Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout *The Family in Trouble: Since When? For Whom?*

**Main Point:** When looking at who has been affected by family troubles in America and when, it is important to look at the numbers because simple perceptions of family change may be more complex. By asking “Since When,” and “For Whom,” we can map out complexities involved in family troubles.

**Central Issues And Concepts:**

- By asking “Since when?” something that’s changed over the past forty years may actually show little change over one hundred, reflecting that perceived “big changes” may be less drastic than originally thought. “For whom?” can show whether changes in family troubles are different for different groups, like for black families and white families.

- Big Changes for American families over the century include longevity and reduction in the birth rate. This has led to an increase in the number of empty nesters. Also there has been an increase in the amount of married women who work outside the home. Modest changes include fluctuations in the age at which Americans get married and an increased divorce rate (although if one looks at “since when” and includes dissolution by death, then dissolution remains constant). Premarital sex has become more common, cohabitation too, and many of the above result in an increased number of children living with a single parent. What remains essentially unchanged is that marriage continues to be valued. Americans still get married, they are less tolerant of extramarital sex, and standards for intimacy, affection, and commitment have increased.

- A few defensible statements can be made based on the information above. They are summarized in this list: Americans prefer households of married couples with children. More people live the married life than people a few generations ago. People are more willing to live alone, cohabit, or be a single parent. It is more and more common for marriages to be delayed or broken by choice.

- It is known that children are more stable when they live with two parents instead of one. The “Since When” and “For Whom” are complicated, but it is statistically sound to argue that black children are more likely to come from single-parent homes than white children. Also, the more education a parent has, the more likely they are raise their children in a married home. So single-parent homes are more often lower-income homes. Economics is not all that is involved, but it is part of the “why.”

- When placing family troubles in historical context, one finds that the troubles follow Americans with disadvantages. “Troubles” for advantaged families are more often reflections of changed culture values and new opportunities (ex. childless, unwed).
Two Key Quotes:
“American family life changed in many ways in the twentieth century, but the severity of a change and the severity of the conversations about that change did not match.” (SS43)

“The historical data going back to the early part of the twentieth century make it difficult to explain family change as a linear consequence of “modernity.” (SS53)

Two Questions:

--Economic strain is a part of the “why” involved in the increasing number of children growing up in single parent homes. Could religion be a part of that “why” too? Is the answer too obvious? Is it testable?

--One reason a fivefold increase in divorce is not called a “big change,” is because marriage dissolution has not changed as much, so dissolution by death is included. How can this be a reason if the terms have been changed?