stability:
A Reconsideration of the 1950s American Family

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In 1954, Elizabeth Longford wrote the following about her family: “When, during the holidays, all ten of us are sitting around a table together, one of the younger one will often remark with intense satisfaction, ‘Now the whole family is together.’”¹ This small story paints a picture of a family experiencing the fulfillment of closely-knit family life. It is stories such as this that have helped generate the idealized image of the 1950s American family that exists today. Indeed, when people think about the ideal family, visions of a family that functions relatively cohesively while providing love, support, and stability come to mind. Families living in the 1950s seem to fit the mold by reflecting many idealized characteristics. Unsurprisingly, the result is that family life of the 1950s has become a point of reference or model used to measure American families that have followed.

For better or worse, the 1950s is often talked about by predominantly conservative groups and hailed as a sort of “golden age” for the American family. While such visions are certainly based on somewhat nostalgic memories of a past time, positive qualities were present in 1950s American family life. For example, consider how more people were getting married, families were larger, and, most importantly, divorce rates were very low. In contrast, many scholars contend this view that portrays the 1950s as a golden age for the American family is a fallacy. They point to factors like discontent among women due to feeling trapped by strict gender roles, diversity was suppressed, and ultimately produce the impression that the good characteristics were more than outweighed by the bad. Although many scholars insist the often-idealized family of the 1950s is a fanciful notion lacking perspective, in-depth research makes it clear that the 1950s was still a special time for the American family. In spite of what problems did exist, this is a period of time in which the American family flourished because of a close sense of

¹ Elizabeth Longford, *All in the Family: Parenting the 1950s Way* (Stroud: History, 2008), 197.

togetherness, heightened commitment, and greater stability.

The American family of the 1950s has received some attention from various historians throughout the years. Scholarship up to this point has approached the family of the 50s in various ways with varying emphasis, yet common themes do emerge. More specifically, most authors point out that there were several underlying problems in 1950s family life that seems to be often forgotten. Part of Elaine Tyler May's argument in *Homeward Bound* is that homes became a sort of prison for women during this time. Similarly, author Stephanie Coontz contends that diversity was suppressed and stricter gender roles were enforced. Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg also pick up this idea in *Domestic Revolutions*, though they also note that there was a trend towards greater equality in the marriage relationship. Historian Jessica Weiss also suggests that though there were disparities in equality between husbands and wives.

In addition, most writers also accept that in many ways the 1950s were a pro-family time. However, the focus, reasons, explanation, and analysis of these writers diverge in several different ways. Historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg lay some groundwork by providing an overview of the American family as it has changed throughout its history, including the 1950s. David Halberstam provides an exhaustive overview of the decade in his book, *The Fifties*, in which he emphasizes that media such as television is partially responsible for the existing image of the 1950s family. Other writers such as Stephanie Coontz, in *The Way We Never Were*, narrow in to present a more focused analysis. Coontz presents the 1950s American family as a "historical Aberration" and suggests that a large part of family success during this time was due to a booming economy and governmental support. In contrast, Elaine Tyler May, in *Homeward Bound*, sees the emphasis on family as a reaction to the instability of the cold war. Jessica Weiss' book, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom and Social Change*, focuses on how the

50s were a transitional time of struggle which left a lasting legacy of greater equality and changes in family roles. Taken together, these works form much of the historical thought produced on this topic and though they cover the American family from a variety of angles and offer many excellent insights, each one fails to adequately explore the significance of the profound emphasis being placed on family, and the remarkable qualities it stimulated.

The American family of the 1950s lived in the wake of struggling through the Great Depression and World War II. These two events left a lasting impression on the United States, stimulating cultural and political changes. During the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented his New Deal policies in order to relieve widespread suffering. The events of the Great Depression, and the government's response to those challenges, drastically changed the United States economy and society.²

After emerging from the trying 30s and 40s, the country experienced significant growth in a variety of areas. The economy of the United States boomed as the government spent money on infrastructure projects such as interstate highways, schools, and on building up the military strength with items such as new planes. In many ways World War II largely drove this new economic prosperity. Americans everywhere greatly benefitted from this postwar economic boom because unemployment and inflation were low and wages were high, stimulating a consumerist society.³

The economy was not the only boom that occurred in the decade of the 1950s; the number of children did as well in what is popularly referred to as the "Baby Boom." As men returned from the warfront of World War II, people began marrying and having children in

² David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 3.

³ History.com Staff, "The 1950s," History.com, 2010, under "The Postwar Booms," accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.history.com/topics/1950s>.

record numbers. In fact, throughout the 1950s, "...a million more children were born each year than during the 1930s."⁴ The explosion of families also generated a great need for housing. It was not long before developers such as Bill Levitt began mass-producing houses on lots and selling them.⁵ The economic prosperity allowed young families to move into these cheaply produced homes and, in State of the Union address in 1960, President Eisenhower announced that 31 million of the country's 44 million families owned their own home.⁶

The 1950s were not all fun and games, however. In 1949, the United States discovered that America ceased to hold a monopoly on the atomic bomb.⁷ This proceeded to intensify already strained relations and usher in the Cold War, a period of time characterized by profound tension and uneasiness as the United States and Russia fought for ideological military supremacy. In particular, the United States was very concerned with the "expansionist tendencies" of Russia and the resulting spread of communism. While this conflict, a clash between communism and the combination of democracy and capitalism, was largely ideological in nature, the tension and uneasiness shaped foreign and domestic policy and resulted in the anti-communist "Red Scare," in which thousands of Americans suspected of communist tendencies lost jobs.⁸ At home, the American people felt this tension of being on the verge of nuclear war.

In addition to Cold War tension, racial conflict was also a concern as civil rights entered the spotlight of the nation. One of the biggest moments in this struggle came in 1954 in the landmark case *Brown V. Board of Education*. In this instance the court ruled that separate

⁴ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 180.

⁵ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 134.

⁶ Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 180.

⁷ Halberstam, *Fifties*, 25.

⁸ History.com Staff, "The 1950s," History.com, 2010, Under "The Cold War," accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.history.com/topics/1950s>.

schools for black students were unequal, thus violating the Constitution.⁹ This ruling provoked a great deal of upheaval, particularly in the South where many removed their children from public schools and placed them in all white academies.¹⁰

It was within this historical context that families of the 1950s went about daily living. During this time the economy was flourishing, which in turn allowed most Americans to thrive as jobs were plentiful and wages were high. However, this was also a difficult time to live in because it was an era of turbulence and unrest, both at home and abroad. The world was an insecure and uncertain place with the development of nuclear weapons and the ongoing race for dominance between Russia and the United States. Of course, there were also the challenges posed by civil rights and the desegregation of schools. In this time, the American family of the 1950s came together to provide a haven of security and stability in an uncertain world with an unclear future.

When historians address the subject of the American family of the 1950s, they frequently gloss over some of the most important and defining characteristics. Though many scholars acknowledge these characteristics do exist, their tendency is to sweep over them quickly without taking the time to meaningfully examine their significance. Author Stephanie Coontz provides an excellent example of this very tendency. In her book titled *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Coontz writes: “For the first time in 100 years, divorce rates dropped, fertility soared...and the age of marriage fell to the point that teenage

⁹ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 423.

¹⁰ History.com Staff, "The 1950s," History.com, 2010, Under "The Civil Rights Movement," accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.history.com/topics/1950s>.

birth rates were almost double what they are today.”¹¹ Stephanie Coontz even goes as far as saying, “The 1950s was a pro-family period if there ever was one,” but then proceeds to dismiss this notion by calling the time period a “historical aberration.”¹² So while many writers acknowledge that there were many positive aspects associated with the 1950s family, Coontz and other writers fail to recognize their significance.

Unfortunately, the tendency to gloss over the important characteristics of family life in the 1950s has the effect of discounting the fact that there were several qualities that make this a remarkable time for American families. Contrary to the impression conveyed by writers such as Coontz, it is a mistake to simply pass by important factors like the low divorce rate. This sort of data on key qualities of the American family of the 1950s provides valuable insight and, on a more foundational level, is the starting point in the process of beginning to see the strengths of family life during this era. Within this context, it makes the most sense to begin the discussion of the 1950s American family by exploring its unique qualities that distinguish it from any other era of family.

As it turns out, there are multiple factors that lend support to the idea of the 1950s being a sort of golden age for the American family, as some claim. One of the most fundamental is the fact that couples were much more likely to stay married during this time. Throughout the 1950s, rates of divorce were very low, especially in comparison with its more current state. In fact, it should be noted that the 1950s were one of the few decades in which the divorce rate declined. According to historian Jessica Weiss, the divorce rate fell to 8.9 per 1000 women 15 years or

¹¹ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trip* (New York: Basic, 2000), 25.

¹² Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 24.

older, or a total of 368,000 total divorces in 1958.¹³ This stability presents a stark contrast with family as it exists today. According to the 2012 National Health Statistics Report, in 2010 the probability of first marriages lasting 20 years was only 52% for women and 56% for men.¹⁴

The low divorce rate by itself is a very important characteristic, but interestingly enough, seems to be given little weight in most analysis and is typically only mentioned in passing. The fact that it is overlooked seems to suggest that divorce has no real affect on families, which is intriguing given how much pain and disruption divorce causes among families. Most would agree that divorces bring with them a host of difficulty and has many detrimental effects. For example, Andrew J. Cherlin, professor of sociology suggests that the problems associated with divorce include psychological trauma, dramatically lowered standards of living, greater insecurity and chaotic lifestyle, as well as the complications resulting from complex family structures.¹⁵ Thus, it logically follows that the detrimental effects of divorce were much less prevalent in the 1950s than in more recent times, based on the low levels of divorce that existed during that time. The lack of this pain and disruption is very positive and the fact that few families experienced such a disruptive process should not be discounted when evaluating the health of the family during this time.

In addition to much lower rates of divorce, a second important aspect of the 1950s American family which supports claims of it being a golden age is the fact that people were getting married at very high rates, and that people were getting married at younger ages than they

¹³ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 4.

¹⁴ Casey E. Copen et al., "First Marriages in the United States: Data From the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 22, 2012, Duration of First marriage, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr049.pdf>.

¹⁵ Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass. U.a.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 72.

were before. In fact, in the 1950s, more Americans than ever before were getting married. By 1960, only 27.4 percent of women between the ages of 20-24 were single.¹⁶ To give some idea of the change that has occurred, in 1950 the marriage rate was nearly 88 per 1000 women, but in 2004 that figure had dropped to 40, less than half what it was in 1950.¹⁷ With regard to average marriage age, by 1950 the median age at which women were first married was 20.3 years old, a decrease of one year from 1930 when it was 21.3. For men, the change was even more drastic. By 1950, the median age at which men were getting married was 22.8, which was a decrease of nearly four years from 26.7 in 1930.¹⁸

Such high rates of marriage are important because it indicates a greater propensity towards getting married. It makes sense that if any time period could claim the right to be a golden age for the American family, it would be during a time in which a high percentage of people were choosing to get married and raise families. A golden age for the family cannot be a time in which people are hesitant to marry and even begin families.

In addition to people marrying more frequently and at younger ages, the American families in the 1950s also began having larger families than generations that came before and after. Specifically, an article published in *Science Digest* in 1957 explains that the birth rates for third, fourth, and fifth births all increased during this time. Most notably, the percentage of those having a fourth child increased by 70 percent, and the number of those having a fifth child increased by 50 percent.¹⁹ Similarly, an article ran in 1957 in the magazine *U.S News and World*

¹⁶ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 4.

¹⁷ Elaine T. May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 6.

¹⁸Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 4.

¹⁹ Joseph Henry Satin, *The 1950's: America's Placid Decade*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 160.

Report, said, “Americans, in this decade of growing confidence, had a record number of babies—39 million in 10 years.”²⁰ Examining the fertility rate, which also demonstrates a major shift, is yet another way to look at and understand this growth. According to Historian Jessica Weiss, the fertility rate increased dramatically between 1940 and 1957, rising from 79.9 to 122.9 births per thousand women.²¹ Taken together, the fact that families became more focused on having children demonstrates how there was a large emphasis being placed on family in the 1950s.

Though there were many positive aspects associated with the American family of the 1950s, things certainly were not perfect. One of the largest detracting issues centers around strict division between the different genders, inequality in marriages, and discontentment among women. Many writers devote significant attention to this topic. One of the main primary sources that historians draw from is Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. For example, Jessica Weiss writes, “According to feminist author Betty Friedan, it was wives, not husbands, that 50s marriage trapped. The women who seemed to have everything—love, children, well-kept and well-appointed homes—lived with deep discontent.”²² Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg also pick up this idea and suggest that there were several popular magazines that ran articles focusing on the discontentment and restlessness of women. This feeling of discontentment among women is often associated with the inequality and confined marriage roles between men and women in marriages. Women in particular were said to feel trapped at times by their role of being a housewife.²³

Interestingly enough, though one of the key faults of the 1950s American family that

²⁰Satin, *America’s Placid Decade*, 18.

²¹ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 4.

²²Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 16.

²³ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 195,199.

historians tend to focus on is the lack of equality that existed between men and women, progress was being made even in this area. As historian Jessica Weiss points out, during the 50s social scientists were proclaiming that it was a time of growing equality and flexibility for gender roles in marriages. Experts such as marital advisor Frances Strain encouraged married couples to form more egalitarian partnerships, saying that it would ultimately lead to greater satisfaction. This idea was even picked up in college textbooks such as *Making the Most of Marriage*, by Paul H. Landis.²⁴ Though the inequality cannot nor should not be ignored, it is true that the family was making important gains in this area during the 1950s.

Another aspect that is especially important in demonstrating the remarkable nature of the 1950s American family—largely untouched by historians—is the cohesiveness of families during this time. A good source of evidence is found in an article titled, “Family Life Seen as Getting Stronger,” written in 1951 by Dr. Margaret Mead, a renowned cultural anthropologist most well known for her research on how much of personality is determined by social or hereditary factors.²⁵ One thing she writes that is especially intriguing is, “Indeed, the veteran-student parent has produced a cooperative family the likes of which have not been seen since the old type farm family. Husband and wife work and plan together. Dad takes an interest in the children as dads never did before in this country.”²⁶ Dr. Mead’s comments about how husbands and wives, fathers and children interact and work together paint a picture of a close family with strong relationships. Additionally, as will be explored in depth later, families demonstrated strong preferences towards family-based activities.

²⁴ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18.

²⁵ "Margaret Mead Biography," Bio.com, under "Social Science Research," accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.biography.com/people/margaret-mead-9404056>.

²⁶ Dr. Margaret Mead, "Family Life Seen Getting Stronger," *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1951.

As previously described, there were a variety of positive elements existing in the family of the 1950s, such as high rates of marriage, low divorce rates and family cohesiveness. Though scholars acknowledge these characteristics, they simultaneously fail to recognize their importance in demonstrating the strength of the American family at this time. Contrary to the often-negative impression given by many authors, these characteristics do indicate that this epoch, though certainly imperfect, was an important time in which the American family was able to flourish in several positive ways. In particular, these positive aspects culminated in two remarkable strengths that set the families living in the 1950s apart from the type of family seen before or after.

The first of these two strengths can be characterized as a very strong sense of commitment to family. This heightened level of commitment seen in 1950s American families came in a variety of forms, but one of the most important of those areas was the popular attitude and feeling of this unique era that greatly esteemed family life. A glimpse of this powerful belief can be observed in different surveys that were taken during this time. In a particular case, a survey polling Americans in the 1950s found that fewer than one in ten believed you could be happy if you were not married.²⁷ The fact that 90 percent of the people who were surveyed believed marriage was fundamental to happiness is an incredible testament to how ingrained and important marriage and family was in daily life at that time. Undoubtedly, this belief that happiness was directly tied to family life served as a powerful catalyst in enhancing commitment to the family in a variety of ways.

In addition to this survey, a more detailed research project was also being conducted during this time that further shows the extent of this commonly held attitude. The Kelly

²⁷ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 180.

Longitudinal Study, an in-depth research project of 300 couples that tracked their lives from 1935 to 1955, provides further evidence of the far-reaching importance of family and the heightened levels of commitment to this institution that occurred as a result. According to historian Elaine Taylor May, one of the more prominent questions families who participated in this study were asked was, “What has marriage brought you that you could not have gained without your marriage?” Responses to the 1955 survey, once again, reveal a great deal; the most common answers received from both men and women centered on family and children, and love and companionship. While these were the most common, other important benefits that people saw included success, a personal sense of purpose, and security. Elaine Tyler May also suggests it is important to recognize the fact that many of those who participated in this survey genuinely believed they would not have been able to experience these elements had they not been married.²⁸

These two surveys paint a vivid picture of the strong attitudes of commitment people demonstrated towards marriage and family. As seen from the responses of married couples at this time, marriage and family were seen as being truly fundamental to leading a fulfilling existence in daily life. This outlook was directly shaped by values. The things which the people of the 1950’s valued most—children, love, and companionship—came directly from family, and that is why they did not believe it possible to be happy without marrying. Overall, as Steven Kellogg and Susan Mintz write, “A popular advice book summed up the consensus of opinion: ‘Whether you are a man or a woman, the family is the unit to which you most genuinely

²⁸ Elaine T. May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 32.

belong...The family is the center of your living. If it isn't, you've gone far astray.”²⁹ This attitude, which was so pervasive in the 1950's, had a profound effect by helping to produce a great sense of commitment that sets the American family of the 1950s apart from the family of other eras in American history.

In addition to existing in popular attitudes towards family, a heightened sense of commitment towards family can also be seen in popular advice books written during the decade of the 1950s. As a specific example, Dr. John Schindler in his popular book, *The Woman's Guide to Better Living 52 Weeks a Year*, published in 1957, suggested that people belonged in a family, and even went as far as saying that people had gone off course if the family was not at the “center” of their lives.³⁰ This once again is illustrative of the revered state of the family in 1950s America.

Though popular attitudes and literature provide important glimpses of how committed people were to family, the most important manifestation of this trait is found in how families of the 1950s carried out their daily lives. As it happened, it was during this time that the concept of family “togetherness” was coined and popularized. This idea of togetherness is vital to understanding how committed families were to one another, and in order to fully comprehend the concept, it is necessary to understand its historical context. According to historian Jessica Weiss, the idea of togetherness was first proclaimed by *McCall's* magazine in May of 1954 when they encouraged their readers to try and ‘live the life of the McCall's.’³¹ In this article, Otis Stiese described a family life vastly different from what had existed during the previous decades.

²⁹ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 180.

³⁰ Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 180.

³¹ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 115.

Within this vision, the family was achieving a better way of life by working together—father, mother, and child—as a united family. The term togetherness was further popularized as department stores began using it in their advertising,³² and it wasn't long before it came to be a national ideal.³³

A few years later, Harper's magazine printed an article titled *E Pluribus Togetherness* that thoroughly assessed the definition of the word "togetherness." Written by Hugh R. King and published in August of 1957, this article reveals that there was no single definition used to describe the concept that the word togetherness implied. As a specific example, one definition stated togetherness was "The tie that binds American families to their mothers."³⁴ This definition seems to place mothers at the center of the togetherness ideal, which corresponds to a nuanced assessment made by historian Jessica Weiss. She writes: "But mothers in the 1950s had a greater stake in family togetherness than simply fulfilling prescribed social roles. By engineering shared family time, they involved their husbands more directly in child rearing and enjoyed more adult companionship. IHD records reveal women as initiators of togetherness."³⁵ It is thus apparent that cultivating a sense of togetherness became almost a prescribed and expected role of mothers in the 1950s, but was the role of fathers in this system of family? In theory, an important aspect of the idea of togetherness was that men would be more actively involved in participating in the day-to-day family life. But, significantly, the reality of men becoming more actively involved in family life can be substantiated. For example, an article

³² Joseph Henry Satin, *The 1950's: America's Placid Decade*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 169.

³³ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 180.

³⁴ Satin, *America's Placid Decade*, 171.

³⁵ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 124.

published in the Los Angeles Times—entitled *Family Life Seen as Getting Stronger*—reports that expert Dr. Margaret Mead believes that “Dads take an interest in the children as dads never did before in this country.”³⁶

Family cohesiveness centered around mothers was not the only defining characteristic of togetherness, however. Hugh R. King, in his article *E Pluribus Togetherness*, also defines togetherness as being a “Warm, tender feeling between people who love each other,” and as the “Creative, cohesive mechanism which fuses the man and the women into a team.”³⁷ From these definitions it is clear that the term togetherness also implied a high level of care for one another, as the family worked together to carry out the necessary aspects of daily life. It should be noted that as part of this culture of spending time and caring for family members, fathers started to become more involved with their children.

It is one thing to examine the idealist connotations of the term togetherness, but quite another to delve into how this actually translated in the day-to-day lives of American families in the 1950s. Were the idealized aspects of togetherness actually realized, or was it a superficial term that existed to simply help Americans feel good about themselves? If togetherness was a real part of families, to what extent was it achieved? These important questions require further analysis in order to discern the real answers.

As it turns out, the idea of togetherness was most prominently realized in families in the basic way of spending time together as a family. According to Historian Jessica Weiss, on a daily basis, togetherness meant spending time together through activities such as going to the zoo, having backyard barbecues, and even taking trips together. Drawing from interviews of

³⁶ Dr. Margaret Mead, "Family Life Seen Getting Stronger," *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1951.

³⁷ Joseph Henry Satin, *The 1950's: America's Placid Decade*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 171.

families living during this time, Jessica Weiss notes that many families did live out this ideology, and not simply because they were forced to do so by societal expectations. This can be seen in descriptions of real families, which included themes such as having fun with the family on “family days,” and doing things together as a “whole family.” These descriptions indicate a strong preference for family based activities.³⁸

Though there were many positive aspects of togetherness, it also led to various difficulties. One of the biggest of those problems was that it led to the issue of parents finding it difficult to balance the time spent with family with the need to spend time as a couple. In addition to this difficulty, sometimes it was also a challenge to find time to spend together as an entire family. According to Weiss, “In addition to work and household chores, community activities beckoned parents away from family centered fun, despite prescriptions to the contrary.”³⁹

The commitment of family that existed in the 1950s becomes even more remarkable when a contrast is made with prevailing attitudes towards family life today. As evidence, author and historian Stephanie Coontz points out that a poll taken in 1989 showed 25 percent of the respondents were willing to walk away from their entire family for 10 million dollars. Furthermore, she also notes that 42 percent of children whose dad had left the family had not seen him within the last year.⁴⁰ Though that was some time ago, factors like the consistently high divorce rates indicate this has not changed. Significantly, these figures present a stark contrast

³⁸ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 123.

³⁹ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 123.

⁴⁰ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), pg. 3.

from the prevailing attitudes of those living in the 1950s. Clearly, there has been a shift in attitudes, ultimately culminating in a decreased sense of commitment towards family.

While there was most certainly a gap between the popularized notion of togetherness and what was actually achieved, many elements of it were present in the American families of the 1950s. Though they weren't always successful, families worked hard toward spending time together as a family, and this had the effect of establishing and strengthening the connections that bound families together.

When discussing the enhanced levels of commitment to family during the 1950s, the concept of togetherness is one of the most pivotal aspects of the conversation. The fact that families were working hard to achieve the ideal of togetherness speaks volumes about the importance of family. Unquestionably, the 1950s was a time of heightened commitment towards family. Evidence for this assertion is found in the prevailing, popular attitudes towards marriage and family, popular advice books, and, most significantly, the striving of American families towards togetherness. Taken together, these factors demonstrate an enormous commitment to family in the 1950s that set it apart from any other time.

The level of commitment families demonstrated towards each member during the 1950s was truly exceptional. As historian Stephanie Coontz articulates, the form that the American family took on throughout this decade was different from any it had assumed before or after that period of time, and this is largely due to the great level of commitment to family. As a direct result of this heightened commitment, family life was much more stable during the 1950s in a variety of ways—the most obvious of those being the low rate of divorce. Therefore, the stability of family life in the 1950s becomes a second remarkable characteristic that strengthened the American family during this time and allowed it to flourish. In order to fully comprehend

how significant the stability of family life was during this time, it will be most useful to examine the ways in which *instability* has affected family in more recent years. Indeed, examining how instability has negatively affected the more recent generations of family in the United States and contrasting that image with the stability that characterized family life in the 50s will make the significance of that stability fully evident.

As previously noted, the rates of divorce in American marriages actually decreased during the 1950s, reaching a low point of 8.9 per thousand women age 15 or older in 1958. In that year, there were a total of 368,000 divorces.⁴¹ This low rate of divorce presents a stark contrast with more recent trends. For the purposes of comparison, in 2009, the rate of divorce was 16.4, approximately double what it was in the 50s.⁴² This rate can be looked at in a more telling light: according to the 2012 National Health Statistics Report, nearly 50 percent of marriages in 2010 will end in divorce in a mere twenty years.⁴³ From these statistics, it is evident that families today are much less stable than they were during the 1950s. This instability bears many important implications that need to be explored in depth.

The high rates of divorce seen in more recent times are no longer a surprise to anyone—most people are used to it as a fact of life. As frequent divorce has become a normal part of American culture, people have become less aware of the costs associated with it. This is the case with anything that becomes normal to us—we forget or become desensitized to the effects. Yet,

⁴¹ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 4.

⁴² University of Virginia, "Social Indicators of Marital Health and Wellbeing: Trends of the Past Five Decades," *The State of Our Unions*, 2011, under "Divorce," accessed February 26, 2014, http://www.stateofourunions.org/2011/social_indicators.php.

⁴³ Casey E. Copen et al., "First Marriages in the United States: Data From the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 22, 2012, under "Duration of First marriage," accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr049.pdf>.

as alluded to previously, instability, partially triggered by high rates of divorce, has a variety of lasting, negative consequences that affect everyone involved.

A body of research suggests that divorce is far from being an isolated event. According to writer Andrew J. Cherlin, the research demonstrates that divorce is a traumatic process with the potential to cause psychological problems. He writes: "...the first two years following the breakup of a marriage constitute a 'crisis period.' During this difficult time adults and children typically face intense emotional upset, continuing family conflict, and adjustments to new living arrangements."⁴⁴ In a longer-term study, researchers studied the effects of divorce by tracking the children periodically from the time of the divorce up until ten years after it occurred. They found that at first nearly all the children were "profoundly upset." It is also noted that preschool aged children were often frightened, confused, and blamed themselves; and children who were older tended to display a great deal of anger. Of course, children respond differently to the trauma brought by divorces. For example, the findings showed that boys tended to demonstrate more antisocial and aggressive behavior while girls tended to internalize their distress, which resulted in depression and lowered self-esteem.⁴⁵

In addition to negative psychological effects, divorce also leads to financial instability for many. As the number of divorces has increased, the result has been a greater number of single parent families. To give some historical context, in 1960, 88 percent of all children lived in a two-parent household, but by 2010 that number had decreased to 66 percent. Another way of looking at this is that in 1960 only 9 percent of children 18 or younger lived in single-parent households, a number that has jumped to 25 percent since then. One glaring issue resulting from

⁴⁴ Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass. U.a.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 72.

⁴⁵ Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, 75.

single-parent families is the financial difficulty it leads to. In particular, this burden has been especially heavy on single parent families headed by mothers, which happens to be the vast majority of single parent households. According to Suzan Bianchi of UCLA, 85 percent of single parents are mothers.⁴⁶

Single parent moms experience a great deal of pressure as they work to provide for their children, and the consistent trend is for their standard of living to decrease significantly. While mothers should technically receive child-support, this is frequently never received, and what is received is often too little. According to a national study, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, women acting as a single parent who had been separated or divorced saw their standard of living drop an average of 30 percent in the year after the separation or divorce occurred. For some mothers—31 percent of those who had been part of a family with an above average income—the standard of living was shown to drop by more than half.⁴⁷ This fallout has serious consequences. In trying to make ends meet, mothers are forced to work long, difficult hours. From the perspective of family health, long work hours lead to a host of other critical problems. For example, a lack of time means that a parent may not have enough time to adequately care for their children's needs, whether that be simply spending time with them or helping with schoolwork.

The economic burden that some mothers face may explain why life is often chaotic for children following a divorce. According to Cherlin, one researcher found that, “Single mothers and their children in the divorced families were more likely to eat pickup meals at irregular

⁴⁶ Suzanne M. Bianchi, [Http://workplaceflexibility.org](http://workplaceflexibility.org), 2010, under A Note on Single Moms, accessed February 27, 2014, http://workplaceflexibility.org/images/uploads/program_papers/bianchi_-_family_change_and_time_allocation_in_american_families.pdf.

⁴⁷ Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass. U.a.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 73.

times, the children's bed-times were erratic, the children were more likely to arrive at school late, and so forth."⁴⁸

In addition to this chaotic lifestyle, divorce tends to further complicate matters by creating complex and often difficult family structures. The complexity occurs as new marriages are formed after a previous divorce. Remarriage after a divorce has increased steadily the past several decades. In 1930, only 9 percent of all brides had previously been divorced, but by 1987 that number had climbed to 32 percent of all brides.⁴⁹ Consider the following scenario: imagine, for a moment, an individual still growing up when his parents divorce. After the divorce, he lives with his mother—79 percent of children of divorced parents live with their mother—who then remarries, giving him a stepfather. After completing school, this individual eventually marries, and after a couple years he and his wife will have a child. A few years later, his marriage becomes strained and divorce follows. Following his own breakup, he decides to remarry and then becomes a stepfather of his new wife's children.

Throughout this process of marriage, dissolution, and remarriage this individual has forged many ties with a variety of people who become kin. To be more exact, he has developed ties to at least five family entities throughout this process. While its true that relatively few have had such an experience, the fact of the matter is that high rates of divorce and remarriages are making this scenario less uncommon. In fact, according to Cherlin, one out of every seven children living in a two-parent household is living with a parent and stepparent.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass. U.a.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 72.

⁴⁹Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, 26-27.

⁵⁰ Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass. U.a.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 28.

Delving in a little deeper, as families are broken and reformed, a host of tensions emerge that strain newly reorganized families. Sociologist Frank Furstenberg acknowledges this by saying: “Stepchildren consistently expressed more negative descriptions of relations with their stepparents than did children in nuclear households with their parents. And stepparents who were raising both biological and stepchildren reported that step parenting was more problematic and less rewarding.”⁵¹ Part of the issue is that it is very difficult to blend different family cultures together. Every family has specific patterns of thought, behavior and action that form their particular family culture. When various situations are encountered, families react differently based on their cultural identity, which in turn precipitates relational tension.

Ultimately, the issue of complicated family structure is important because it has been linked by researchers to further problems. For example, the probability for a second divorce after remarriage is substantially higher than it is for first marriages. Some researchers have linked this higher probability for a second divorce to complicated family structures and suggest the extended family ties strain remarriages following divorce, ultimately raising the likelihood of a second divorce.⁵²

Analysis has clearly shown that instability in more recent years has created a variety of problems ranging from psychological issues and chaotic living to economic struggles and complex family structures that cyclically perpetuates the problem of instability further. Standing in a stark contrast, family life in the 1950s was characterized by a remarkable degree of family stability, a fact strongly suggesting that families were living largely free of the difficult issues that have developed since that time. The significance of that is great. A family living free of the

⁵¹ Frank F. Furstenberg and Andrew J. Cherlin, *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 82.

⁵² Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, 29.

added burdens these problems pose is a healthier family. Because families living in America in the 1950's were much more stable, they were ultimately saved from the detrimental affects that have been sparked by instability, and this allowed them to thrive.

Undeniably, the 1950s were a very unique time in the history of the American family. Fueled by a profound cultural emphasis on family, people were marrying at incredibly high rates, at younger ages, and, perhaps most significantly, were staying married. Yet, historians have been much more highly focused on the negative issues of this age. It is important to be aware of the problems associated with this era, but such an overemphasis on the negative has led to a neglect of the positive and defining features of this time in the history of the American family. The purpose of this paper, then, is to call for a reevaluation of the American family during the 1950s. As history teaches repeatedly, there are always multiple sides to every story, but in the process of historians seeking to demonstrate the flawed nature of family life in the 50s, it seems that an important side of this story has been slipping into extinction.

As demonstrated in numerous ways, there were many positive aspects about families in the 1950s, such as high rates of marriage, low rates of divorce, and cohesiveness. Digging deeper than simple statistical figures, it has been shown that family life in the 1950s was highly esteemed and people demonstrated an astonishingly high level of commitment to it. This heightened level of commitment was fundamental to this family centered time, ultimately resulting in a push towards "togetherness," an ideal that was realized in daily life as families spent time and participated in activities together as a family.

This high level of commitment also had the effect of producing families that experienced much greater stability than more recent times. This important point takes on great significance because it means that families didn't experience difficulties such as psychological trauma,

financial stress, and complicated family structures nearly to the extent that these challenges affect our world today. In light of these points, the family of the 1950s had many remarkable characteristics that do in fact warrant recognition. Though family life in the 1950s was certainly imperfect, it also possessed the necessary qualities to make families strong and stable, ultimately allowing it to flourish in ways that have become much less common in more recent years.

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