SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON CHILDREN: CHANGING PORTRAYALS IN POPULAR MAGAZINES IN THE U.S., 1900-1998

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INTRODUCTION

Survey data indicate that Americans have become increasingly accepting of single-parent families formed through divorce and non-marital childbearing since 1960 (Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993). But knowledge of attitudes about single-parent families is limited in terms of both time period and detail. Most data series do not begin until after 1950 (Thornton 1995) and focus narrowly on measuring views of the demographic trends that have fueled the increase in single-parent families rather than on a broader set of attitudes about single-parent families or factors that might influence these attitudes.

Attitudes toward single-parent families, especially regarding their effects on children, are of particular interest given the rapid growth of single-parent families in the U.S. (DeVanzo and Rahman 1993; McLanahan and Casper 1995; Bumpass 1990). Between 1960 and 2000, the proportion of children living in single-parent families tripled, rising from nine to 27 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2003), and about half of U.S. children spend some time in a single-parent family before reaching adulthood (Bumpass and Raley 1995). In addition, attitudes toward single-parent families warrant attention because, on average, children raised by one biological parent fare worse on a host of social and economic measures than children raised by both biological parents (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002).

In this paper, I use data I have collected as part of a larger project exploring both the quantity and the quality of depictions of single-parent families in American popular magazines and social science journals over the twentieth century. My focus here is on the quality of media depictions. I examine change over time in three aspects of depictions of
single-parent families in popular magazines between 1900 and 1998: change in depictions of the acceptability of single-parent families; and change in depictions of the impact of single-parent families on children; and change in depictions of the forces responsible for single-parent family formation. I examine depictions of single-parent families formed through divorce or non-marital childbearing, exclusive of those resulting from parental death. I focus on depictions of single-parent families resulting from divorce and non-marital childbearing because these events are more directly subject to individual choice than parental mortality and because they drove the dramatic increase in single-parent families over the twentieth century, which would have been even greater if not for declines in parental death (Ellwood and Jencks 2002).

I investigate several factors likely to influence shifting media portrayals. First, I consider the role of change in the magazine industry itself over the century, in terms of the types of magazines that publish articles about single-parent families and in the types of writers who author these articles and others they quote. This allows me to explore associations between changing depictions and change in both the magazines containing these depictions and change in the authors of the depictions. Second, I examine demographic trends in divorce and non-marital childbearing, since the views of magazine authors and the commentators they quote are likely to reflect the evolution of the American single-parent family, particularly change over time in the prevalence of single parenthood and in the relative prevalence of single-parent families formed through divorce versus non-marital childbearing. Third, I consider a set of socio-economic and political factors that may be associated with attitudes toward single-parent families. These include economic well-being, immigration and political mood inside the U.S. and
foreign policy crises involving the U.S. abroad. Finally, I examine the effect of time and evaluate whether time continues to be associated with changing depictions of single-parent families after taking into account magazine industry factors, demographic factors and socio-economic and political factors.

Authors of magazine articles about single-parent families and the experts they quote represent a select group of Americans rather than a cross-section of the general population. But they are a particularly interesting group insofar as the media both shape and reflect general attitudes about major social issues like single parenthood and influence public policies related to such issues (Gamson and Modigliani 1989:2-3; Kennamer 1992:2-15). This makes media depictions of interest in their own right as well as for comparative purposes for the period after 1960 when it is possible to contrast the attitudes toward single-parent families expressed by the general public with those expressed by magazine authors and commentators.

In the next section of this paper, I review prior research relevant to this study. In the third and fourth sections, I discuss my data and methods. In the fifth and sixth sections, I describe the results, draw conclusions and discuss plans for future research.

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Cultural products, including media coverage, are “shaped by the social, legal and economic milieux in which they are produced” (Peterson 1982:143). The quantity and content of media coverage of any topic reflects the constraints and incentives under which journalists operate (Peterson 1982; Gitlin 1980; Gans 1979), and these constraints and incentives have changed over time. Over the last century, the American magazine
industry expanded dramatically. Between 1900 and 1998, the number of magazines included in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*—the most comprehensive index of U.S. popular magazines—rose from 54 in 1900 to 211 in 1998 (Usdansky 2002).\(^1\) Over the same period, the magazine industry came to comprise an increasingly eclectic range of magazine types, as the number of general interest magazines declined and news and specialty magazines increased (Usdansky 2002). The writers who authored magazine articles and the people they quoted may also have changed, given the evolution of media standards over this period (Schudson 1978).

I am unaware of any research examining how change in the magazine industry has influenced media depictions of single-parent families over the course of the twentieth century. But more general media and production of culture research suggests a number of ways in which the nature of the magazine industry may be influential (Peterson 1982). Certain types of magazines may be more or less likely than others to include normative statements about single-parent families or to portray them sympathetically. For example, authors and commentators (hereafter referred to as “speakers”) in women’s magazines may be both more likely to express normative views about single-parent families and to portray them in a favorable light. This seems plausible since women’s magazine authors and those they quote may view single-parent families as a subject of special concern to their largely female readership and because women head most single-parent families and thus have a particular stake in them. In contrast, news magazines, which devote much attention to tracking social trends, may also be especially likely to express normative views about single-parent families and their impact on children but may tend to depict

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\(^1\) This count excludes a small number of academic journals which were indexed by the *Reader’s Guide* early in the century before specialized indices of academic journals arose.
large-scale social change such as the rise of single-parent families as problematic. A focus on presenting and explaining social trends may also mean that news magazines are particularly likely to discuss causes of single-parent family formation and to assign responsibility to larger social forces rather than to individuals.

The types of articles that contain depictions of single-parent families may also be associated with the frequency and nature of normative statements about single-parent families. For example, speakers in opinion pieces may be especially likely to express views about single-parent family acceptability and child impact because opinion pieces contain more normative statements than other types of articles. First-person accounts by single-parent family members and advice pieces about how to handle the difficulties of single-parent family life may present more sympathetic accounts than either news articles or opinion pieces.

Even more important may be the kinds of authors who wrote about single-parent families and the types of commentators they quoted. The backgrounds and viewpoints of those who have access to the media, either by virtue of their ability to author their own articles or to be quoted by journalists, play a key role in shaping media discourse (Zaller 1992). Shifts in media depictions across historical periods may reflect both change in who has a voice in the media and change in the views of those who have such a voice (Steensland 2002). In the case of media coverage of single-parent families, which are predominantly female-headed and raise issues of gender, race and class, both these facets of media access are likely to play a role in shaping media portrayals. The degree of media access among women and among academics or other highly educated speakers may be particularly important since women and college graduates express more favorable views
of divorce and non-marital childbearing than men and the less-educated (Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993).

Demographic trends, which fueled the growth of single-parent families, represent a second factor that may influence media depictions. While media accounts clearly interpret events rather than straightforwardly mirroring social trends (Gans 1979; Gitlin 1980), media coverage of social change may also be influenced by the nature of social change itself (Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller 1980). Media depictions may be more numerous and more critical of single-parent families during periods when single-parent family formation is rising rapidly, for example, as when divorce surged briefly after World War II and for a more prolonged period during the 1960s and 1970s. The nature of single-parent family formation may also be important since divorce was more widespread and more widely accepted than non-marital childbearing over most of the century (Ellwood and Jencks 2002). Thus, the dramatic rise in non-marital childbearing during the second half of the century may have fostered increasingly negative media depictions of single-parent families.

Finally, media portrayals over the century are likely to have changed because the socio-economic and political climate changed and so did American views about divorce and non-marital childbearing (Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Major political and social events, from the World Wars and the Great Depression to the sexual revolution and the cultural conservative movement of the 1980s are likely to have influenced magazine authors’ and commentators’ views of single-parent families just as they influenced the views of Americans generally.
Over the twentieth century, Americans placed increasing value on individual freedom over social obligations (Lesthaeghe 1995), and this shift was reflected in growing acceptance of divorce by couples with children and of non-marital childbearing after 1960. Between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, for example, the proportion of high school seniors who said that bearing a child outside marriage violated moral principles or was destructive to society declined from 50 percent among women and 40 percent among men to about 35 percent for both women and men (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001, p. 1025). Magazine authors and commentators are a specialized group whose views may have differed from those of the general population, but major socio-economic and political events that shaped the attitudes of Americans generally are likely to have had some influence on magazine speakers, too. While the lack of consistent survey data prior to the 1960s makes it impossible to ascertain the trend in American attitudes toward single-parent families over the entire twentieth century, this analysis sheds light on media depictions over the entire century and allows for a comparison of media depictions and general attitudes after 1960.

DATA AND METHODS

My data come from a non-proportionate, stratified random sample of articles about single-parent families published in popular American magazines between 1900 and 1998. The sample was drawn from the universe of articles indexed under subject headings related to single-parent families in the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature, the most comprehensive index of popular American magazines. Because the term “single-parent family” was not widely used until the 1970s, I identified this universe by compiling a
list of subject headings used by the Reader’s Guide to index articles relevant to divorce, non-marital childbearing and single-parent families between 1900 and 1998.

I then created a computerized data base of 3,967 articles indexed under these headings during this period and used the data base to draw a sample of 500 articles, each with a known probability of selection. I stratified the universe of articles by decade and used a non-proportionate sampling design in order to ensure adequate representation of the early decades of the century, since the growing number of magazines and articles published over time would have skewed a simple random sample of articles toward the last two decades. I was able to obtain all but four of the 500 articles, a 99 percent response rate. After discarding articles about divorce that did not discuss children and thus were irrelevant to single-parent families, I retained a sample of 364 articles that discussed divorce, non-marital childbearing or single-parent families and made reference to children.

I designed a 58-page coding instrument that defines several dozen variables regarding characteristics of the articles, the speakers (magazine authors and commentators), and these speakers’ discussion of single-parent families. I coded articles with the help of two research assistants. Preliminary analysis indicated that inter-rater and intra-rater reliability scores were above 85 percent for most independent variables and in the range of 70 to 80 percent for most dependent variables. Because the authors of many articles quoted or cited experts or others who expressed views about single-parent

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2 I also excluded seven additional articles that did not belong in the sample. These articles consisted of brief letters to the editor, maps and graphics without substantial text and results of magazine surveys without any editorial comment. Further details about the definition of the universe and the sample design are available from the author.
families, I coded both authors and “other speakers.” I treat speakers as my unit of analysis.  

In this paper, I analyze the views of the 545 author and non-author speakers in my sample who discussed at least one of 20 social problems related to single-parent family life that I coded. These problems range from divorce and non-marital childbearing to relationships between children and their single parents, custody and visitation matters, and inadequate government or private assistance for single-parent families. Speakers who discussed any of these problems were coded regarding their normative views of single-parent families, their assessment of the impact of single-parent families on children, and their attribution of responsibility for single-parent family formation, the measures I use as dependent variables in this analysis.

My first dependent variable captures speakers’ normative views of single-parent families using four response categories: wrong, undesirable or unacceptable; mixed, depends on circumstances; acceptable; and no normative view stated. My second dependent variable indicates speakers’ views of the impact of single-parent families on children. The four response categories are: harmful; mixed, depends on circumstances; good alternative; and no normative view stated. My third dependent variable measures the speakers’ views about whether individuals or larger social forces are responsible for

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3 I excluded from the analysis non-authors quoted because they had personal rather than professional experience with single-parent families, such as divorced or unmarried mothers or friends of divorcing couples. This was necessary because most of these speakers were quoted too briefly and ambiguously to allow for coding of their attitudes. Those attitudes they did clearly express usually echoed ideas voiced elsewhere in the article by other speakers. I coded all authors, including those who wrote about their own experiences as members of single-parent families, as well as other speakers who had any kind of professional or quasi-professional experience with single-parent families. This included college deans whose student body included children of divorced parents and single parents who had formed various types of self-help, advocacy or support groups.

4 My data include an additional 175 speakers not coded as discussing a problem related to single-parent families and thus not part of this analysis. Second authors of articles and speakers who discussed divorce but mentioned children only in passing fall into this category.
the formation of single-parent families. The four response categories are: individuals; larger social forces; both individuals and larger social forces; and no discussion of responsibility.⁵

My first set of independent variables measures the degree to which dynamics within the U.S. magazine industry affected portrayals of single-parent families. The first variable in this group distinguishes among five types of magazines: general interest magazines; news magazines; women’s magazines; religious magazines; and specialty magazines. The second set of variables distinguishes among four broad categories of articles (news articles, opinion articles, first-person narratives, and advice pieces) and a small group of fiction articles, including poetry and short stories.⁶ The third set of variables in this group identifies the sex and occupation of each speaker.

The second set of independent variables takes into account the demographic factors that fueled the growth of single-parent families over the century. These include the rate of divorce per 1,000 married women age 15 and above and the rate of non-marital childbearing per 1,000 single women ages 15 to 44. Since the non-marital childbearing rate is not available for the early decades of the century, I create a dummy variable coded one for years prior to 1940 and zero afterward. I interact this dummy variable with the divorce rate and use this interaction term as an indicator of whether the

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⁵ Appendix A contains instructions and decision rules from the coding instrument that were used to code the dependent and independent variables. In some analyses, I separated each of the three dependent variables into a linked pair, in which the first variable in each pair is a dichotomous measure coded one if the speaker expressed a view about acceptability, child impact or responsibility and coded zero if not. The second variable in each pair then becomes a three-way categorical measure including the remaining three response categories. In some cases, I further collapsed the three-way attitudinal measures into dichotomous variables coded one if the speaker presented single-parent families as unacceptable or as harmful to children and coded zero otherwise.

⁶ I followed Library of Congress cataloguing conventions in identifying magazines by type. I coded as news articles all articles appearing in news magazines as well as articles in other types of magazines that followed a conventional news format as described in Appendix A.
lack of data on non-marital childbearing prior to 1940 influences the findings. In addition to these demographic rates, I include a dummy variable indicating the type of single-parent family discussed by the speaker. This variable is coded one if the speaker’s main subject was non-marital childbearing or single-parent families generally and coded zero if the main subject was divorce.

The third set of independent variables includes socio-economic and political factors that may be associated with changing attitudes toward single-parent families. Among these are: national economic well-being, measured as the unemployment rate; social change affecting the makeup of the U.S. population and of single-parent families, operationalized as the immigration rate and the proportion of the U.S. population that is non-white; national political mood, measured as the political party of the U.S. President in office; and U.S. involvement in foreign conflicts, operationalized as the level of military mobilization.

The final set of independent variables is designed to capture the association between time and the changing views of magazine authors and commentators. I operationalize time as a continuous variable identifying the year in which the article was written in cases which the time trend in the dependent variable appears to be linear. I use sets of dummy variables and/or polynomial terms when the time trend in the dependent variable is non-linear. I also include a control variable indicating the speaker’s role in the article. This variable is coded one if the speaker authored the article and zero if he or she was quoted or cited in the article. In addition, I include an interaction of speaker sex and time to test whether the association between attitudes and speaker sex changes over the century.
Since these data were only recently collected and since little is known about popular media depictions of single-parent families over the century, the analysis presented here is descriptive, focusing on graphical presentations of the time trends in magazine portrayals of the acceptability of single-parent families, their impact on children and responsibility for their formation. I also examine univariate time trends in selected independent variables. I use weighted data in order to adjust for over-sampling of articles from the early decades of the century. I present moving averages for graphical depictions of univariate trends over time because the number of cases per year is small.

RESULTS

Weighted summary statistics are shown in Table 1. The mean year of publication for the articles in which speakers wrote or were quoted was 1980, and half of all speakers wrote or were quoted in articles published after 1985. The weighted sample is skewed toward the last two decades of the century because of a dramatic expansion in the number of articles about single-parent families published over the century.\(^7\) Over the entire century, only one in four speakers expressed a clear view about the acceptability of single-parent families. But three in four speakers who did express a normative view of single-parent families portrayed them in a negative light. Over the century, speakers were somewhat more likely to discuss the impact of single-parent families on children. Of the 40 percent of speakers who discussed how single-parent families affect children, 70 percent depicted the effect as harmful, similar to the proportion of speakers with known views of single-parent families who depicted such families as wrong or undesirable. Of

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\(^7\) The unweighted mean year of publication is 1956. The number of speakers per article rose slightly over the century but does not have a large effect on the weighted average year of publication.
the 38 percent of speakers who discussed responsibility for single-parent family formation, almost half—47 percent—depicted individuals as bearing sole responsibility for the creation of single-parent families. In contrast, only 16 percent depicted social forces as bearing sole responsibility for the creation of single-parent families. Thirty-eight percent of speakers depicted individuals and larger social forces as sharing responsibility.

One third of the speakers wrote or were quoted in specialty magazines, one quarter in news magazines and 22 percent in women’s magazines. Another 16 percent wrote or were quoted in general interest magazines, while the remaining two percent wrote or were quoted in religious magazines. Opinion pieces and news articles predominated. About forty percent of speakers wrote or were quoted in each of these article types, while first-person narratives and advice pieces accounted for an additional 11 percent and seven percent of speakers respectively. Less than one percent of speakers appeared in fiction articles.

Men comprised a plurality of speakers—47 percent—over the century, while women comprised 43 percent of speakers and the sex of 10 percent was unclear. The largest occupational groups were journalists (22 percent of speakers), likely journalists (18 percent), and academics (18 percent). Another 14 percent of speakers were medical or mental health professionals. Eleven percent were elected or appointed government officials, judges or lawyers. Ten percent belonged to other, smaller occupational groups, and another 10 percent were not identified by occupation. More than half of speakers (56

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8 A speaker’s sex was coded as unclear if it was not evident from the speaker’s name or from the context of the article or, in rare cases, if the speaker was an institution, such as a magazine editorial board.

9 I coded authors who were not identified other than by name as likely journalists rather than as journalists since magazines often publish articles by authors other than regular staff members.
percent) discussed single-parent families formed through non-marital childbearing or single-parent families generally, while the remaining 44 percent focused on single-parent families formed through divorce.

Figure 1 depicts magazine speakers’ views of the acceptability of single-parent families. The royal blue at the top of the figure traces the increasing proportion of speakers who did not express any normative view about the acceptability of single-parent families. This fraction rose steadily over the century, growing from about 10 percent in 1900 to almost 90 percent in 1998. The green panel immediately below the royal blue indicates the fraction of speakers who depicted single-parent families as acceptable, while the light blue panel beneath indicates those speakers who held mixed views of the acceptability of single-parent families or suggested that they were acceptable in particular circumstances, such as when previously married couples had made every effort to reconcile before seeking divorce. Favorable and mixed views were most commonly expressed during the first half of the century.

Magazine authors and commentators were especially unlikely to depict single-parent families as acceptable or mixed during the second half of the 1950s and during the 1980s, both periods marked by waves of anti-single-parent family feeling, as indicated in the bottom, purple panel of Figure 1. The fraction of speakers who depicted single-parent families as unacceptable or wrong fluctuated between 25 and 40 percent in the first two decades of the century, then gradually declined until around 1950. Unacceptability reached a peak of about 45 percent during the mid-1950s, then fell sharply during the 1960s, reaching a low during the early 1970s when fewer than one in ten speakers depicted single-parent families as unacceptable. Unacceptability then rose sharply again,
reaching levels not seen since the early decades of the century during the 1980s before falling to around 15 percent during the 1990s.

Figure 2 shows magazine authors’ and commentators’ views about the impact of single-parent families on children. The royal blue panel at the top of Figure 2 indicates that the fraction of speakers who did not express a normative view about child impact grew fairly steadily over the century, rising from about 30 percent to about 60 percent. The green and light blue panels beneath the royal blue in Figure 2 trace the respective trends in the expression of favorable and mixed views of child impact. Favorable views of child impact (green panel) were concentrated during the first half of the century. Mixed views (light blue panel), held for example, by speakers who argued that child impact depended upon the way single parents behaved toward their children, were expressed by between 10 and 20 percent of speakers during most of the century.

Speakers were most likely to depict child impact as harmful during the early 1930s and the mid-1940s (Figure 2 purple panel), the only periods when more than half of all authors and commentators depicted single-parent families as exclusively or inevitably harmful to children. During most of the remainder of the century, the proportion of speakers depicting child impact as harmful fluctuated between 30 and 40 percent except during the 1960s and early 1970s when harmful views declined temporarily to a low of fewer than 20 percent of all speakers.

While the proportion of speakers who expressed a normative view about single-parent families and the proportion who expressed a normative view about child impact both fell over the century, the decline in the expression of views about child impact was smaller, as Figure 3 illustrates. In addition, speakers were more likely to express a
normative view of child impact than of single-parent families generally during most periods after 1925. The comparison in Figure 3 also reveals a divergence in these trends during the 1940s, the 1960s and the 1990s. During these decades, the proportion of speakers who expressed a normative view about single-parent families fell particularly sharply, while the likelihood that speakers discussed child impact rose. This pattern suggests a possible substitution effect in which speakers compensated for declining attention to norms regarding single-parent families generally by increasing their attention to the impact of single-parent families on children.

A comparison of Figures 1 and 2 shows that speakers were most likely to depict single-parent families as acceptable and as good alternatives for children during the first half of the century. Speakers also expressed mixed views about single-parent families most often during the first half of the century, while mixed views about child impact were more evenly distributed over time. Comparing Figures 1 and 2 also reveals distinctive patterns in unfavorable views about single-parent families versus unfavorable views about their impact on children. The fraction of speakers who depicted single-parent families as unacceptable declined during most of the first half of the century but reached a peak during the 1950s and rose again during the 1980s. By contrast, the share of magazine authors and commentators who depicted single-parent families as harmful to children was more stable over time, while high points in harmful depictions occurred around 1930 and during the mid-1940s.

Figure 4 repeats the illustration of speakers’ attitudes toward single-parent families from Figure 1, while superimposing on it the proportion of those speakers expressing a normative view about single-parent families whose view was
“unacceptable.” In other words, the black line in Figure 4 indicates the proportion of those speakers who expressed a normative view who depicted single-parent families as unacceptable. Among those speakers who expressed a normative view of single-parent families, the likelihood of expressing an unfavorable view was far higher during the 1950s, 1980s and 1990s than during earlier periods. Figure 5 repeats this exercise for child impact, revealing a much different pattern. Among those speakers who expressed a normative view of child impact, the likelihood of expressing an unfavorable view (black line) followed a more cyclical view over the century, reaching peaks during the late 1920s, the late 1950s and the late 1980s.

Figure 6 addresses the question of responsibility for single-parent family formation. The royal blue panel at the top of Figure 6 indicates that magazine authors and commentators became less likely to discuss responsibility for single-parent family formation over the course of the century although this generally downward trend was interrupted by occasional increases in the discussion of responsibility, particularly around 1930 and during the mid-1940s. The green panel immediately below the royal blue shows that a fairly stable minority of speakers—between 15 and 30 percent in most years—attributed single-parent family formation to a combination of individual action and larger social forces. A very small group of speakers—fewer than 10 percent in most years—attributed single-parent family formation to social forces (light blue panel) without discussing any role played by individuals. Finally, at the bottom of Figure 6, the purple panel indicates that between 20 and 30 percent of speakers in most years attributed single-parent family formation to individual action without reference to larger social forces.
Three overarching trends are evident in the figures discussed above. First, the proportion of magazine authors and commentators who expressed a normative view of single-parent families and their impact on children, fell over the century, as did the proportion of speakers who discussed responsibility for single-parent family formation. Second, favorable depictions of single-parent families and their impact on children were most common early in the century. Third, throughout the century, speakers attributed single-parent family formation to individuals far more frequently than to larger social forces.

Several developments over the century may be associated with these trends. Among them are demographic changes that fueled the growth of single-parent families, change in the magazine industry—including change in the types of authors and commentators featured in magazines—and social, economic and political factors, which may relate to speakers’ outlook on single-parent families.

For purposes of illustration, time trends for a few of these independent variables are shown in Figures 7, 8 and 9. Figure 7 displays the change over time in the sex of magazine authors and commentators. Men (in the light blue panel at the bottom of Figure 7) comprised the largest group of speakers, accounting for between 35 and 60 percent of all magazine authors and commentators in most years. Female speakers became more prevalent over time, reaching a maximum of more than 60 percent of all authors and commentators during the mid-1960s (green panel in the middle of Figure 7). Speakers whose sex was unclear accounted for a declining share of speakers over the century (royal blue panel at top).
Figure 8 depicts the time trend in the occupation of speakers. For ease of presentation, I have coded speakers into five broad occupational categories here. Academics, indicated by the purple panel at the bottom of Figure 8, were most prevalent in the middle and latter decades of the century. Medical and mental health professionals, in the violet panel immediately above academics, appeared most often after 1950. Journalists (light blue panel) and likely journalists (green panel) appeared in substantial numbers throughout the century although likely journalists appeared most often early in the century. Authors and commentators whose occupation was unclear or who belonged to other, smaller occupational groups, such as government officials, judges and lawyers (royal blue panel at top), accounted for a declining share of all speakers over time.

Figure 9 contrasts time trends in the demographic events that fueled the growth of single-parent families with demographic patterns in magazine depictions of single-parent families. Divorce (purple line) rose steadily until World War II, when it temporarily surged before declining during the 1950s. Divorce rose rapidly during the late 1960s and 1970s before leveling off at unprecedented levels—about 20 divorces per 1,000 married women—during the 1980s and 1990s. Non-marital childbearing rose steeply from the time it was first measured nationally around 1940 until the 1990s when it also appeared to stabilize at previously unprecedented levels (approximately 45 births per 1,000 unmarried women). The non-marital birth rate exceeded the divorce rate in every year after the late 1940s. In contrast, the proportion of magazine authors and commentators whose depictions focused on single-parent families formed through non-marital childbearing versus divorce followed a more cyclical pattern. While the share of speakers who focused on non-marital births followed a generally upward trend for most of the
century, this proportion also rose and fell several times, reaching a peak of more than 80 percent of speakers during the early 1980s before falling to about 40 percent of speakers during the 1990s.

CONCLUSION

These time trends match some expectations we might have had about likely patterns in depictions of single-parent families in popular magazines given historical events and what we know from survey data regarding changing attitudes toward single-parent families during the final decades of the century. Unfavorable depictions of single-parent families reached a peak in the 1950s, for example, a decade marked by a low divorce rate, an increase in early marriage, rising fertility and an emphasis on hearth and home (Cherlin 1992; May 1988). Similarly, the resurgence of unfavorable depictions of single-parent families during the 1980s might be explained by the wave of cultural conservatism that marked that decade. The decline in unfavorable depictions of single-parent families and, to a lesser extent, of child impact during the 1960s and 1970s likewise accord with the sexual revolution and well-documented increased acceptance during this period of a broad range of sexual and familial behavior (Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Finally, greater attention to individual versus societal responsibility for single-parent family formation may reflect the American emphasis on individualism.

But these trends in magazine depictions of single-parent families also reveal some less-expected patterns. Survey research indicates that acceptance of non-traditional familial behavior rose sharply during the 1960s and 1970s and held steady during the
1980s and early 1990s (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). But speakers in popular magazines became increasingly likely to depict single-parent families as undesirable and as harmful to children during the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, magazine authors and commentators were as likely to depict single-parent families as unacceptable as they had been prior to 1940, and the great majority of speakers who expressed a view about child impact depicted it as harmful. Perhaps even more surprising, depictions of single-parent families as acceptable and as good alternatives for children were most common during the early decades of the century.

These unexpected finding may be explained by factors related to the magazine industry or by demographic trends, particularly the rising proportion of single-parent families resulting from non-marital childbearing. They could also reflect socio-economic or political factors or a divergence in the views of magazine authors and commentators from those of the general population.

However, it is also possible that the steep decline in the proportion of speakers who expressed normative views is directly relatively to the relatively high level of favorable depictions of single-parent families and child impact early in the century and to the absence of a more marked reduction in unfavorable depictions at the century’s end. This could be the case if the attitudes of speakers who did express normative views about single-parent families differed from those who did not. This might have occurred if most speakers at the beginning of the century took it for granted that most Americans—and most of their readers—disapproved of single-parent families and considered them harmful to children. If this was the case, speakers in the early decades of the twentieth century may have been more inclined to express normative views of single-parent
families if they viewed them as acceptable and as all right for children—views at odds with those of the general populace. Conversely, by the century’s end, growing tolerance for diverse family forms may have made speakers who believed single-parent families to be wrong or harmful to children more likely to express those views than speakers who were more accepting of single-parent families.

In the next phase of this project, I will develop a set of multivariate models to predict whether or not magazine speakers express normative views about the acceptability of single-parent families and their impact on children and whether they discuss responsibility for single-parent family formation. I will develop a second set of multivariate models predicting the views of those speakers who do discuss these questions. These models will examine the associations between attitudes toward single-parent families and change in the magazine industry, in demographic trends and in the socio-economic and political climate. I am also exploring the possibility of using additional variables not included in this analysis to create Heckman selection models and better gauge the effect of lack of data regarding the views of those speakers who do not make clear normative statements about single-parent families, child impact and responsibility.

In addition, I will examine other dimensions of speakers’ attitudes toward single-parent families that I have coded based on this sample of magazine articles. These measures will include: whether speakers depict single-parent families as harmful to individuals, to society or to both; whether those speakers who depict single-parent families as harmful to children discuss harm to children, to mothers, to fathers or to others; and the types of harm speakers cite (emotional, social, economic, moral/religious
and physical). I will also analyze the kind of social problem single-parent families constitute in the view of magazine authors and commentators. Specifically, I will distinguish speakers who view single-parent families themselves as problematic from speakers who counter that the problem is not single-parent families but the way society treats them. I will also examine a third conceptualization in which speakers focus on strategies for coping with the social issues raised by single-parent family formation rather than debating whether or not single-parent families are problematic.

The lack of consistent survey data prior to the 1960s makes it impossible to ascertain the trend in American attitudes toward single-parent families over the entire twentieth century. However, this analysis will contribute to the understanding of media depictions of single-parent families, which influence attitudes held by the general population and will allow for a comparison of media depictions and general attitudes after 1960.
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Appendix A: Excerpts from the Coding Instrument

SPF Acceptability

1=Bad, wrong, unacceptable, immoral or undesirable
2=Mixed/neutral
3=Acceptable, permissible alternative, right, moral, good or desirable
4=No discussion/unclear

Decision Rules

- DEFINING SPF ACCEPTABILITY: This variable captures the speaker’s normative statements about the acceptability of divorce or separation or desertion among couples who have children, or the acceptability of OWC or SPFs. SPF Acceptability is distinct from the question of whether the speaker thinks divorce by couples with children, OWC or SPFs are or can be harmful. Eg, a speaker might point out potential harms, such as reduced living standards after divorce, without stating whether divorce, OWC and SPFs are moral/acceptable. Another speaker might conclude that divorce is a permissible or desirable alternative to unhappy marriage, while noting that children sometimes suffer emotional harm from divorce.

- BAD, WRONG, UNACCEPTABLE should be coded if the speaker makes normative statements indicating that SPFs or their proximate causes are unacceptable, immoral, wrong, bad or undesirable. This doesn’t require that the speaker state that SPFs or their immediate causes are bad or wrong under all circumstances, simply that the speaker exclusively discuss circumstances under which he/she believes SPFs are unacceptable.

- MIXED/NEUTRAL should be coded if the speaker indicates that 1) SPFs are acceptable in some circumstances and not in others (eg if couple is so unhappy that their misery harms their children) or 2) if the speaker suggests that SPFs have both desirable and undesirable results or are 3) desirable for some people but not others, eg OWC desirable for children but not for parents. 4) Also code “Mixed/neutral if a speaker discusses more than one type or proximate cause of SPFs and expresses different views of their acceptability, and make a note of this in the memo field. Note that if the speaker is discussing divorce, we will code SPF Acceptability based only on the speaker’s attitudes toward divorce among couples with children—not the speaker’s attitudes toward divorce among childless couples.

- BAD VS. MIXED/NEUTRAL: If a speaker emphasizes that divorce, OWC or SPFs are wrong or undesirable but notes that there may be rare cases in which they are permissible/justifiable, “bad, wrong, unacceptable” should still be coded in order to capture the speaker’s overall attitude toward SPFs. “Mixed/neutral” should be coded when the speaker is genuinely torn about the acceptability of SPFs or when one of the other decision rules under “mixed/neutral” applies.

- ACCEPTABLE should be coded if the speaker indicates that SPFs or their proximate causes are acceptable. Acceptable should be coded if the speaker focuses exclusively on instances in which he/she believes SPFs or their immediate causes are acceptable. This doesn’t require that the speaker state that SPFs or their immediate causes are acceptable under all circumstances, simply that the speaker exclusively discuss circumstances under which he/she believes SPFs are acceptable. Eg Divorce among parents is reasonable if marriage is so bitter it’s likely to harm kids.

- NO DISCUSSION/UNCLEAR should be coded if the speaker’s view about the acceptability, morality or desirability of SPFs is unclear or if the speaker does not talk about the acceptability, morality or desirability of SPFs as is often the case with 2nd-generation problems.
SPF Child Impact
This variable captures what the speaker says about the impact of divorce, OWC and SPFs on children and any harms the speaker depicts SPFs doing to children.

1=Harmful for children
2=Mixed, neutral, potentially harmful or depends on circumstances (eg on parents' behavior)
3=Good alternatives for children (at least in some circumstances)
4=No discussion of impact of SPFs on children or the speaker's view is unclear

Decision Rules
- HARMFUL should be coded if the speaker states that SPFs inevitably or always hurt kids or the speaker portrays SPFs as exclusively harmful to children, without suggesting that SPFs could ever help children.
- GOOD ALTERNATIVES should be coded if the speaker discusses any ways or circumstances under which SPFs can benefit children. Speakers who state that SPFs can be good alternatives for children and also depict harms that SPFs do to children should still be coded under “good alternatives.” This code does not require that the speaker argue that SPFs are always preferable for children. Eg speaker says kids are better off in a happy SPF than watching parents fight in a bitter marriage.
- MIXED, NEUTRAL should be coded if the speaker suggests that 1) whether or not SPFs harm children depends on particular circumstances, eg how the parents handle the situation, or 2) that SPFs both harm and benefit children or that 3) SPFs neither harm nor benefit children or that 4) SPFs harm some children and benefit others. Also code “Mixed/neutral” if the speaker 5) advocates ways to limit or minimize harm that SPFs can do to children, implying that outcomes for children depend on how parents or others handle the situation. 6) Mixed/neutral should also be coded if the speaker discusses different types of SPFs (eg caused by divorce and OWC) and suggests one is harmful and the other not. (When this happens, please make a note in the memo field.) Examples: If the speaker says that some, but not all children, fare worse after divorce or if the speaker says that the effect of divorce on children depends on how bitter the divorce is or otherwise suggests that parents’ behavior or other factors determine whether SPFs harm children. This code is particularly common with 2nd generation problems.
- NO DISCUSSION/UNCLEAR should be coded if the speaker’s view about SPF Child Impact is unclear or the speaker does not address this issue.

Article Type
This variable identifies the narrative form of each article. I distinguish 11 types of articles.

01=First-person narrative
02=Advice or self-help
03=Unsigned editorial or editor’s essay
04=Essay or opinion piece
05=Book review
06=News story
07=News brief
08=Fictional story (e.g. short story or fictional essay)
09=Poem
10=Play
11=Satire

Decision rules:
- NEWS STORIES and their shorter cousin, news briefs recount specific events that either occurred recently or were discovered recently. They typically begin by describing an event or trend (i.e. telling the “news”) or with an anecdote illustrating the trend and go on to interview individuals who discuss this news. News stories that begin with an anecdote should, a few paragraphs into the story, contain a statement summarizing the event or trend illustrated by
the anecdote. Although authors of news stories may reveal their opinions about the news indirectly, they do not make explicit arguments about whether the news is good or bad. If an author makes explicit normative judgments, the article should NOT be coded as a news story or brief. Articles that meet the above criteria and 1) make reference to the time when the event occurred by using terms such as “last week” or “earlier this week” should be coded as news stories or news briefs. In addition, 2) articles in news magazines (Time, Newsweek, US News & World Report) should be coded as news stories or briefs, as should 3) articles about recently conducted surveys or polls. Articles in magazines like Literary Digest that quote widely from editorial opinions of other publications about recent news events should also be coded as news stories.

- NEWS BRIEFS: A news brief is a short news article describing events and including relatively little commentary. A news story that consists of fewer than six paragraphs should be coded as a news brief. For example, a four-paragraph article about a plateau in the divorce rate. Often, magazines group several news briefs together. News briefs are particularly common in science magazines and news magazines.

- UNSIGNED EDITORIALS OR EDITOR’S ESSAYS: Editorials are written by a member or members of the editorial staff, are unsigned (i.e. the author is not identified), usually no longer than a page and clearly express editorial opinions about the subject. Most editorials examine a contemporary issue and advocate some public policy regarding the issue. Editor’s essays are opinion pieces written by the editor of the magazine. The editor may be identified by name or simply as “the editor.” Sometimes such essays or columns have a title such as “Editor’s Corner.” In contrast to unsigned editorials, essay or opinion pieces have a named author (although the author may be anonymous or may use a pseudonym as noted below), tend to be longer than editorials, and may be written by a one-time contributor to the magazine or by a regular author, columnist or editor. If the author of an opinion piece is not clearly identified as the editor, code the article type as “essay.”

- An article should be coded as a FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE when it relates the author’s personal—rather than professional—experiences as a member of an SPF, eg what it was like to raise children as an unmarried mother or to become a divorced father. Articles by attorneys, ministers, counselors or other professionals recounting their professional, rather than personal, experiences with SPF should not be coded as first-person narratives. However, do make a note in the memo field that such articles contain “narratives of professional experiences with SPF.” Articles in which the author refers to him- or her-self in the first person are not necessarily first-person narratives; they can also be essays or advice pieces. Eg, if a priest writes in the first person about his views on divorce based on counseling divorcing parishioners, the article should be considered an essay because the priest is not a member of an SPF.

- An article should be considered an ADVICE PIECE when its main focus is on providing explicit, detailed and practical recommendations for couples and children coping with some aspect of SPF. Don’t code an article as an advice piece just because the author makes a recommendation or two. If the author makes a couple of recommendations but spends more time discussing broader issues, eg the advantages of mediation in resolving divorce disputes, or recounting his or her own experiences as an SPF member, the article should be coded as an essay (in the first case) or a first-person narrative (in the second case). Advice pieces often contain lists of recommendations or subtitles or phrases such as “guides for single parents” or “help for divorcing parents.” They are often written by experts or people with first-hand experience coping with their own SPF.

- In ESSAY AND OPINION PIECES, authors make specific arguments and/or adopt specific opinions about the issues they write about. However, the authors of essay and opinion pieces may also interview other people and/or discuss other people’s opinions. Articles that do not focus primarily on recounting recent news events, are not first-person narratives or editorials and do not focus exclusively on giving advice should be coded as essay and opinion pieces.
ESSAYS VS. ADVICE PIECES AND FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVES: If an essay or first-person narrative also provides advice about coping with SPFs, decide whether the focus is mainly on the author’s experiences/opinions or on advice giving and use this as a basis for coding article type. Make a note in the article memo when more than one article type could apply.

EDITORIALS VERSUS NEWS BRIEFS: Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish editorials from news briefs. Usually news briefs do not contain strongly worded opinions, but this may not be true in magazines with a strong viewpoint about single-parent families, e.g., religious magazines or certain women’s magazines. If you’re unsure whether the article is a news brief or an editorial, err on the side of coding it as an editorial. The religious magazines in the sample are: America, American Catholic Quarterly Review, Catholic World, Christian Century, Christianity Today, and Commonweal.

Speaker Occupation
This variable indicates the speaker’s current—or, in the case of retirees—former occupation. This may differ from the speaker’s professional training. For example, an elected government official who was trained as a lawyer should be coded according to his current occupation, that is, as an elected government official. If a speaker’s current and former occupation are given, code the current occupation.

- 01 = Politician or elected official
- 02 = Career or appointed government official
- 03 = Government official, elected or career unclear
- 04 = Judge (elected or appointed)
- 05 = Lawyer
- 06 = Minister or other religious leader
- 07 = Academic or non-academic researcher (in sciences, social sciences, humanities, etc.) at a college, university, think tank or other research organization
- 08 = Teacher (pre-school, grade school or secondary school)
- 09 = Medical doctor (except psychiatrist)
- 10 = Psychiatrist
- 11 = Nurse or other health care worker
- 12 = Psychologist/psychotherapist
- 13 = Social worker
- 14 = Marriage and family counselor, or counselor or therapist, not otherwise specified
- 15 = Executive or administrator at a social service agency or other group working with SPFs or divorced or unwed parents
- 16 = Business person (employee or executive at any level) employed by a private business or corporation
- 17 = Journalist (ie professional journalist, not just the article’s author)
- 18 = Writer or author (eg novelist, non-fiction writer, essayist, not journalist)
- 19 = Person-in-the-street
- 20 = Advocate, political activist or lobbyist
- 21 = Other occupation
- 22 = No occupation given/occupation unclear

Decision Rules
- CURRENT VS. FORMER OCCUPATIONS: If a speaker’s current and former occupation are given, code the current occupation.
- HIERARCHY FOR CODING OCCUPATION IF MORE THAN ONE OCCUPATION IS APPLICABLE: 1) Academic or non-academic researcher; 2) Minister or other religious leader; 3) Judge; 4) Government official. Eg, If a speaker is a theologian and a priest, code him as a researcher. If a speaker is a government official and a biologist, code him/her as a researcher. If a speaker is a minister and a judge, code him/her as a minister. In such cases, make a note in the memo field noting the second or third relevant occupational code.
JOURNALISTS: Do not assume that the author of a magazine article is a professional journalist unless this is clearly indicated from the context of the article, eg because the author’s name is followed by words like “staff writer” or “staff reporter” or the author’s name is followed by a phrase like “with bureau reports” or “and bureau reports” or a dateline (eg a city) is listed after the author’s name, eg Ken Brown in Jerusalem. Keep in mind that many magazines publish articles authored by non-journalists, often without identifying them as such. If you believe an author may be a journalist but aren’t sure, code the author as “No occupation given” and make a note in the speaker’s memo.

JOURNALISTS CONT’D: However, if no author at all is listed for an article and the author is not specified as anonymous, do code the author as a journalist. This makes sense because magazines often don’t identify the authors of short articles written by staff writers.

EDITORIAL BOARDS: Editorial boards should be coded as journalists.

ACADEMIC AND NON-ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS TAKE 1st PRECEDENCE: This code applies to 1) college and university deans as well as to 2) college/university professors and researchers or lecturers, regardless of the speaker’s academic specialty. It also applies to 3) speakers who conduct research in the sciences or social sciences as indicated by references to scholarly books or journal articles they have written or scholarly organizations they belong to, eg Institute of Social Sciences, National Academy of Sciences and to 4) speakers who are employed in a research capacity by think tanks or other non-academic research organizations, including government agencies or departments, as long as the speaker’s title or the title of his department or employer suggests that his/her occupation involves research. Eg, a psychiatrist who teaches at a university should be coded as professor/researcher rather than as “psychiatrist.” In such cases, please also note the speaker’s more specific occupation” (eg “psychiatrist”) in the memo field.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS TAKE 2nd PRECEDENCE: Code religious leaders as “Minister or religious leader” even if they hold an occupation outside the ministry, eg as a non-profit executive or as a counselor. In such cases, please also note the speaker’s more specific occupation” (eg “non-profit executive” or “counselor”) in the memo field.

JUDGES TAKE 3rd PRECEDENCE; GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS TAKE 4th: Unless he/she is also a researcher, religious leader or judge, any government official should be coded as a government official even if that government official is also a lawyer or doctor, etc. However, a judge (who is by definition also a government official) should be coded as a judge. In such cases, please also note the speaker’s more specific occupation” (eg “lawyer” or “doctor”) in the memo field.

OCCUPATION IMPLIED: Sometimes a speaker’s occupation is implied by the name of the speaker’s employer and/or by statements in the article but is not directly stated. In such cases, go ahead and make reasonable assumptions based on the speaker’s employer and add a note about the assumption to the speaker’s memo. Eg If a person works at a counseling agency and is quoted giving opinions about counseling, it’s reasonable to assume the speaker is a counselor unless it’s clear that, for example, the speaker is an administrator.

NOTES ABOUT THE AUTHOR: In some cases, a note following or beside an article gives information about the speaker. This information should be used to code speaker occupation and speaker employer.

EXECUTIVE OR ADMINISTRATOR AT A SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCY OR…: This code applies to speakers at social service agencies or other groups, including support groups, providing services for divorced or unwed parents or for single-parent families who hold supervisory or administrative positions in contrast to speakers who are directly involved in providing services to clients. Supervisory/administrative positions are indicated by titles or other descriptions. Not only presidents, vice presidents and board members, but also department heads, division chiefs, organization founders and co-founders and others with executive-like titles should be coded under this code. (In contrast, counselors, social workers, psychologists and others who provide services directly to clients should be coded as “counselor,” “social worker,” etc.) If it is unclear whether or not a speaker holds a
supervisory position or provides direct services, code the speaker as providing direct services, that is, under his/her specific occupation, if that occupation is clear. However, if no specific occupation is identified, code the speaker as an executive/administrator. Eg Rina Jones, head of client services, at We Help Single Moms should be coded as an executive/administrator since it’s clear she runs a department, but it isn’t clear what her particular occupation is, and, in any case, “head” implies an administrative position.

- **BUSINESS PERSON:** Code as business people anyone employed by a private business or corporation or anyone who clearly conducts for-profit business unless the speaker is self-employed or falls clearly into some other occupational category. This code should include anyone working for a business, regardless of its size, local, regional or international character or field. It should also include business people in fields like accounting, computers, sales, etc. If a speaker is described as a business person or refers to him/herself as a business person, use this code. However, don’t use this code just because a speaker is described as going on a “business trip” since religious leaders, social service executives and many others go on business trips.

- **RETIREES:** A speaker who has retired from a specified occupation, e.g. “retired professor Harry Bird” should be coded according to the occupation that speaker held before retiring—*unless* the speaker has changed occupations and now works in a different field, in which case, the speaker should be coded according to his/her current occupation.

- **ADVOCATES ETC:** Advocates, political activists or lobbyists are people who lobby or campaign (for pay or on a volunteer basis) for particular laws or policies regarding divorce, OWC or SPFs and for whom no other occupation is given. If the article makes clear that an advocate also has another occupation, he or she should be coded under that occupation. Eg If a lawyer acts as an advocate, he should be coded as a lawyer.
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Figure 1. Speakers' Views of the Acceptability of Single-Parent Families
(7-Year Moving Averages)
Figure 2. Speakers' Views of the Impact of Single-Parent Families on Children
(7-Year Moving Averages)
Figure 3. The Proportion of Speakers Expressing Normative Views About Single-Parent Families and Their Impact on Children
(7-Year Moving Averages)
Figure 4. Speakers' Views of the Acceptability of Single-Parent Families and the Proportion of Speakers Expressing a Normative View Whose View Is "Unacceptable" (7-Year Moving Averages)
Figure 5. Speakers' Views of the Impact of Single-Parent Families on Children and the Percent of Speakers Expressing a Normative View Who Depict Child Impact as Harmful (7-Year Moving Averages)
Figure 6. Speakers' Views of Responsibility for the Formation of Single-Parent Families
(7-Year Moving Averages)
Figure 7. Magazine Authors and Commentators Who Depict Single-Parent Families: Sex (5-Year Moving Averages)
Figure 8. Magazine Authors and Commentators Who Depict Single-Parent Families: Occupation
(5-Year Moving Averages)
Figure 9. Changing Demography of Single-Parent Families in the U.S. and in Magazines

- Divorces Rate (Divorces Per 1,000 Married Women 15 and Above)
- Non-Marital Birth Rate (Births Per 1,000 Unmarried Women 15 to 44)
- Percent of Speakers Who Discuss Single-Parent Families Resulting from Non-Marital Births (Versus Divorce)