

A generation at risk  
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A model piece of social science research, state-of-the-art at the time, modest in its claims.

This book is two decades old as I write this review. It stands as a high watermark in social science statistical research. The authors compiled information on a large number of variables over a large sample size over a long period of time – 12 years. This is a tremendous amount of work.

Though the authors do not mention the tools that they used, it is significant that the period of study coincides with the availability of statistical software capable of handling such large workloads. The SAS and SPSS software suites were available for minicomputers when they initiated their study in 1980. The techniques they used, regression analysis and latent variable models, were within the capacity of the software. The study was truly state-of-the-art.

Their hypothesis is that a person's family situation significantly influences what happened to him in life. They call this the Life Course Perspective. They track 21 independent variables, which they grouped into three major constructs: economic resources, gender non-traditionalism, and the quality of the parents' marriage. The dependent variables are parent-child relations, intimate ties, relationship quality, social integration, socioeconomic status and psychological well-being. They include control variables to see if race, gender, and family size effects their outcomes.

The most interesting and ambiguous of their constructs is "gender nontraditionalism." Their meaning is very prosaic. Although they acknowledge that there may be gay families in their study, they did not seek to identify gays as such. Gender nontraditionalism is measured by mother's employment, the amount of housework that fathers do, and the parents' reported attitudes about gender roles. In retrospect this is all quite bland stuff.

They confront the traditional measurement problems in any social science situation. Almost all of the dependent variables, and many of the independent ones as well are subjective. They are measured by a five or seven point distribution, called a Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Unfortunately, this is as good as it gets in the social sciences. Only a few variables can be measured concretely, among them income, divorce status, and living at home or not living at home.

The study is at once amazingly comprehensive, for sheer amount of information that the researchers captured, and deficient for the information that they did not, and could not have captured. Human culture is a moving target. There is absolutely no way they could have controlled for other influences. They at least have the honesty to name them. They do not control for intelligence, which obviously determines success in life. They do not control for the changes in the economy, although they frequently mention that the lower middle class was worse off at the end of their study in 1992 than it had been two generations previously. They do not control for societal trends, such as what we now lump together as cultural Marxism – feminism, gay rights, diversity and such – being disseminated through the public school and University systems.

Their conclusions are also quite tame. They conclude that women's working does not have a negative impact on the children, at least not up to the level of 40 hours per week. They conclude, quite self-evidently, that children whose parents are unhappily married or divorce are less likely to form stable relationships. They go back and forth on the issue of whether or not it is better for an unhappy couple to remain together. They observed that mothers who work because they don't want to stick around the house, or are driven to success, are not as happy in marriage as other women.

Almost all of the graphs that they show are Z score based. On a Z score graph, one tick on the y-axis represents one standard deviation, a huge measure in social science research. The authors assume that their readers know something about how to read such statistical output. The bottom line is that very few of the relationships between independent and dependent variables are terribly strong. When one considers all of the variables that could not have been included in the model, might not have

been consider relevant when the data was collected, one has to appreciate that the authors' humility in assessing the outcomes is thoroughly warranted.

The very last section of the book is entitled "Policy Recommendations." Some of these have been implemented and we can see what happened. Under the title "Education and Income" they make the obvious connection (for that time) that more education leads to more income. They recommend therefore that the government encourage people to get more education. The government has done so, with the pernicious result that the cost of education has been driven up by the availability of student loans, and the quality of the degrees has gone down. The advantage of college education is not as great as it was when their study concluded in 1992. Meanwhile, a fair number of privately owned universities got rich delivering mediocre educations to unpromising students, and an entire generation is behind the eight ball, saddled with student debt that cannot be expunged even through bankruptcy. This is another testimony to the unintended consequences of well intended government policy.

They address a father's responsibility for his biological children. Can the law be written to force fathers to be responsible? No, the law certainly can't force them to get a job. Nor can it force them to earn more than their talents will admit. The government has spent a lot of money trying to deal with "deadbeat dads," but in the end has done not much more than stigmatize a lot of poor guys who can't get a break in the first place.

The authors address divorce legislation. Should be harder to get a divorce? Has no-fault divorce led to the problems that they see? Here they get it right. They conclude that there simply is no correct answer, and it is best to leave things as they are.

Lastly, they address marriage and family counseling. They call on counselors to focus on the well-being of the children instead of the unhappy partners within the marriage. Just as you cannot legislate morality, you cannot legislate intelligence or wisdom. Their intentions are good, but one has to wonder if it made any difference.

In the final analysis this book suffers from an excess of honesty. Paul Amato and Alan Booth were so scrupulous in their methodology, and so modest about the conclusions that they were willing to draw that they did not have a bestseller. Nonetheless, the book stands as an outstanding bit of social science research, and a record of where American social science thinking stood in the last decade of the second millennium. A five-star effort.