

Americans ambivalent toward single-parent families

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The increase in single-parent families was a dramatic social change of the 20th century. However, relatively little is known about the evolution of attitudes toward single-parent families. A new study in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* shows ambivalent acceptance of divorce rather than a full embrace of it.

Results of the study show that critical depictions of divorce plummeted in magazines and journals during the 20th Century. The decline was not driven by any increase in favorable depictions of divorce, however, but by the virtual disappearance of normative debate over whether divorce was good or bad, reflecting an ambivalent acceptance of divorce.

There was even less evidence of any softening of attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing during the 20th century. Popular and scholarly articles were as likely to include negative depictions of nonmarital childbearing at the end of the century as they had at its beginning. And they remained highly likely to depict both divorce and nonmarital childbearing as harmful - especially to children -- throughout the century.

"My findings raise an important question as to why Americans form single-parent families at very high rates and yet continue to express deep ambivalence toward them," Usdansky states. "[Couples](#) in many European countries form single-parent families at similarly high rates but are less worried about the result. Americans place more emphasis on marriage as a personal goal and as the ideal setting in which to raise children."

Margaret L. Usdansky, Ph.D., of Syracuse University explored depictions of single-parent families in samples of popular magazine and social science journals. By collecting original data spanning the 20th century, Usdansky was able to analyze attitudes toward single-parent families over this period and how they varied depending on whether the [family](#) resulted from [divorce](#) or nonmarital childbearing.

More information: This study is published in the May 2009 issue of the *Journal of [Marriage](#) and Family*.

Source: Wiley ([news](#) : [web](#))

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