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INTERVIEW

Family Matters: A Conversation with David Popenoe

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Editor's Note: *In 1992 a startlingly direct op-ed appeared in the* New York Times*, "The Controversial Truth: Two-Parent Families Are Better," the original title of which was "Two-Parent Families Are Best." The author was Professor David Popenoe of Rutgers University, who soon followed up that piece with an academic article, "American Family Decline, 1960–1990," in the prestigious* Journal of Marriage and Family*. Both were based on years of research into the weakening of family structure in modern society and its harmful effects on children, findings that set Popenoe deeply at odds with academic orthodoxy as well as with the reigning cultural attitudes of the time. These articles brought to wider public attention the academic debates that had begun with Popenoe's book,* Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies *(1988). Subsequent works include* Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for Children and Society *(1996), which will be reissued in Spring 2009 by Transaction Publishers with a new title,* Families Without Fathers: Fathers, Marriage and Children in American Society; *and* War Over the Family *(2005). He heads the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, where he taught sociology for forty-five years until his recent retirement. We met at his home in Princeton, where we discussed a range of questions, not all of them "academic."*

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Iannone: **It is October 10, 2008, and we are beginning our interview with Professor David Popenoe for *Academic Questions.* Let me first ask how you came to take the family as your field of study.**

Popenoe: Well, my father was a prominent family relations expert in the forties and fifties. To some extent, then, it comes naturally. However, my interest was regenerated when I lived with my own family in Sweden for a couple of years, in the early 1970s. I went there originally to study Swedish urban development. But the longer I lived there—and I went back year after year for quite a few years—I increasingly came to realize that something significant was happening to the Swedish family, despite that nation's good planning and other welfare-state measures, which I hope we will get to discuss.

Iannone: **We shall. But for the moment, could you define the family from a sociological point of view?**

Popenoe: The family is not easy to define, but I define it as group that includes dependents, children. Thereby, I have been in trouble with people who look at the family just as two people who happen to love one another. Throughout history the family has consisted of a group of people related through blood and marriage, often including more adults than just the parents.

Iannone: **Could you summarize the state of the field when you first entered: consensus, findings, methods, trends, whatever seems important?**

Popenoe: The family began to weaken significantly beginning in the late 1960s. By that I mean the marriage rate started to drop, the divorce rate began to go up, and the out-of-wedlock birthrate increased. When this happened there was almost no reaction in the academic community of a negative sort. This wasn't seen as any kind of special problem. In fact, the thinking often was, isn't this new family diversity wonderful? We now don't just have a single kind of family but we have all kinds of families. In the 1980s, when I wrote the book about cross-national family decline, *Disturbing the Nest,* and then in 1993, when I wrote the article for the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, "American Family Decline, 1960–1990," even using the word "decline" caused consternation in many academic quarters. This

was at the beginning of what became known in academia as the "family wars."

Noticeably fueling the debate was that a number of studies done in the seventies and eighties purported to show that family change was not really having any negative effects on children. A widely-discussed, front-page article in the *Washington Post* in 1992 stated that social scientists had concluded the so-called nuclear or traditional family wasn't that important after all, that other family forms were just as good, or something to that effect.

This kind of staggered me because I was beginning to see in all the societies I was studying, including the United States, that in fact family weakening was becoming a huge problem, with the rise in all sorts of child-related issues such as juvenile delinquency, dropping out of school, unplanned teen pregnancies, and the like. Several major books at the time advised, basically, not to worry as the family was only changing, and not getting any worse.

Iannone: **So you really stuck out?**

Popenoe: So I stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. The *Journal of Marriage and Family* wouldn't publish my article "American Family Decline" without including several respondents who slammed it.

Iannone: **Was a new methodology needed to track these things, since other scholars were denying it?**

Popenoe: The early studies had been short-term with relatively primitive methodologies, such as asking the divorcing parents "how are things going with the children?" and vague things of that kind. But, fortunately, in the eighties long-term empirical studies were begun in which one could actually follow kids over time, both here and in other countries. By the nineties, the conclusions of these studies began to be revealed in the literature, and they were quite different from the assertions of the earlier studies. In fact, they agreed essentially with what I had been saying, which was that these new "alternative family forms" have serious disadvantages for children.

Iannone: **You have written that if it were up to the scholarly evidence there would be no debate about the fact that a married mother and**

father is the best arrangement for raising children. Have you seen more and more agreement among your fellow scholars with this view?

Popenoe: Yes, there is now more agreement—a big change from the earlier time. I think that almost every responsible scholar today in the family field would probably admit that two married, biological parents are the gold standard for childrearing. In other words, the evidence strongly indicates that alternative family forms are apt to face many more problems and have worse child outcomes, whether they are single parents, stepparents, cohabiting couples, gay parents, and so on.

On the other hand, there has been continuing resistance to acting on that information in any kind of systematic way through, let's say, promoting marriage or government policies that promote two-parent families. There are several major sources of resistance within the academy to facing up to the consequences of family decline. One is the ideology of radical feminism, which has looked at marriage as an oppressive, patriarchal institution that it generally wants no part of. Another source, which has long been more subdued within the academy, is the tremendous concern about gay and lesbian rights. Obviously, if you are promoting two-parent biological married couples you are saying that, well, gay and lesbian couples are at least second-best. And, as we have seen in the current push for same-sex marriage, this is not a position that people in the academy want to touch with a ten-foot pole.

I have always felt that those were the two biggest sources of resistance to facing up to the strong evidence about the negative effects of family decline. A third one might be that I have always stressed that *biological* parents are the best (which the evidence clearly shows), and there has long been an inherent distaste within the social sciences and the humanities for looking at anything in biological terms. And so, that's been quite a big issue, also.

Iannone: **Meaning a resistance to biology?**

Popenoe: Yes, a resistance to looking at human behavior as being in any way biologically determined. It's especially strong in sociology, but the attitude has bled over into many related fields. Many scholars would prefer it all to be something that is completely based on chosen social structure with no element of biological determinism. They would say, for example, that a biological parent is no better than anyone else at taking care of a child. But, of course, this overlooks the fact that we are genetically programmed to care

for our young; if not, we wouldn't be here today. It's the biological parents who have the tremendous incentive to pass along their genes to the next generation. Of course, now we are getting into the field of evolutionary psychology or sociobiology, which I've been heavily influenced by over the past twenty years or so.

Iannone: **I remember from when I studied feminist criticism of literature that Kate Millet wrote something to the effect that, what we call for is the professionalization of, and therefore *improvement* in, the care of the young. The idea was that if you pay people for it, it will be much better.**

Popenoe: Right. That professionals would do a better job.

Iannone: **What about Stephanie Coontz, who has actively challenged your views?**

Popenoe: Stephanie Coontz and I generally agree on most things now, but usually not about the possible solutions. The other day I received an article from a well-known feminist economist in which some of my material about family decline is referred to. She agrees that, first of all, the family is declining, and second, that children are being hurt. But her take is that there is nothing much that we can do to rebuild nuclear families and therefore we should do everything that we can to help single mothers. In other words, she agrees with me about almost everything except for my main conclusion—that we need to do everything possible to revive marriage. However, in general, I don't have as many academic opponents today as I used to have.

One interesting shift has been in the media. In my early experience with the media, television producers and reporters for the *New York Times* and other newspapers were heavily influenced by left-feminist thought. They often challenged my findings, and rarely quoted me without an accompanying "alternative" answer from someone else. But around 2000 or so the situation began to shift, and now that almost never happens. Even though my views have never changed, they now see me as more credible. A big change is that you have a different group of people writing the stories and producing the television shows. Most of them are younger, and not the left-feminists of old. Today's media people are much more congenial to the idea that the family is weakening (many of them come from broken homes), which is the fundamental proposition that I have worked to bring into public awareness.

Iannone: **So that must be very encouraging. Maybe things can change. Maybe things do change.**

Popenoe: It is encouraging, but what hasn't changed is family weakening. There aren't that many people in the scholarly community who think, as I do, that the family is weakening and that we therefore urgently have to do something about it. The argument still is that family weakening is not a major problem, and even if it were, there is not much that can be done about it. In addition, there are some advantages to it, because it allows people to form many different kinds of families with less stigma attached. These other family forms, sometimes they can be quite successful, and we all know of biological married parents who have been a complete failure.

Iannone: **Do you think that some sociologists think one should just study it, whatever it is, and not have any opinion? I don't see how you could come away, when you see its damage to children, and say, well, that's just how things are.**

Popenoe: Yes. I am often accused of being an advocate because I say that marriage is an important social institution that needs strengthening, let's say. But, of course, no matter what position you take, you are advocating. If you take the position that family weakening is no problem, you are advocating alternative families or no families—each man for himself.

Iannone: **Right. Just so. We have touched on this, but could you say more about feminism and feminist scholarship—how has it influenced views of marriage and the family on the whole?**

Popenoe: I would say that the main antagonist to my point of view over the years has been the ideology of left-feminism in the academic community. Basically, it thoroughly dislikes marriage, believing it to be an institution that has probably outlived its usefulness. Interestingly, now that gays and lesbians want to get married, left-feminists have had to sort of double back and rethink the issue. Also, and we haven't gotten to this yet, they are certainly not so interested in having fathers involved in family life, except perhaps on their own terms.

The progression of my thinking over the years has been this: (a) the family is failing and children are being hurt; (b) the main reason children are being hurt is because fathers are more and more absent from their children's lives,

with children being raised instead by lone mothers; and (c) the way to get fathers back—maybe the only way—is to strengthen the institution of marriage. You see, in those last two steps, radical or left-feminists drop off—they don't particularly want fathers back, and they certainly don't want to get them back if it requires somehow strengthening the institution of marriage.

Iannone: **Could you say why they are so resistant?**

Popenoe: Well, I think that they see women's rights, women's advancement, as basically women being in an identical situation to men in the workplace. And in order for that to happen, there are a lot of impediments that have to be changed. One is the fact that women bear children. Two is the fact that they are in marriages dealing with a man. Radical feminists are particularly adverse to the structure of the family as is was in the fifties, when (a) women were spending a lot of time caring for children and (b) they were often in the role of servants to their husbands. So the whole "traditional nuclear family idea" just blows their minds.

Iannone: **Do they also resist your belief that male and female natures are not the same, and both are needed in raising children?**

Popenoe: Right. That gets to the issue of do you have to have both a man and a woman raising children; are fathers important or can a child just as well be raised by two women? This goes back both to antagonism towards men and to the biological issue about whether men and women are really different. For a long time I have come out strongly on the side of biological difference, which has added to my unpopularity within the academic world. I was, however, able to function as area dean for the social and behavioral sciences at Rutgers from 1988 to 1997. I don't quite know how I handled that. To some extent, it was before I had a national reputation on family issues.

Iannone: **And now if fathers are allowed to be "necessary," it's almost just to be another nanny or nurturer, while your belief is that fathers bring something different to the raising of the child from what the mother brings.**

Popenoe: That is my belief. It's hard to prove, but all the evidence that I've looked at suggests it is the case. Maybe the situation will change down the

line somehow, but I doubt it. I think sex differences are biologically programmed in various ways; men and women are clearly very different from each other in every society we've ever known. They haven't always played the same roles, of course, and I think there is a growing realization of that. By the way, the idea of sex differences is another thing that you could not talk about in the academy twenty years or so ago, mainly thanks to the reaction of the radical feminists. I'll never forget, one of the early books on sex differences [*Brain Sex*, 1991] came from Britain and had to be published here almost subterraneanly by a very conservative publisher and went virtually unnoticed by the press. And, of course, you still see the issue playing out with the famous incident with President Summers at Harvard, where just giving the barest mention of gender differences helped to run him out of the university presidency. So, it's been phenomenal, the reaction.

But I think over time change is clearly taking place. When you talk to young people today they know that there is a huge difference between a boy and a girl, or when you talk to parents who have a boy and a girl they see the differences without the shadow of a doubt. Also, with each passing year more biological differences are being revealed, including in the fundamental structure of the brain. Indeed, someone once calculated that men and women are more different genetically than humans and chimpanzees!

Iannone: **Talk about *la différence*! Speaking of Summers, I was surprised and disappointed that so few scholars and scientists seemed to come out in his support. They just let him hang out there.**

Popenoe: Well, there was a large group at Harvard that did back him, but it was only about a third of the faculty and was pretty silent, so that wasn't enough.

Iannone: **According to what I have read, you think that the father brings more aggression to the raising of children, more physicality.**

Popenoe: First of all, you need fathers for boys. They have to learn how to grow up to be a man. But I think also you need fathers to raise girls, if for no other reason than that girls are going to end up relating to men, and they have to know what a guy's like. And it is important for girls to have a major male figure in their life who loves them unconditionally, and relates to them in a nonsexual way. There are major differences in the things fathers and mothers stress in their childrearing. Fathers tend more to stress independence,

competition, and risk taking; they play with their children differently than mothers do. These differences are not easy to pin down, but a lot of studies have documented them fairly clearly. Moreover, the studies suggest that gendered childrearing turns out the most successful and well-adjusted children.

Iannone: **That's reassuring. OK, you say that the biological attachment of a father to his children is important. Yet, as your opponents say, there are many good adoptive fathers and stepfathers. Do you think that some of the resistance to your views is that people see other arrangements working well and/or don't want to feel condemned or to condemn others for being short of ideal? How does a scholar working in such sensitive areas as yours handle that real-life response?**

Popenoe: This is a very important question and it goes to the heart of how the social sciences are conducted today. We now have a much more tolerant society than we have ever had in the past, when people tended to live in fairly small in-groups, consistently battling out-groups. Now, in modern nations, many of these groups have more or less merged into one common multicultural society. There is something that I like to think of as "the kindergarten effect." Children from different family formations and of course different ethnic and racial groups and so on, all show up in the kindergarten class. In this setting the teacher can't start thinking "what, you have a single mother? That's so sad. It would have been much better if you had come from two married biological parents." Or another child comes from a cohabiting home, or has gay parents. So in kindergarten, since you don't want to make anybody feel bad and are trying to create a strong sense of community, you have to stay away from those kinds of issues. And that viewpoint carries over all the way up through the school years and even into college. With people coming from so many different family backgrounds it is not appropriate to be spouting off about one family form being so much better than another. The viewpoint also clearly is dominant in the political realm. No politician wants to alienate a group of voters from "alternative families," so they tend to avoid discussing family issues, including marriage, divorce, illegitimacy, and so on except where the issues have become truly extreme, such as the extent of fatherlessness in today's black community.

The problem is, where does this place the social sciences? There are real differences among family forms, ethnic and racial groups, males and females,

etc., and to avoid them is not to tell the truth—which is what the social sciences are supposed to be all about. So this is a huge issue. Too many social scientists have been continuing the tolerant, multicultural viewpoint so necessary in kindergarten, and this has done great damage to the social sciences, especially sociology, anthropology, and related fields.

What we are talking about, of course, is political correctness. Political correctness has become so imbued in the social sciences, in my opinion, that many social scientists simply can't see reality anymore. They are so busy trying to make friends, establish intellectual communities, not put anybody down, help the oppressed, and so on, that social reality often falls by the wayside. By the way, this viewpoint greatly impacts teaching today at the college level. With student teaching evaluations having become so important for promotion and tenure, the teacher can't afford to alienate the students in his classes. It is best to clam up on controversial issues.

Iannone: **Is there any way out?**

Popenoe: Well, in my own case, when I raise controversial issues in classes or in speeches I will often say, look, I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, but here are the facts. And I always refer to research; nobody can have any problems with that. But I typically make the statement, for example, that there are many meritorious single mothers who are doing the Lord's work.

Iannone: **You have said that in your judgment the traditional fifties-style family was very good for children, quite good for men, and not so good for women. And yet you have also called it a great civilizational achievement. Is there some tension in your thought about this? Also, wasn't it good for a lot of women, maybe most women? And was it necessarily so good for men? I am thinking of some of the literature of the fifties—*Death of a Salesman, The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, Rebel without a Cause,* that kind of thing—about the frustrations of men and boys trying to live up to the expectations for them. This may have been the origin of the *Playboy* mentality. Perhaps both men and women had to give up something to make it work.**

Popenoe: The reason why the fifties family was a major social achievement is because greater family stability was achieved in the fifties than at probably any other time in history, with high marriage rates, low unwed birthrates, and

low death rates not yet offset by sky-high divorce rates. The fifties family was a very stable, solid family form while it lasted. Saying that it was very good for children, quite good for men, not so good for women is a bit glib. But in the case of men, for example, they had a helpmate and assistant full-time at home, a situation that many men desire and probably benefit from.

As for the wives of the fifties, they were relegated to a dependent role far more than most women want today, certainly, and of course were denied many of the work and public service opportunities available to their husbands. This family form was good for the children because the family was stable and they had a full-time parent.

I think that the so-called conformity of the fifties for men has probably been overstated. It's just that there suddenly was a time in history when men were working in large organizations, and this presented new challenges. Remember, also, that many men were commuting long distances to work, working long hours, and therefore were away from home a lot. Men out of the home was probably a major contributing factor to the rise of male irresponsibility and the playboy mentality.

Iannone: **A Pew study revealed that most mothers of small children wanted either part-time work or to stay at home. Only something like 10 percent said that working full-time is the ideal. So maybe they are looking for a modified version of the fifties model.**

Popenoe: Far more women apparently want that than one ever reads about in the media or hears in the college classroom, but women also don't want to lose out in their career track or their job line—and they often badly need the money today. So, it's very hard for them to stay home, unlike in the fifties where people were more able to live on one income. Of course, we had many fewer material goods then than we do today.

Iannone: **That point raises a lot of questions, too. There was an ideal back then that the father's salary alone should be sufficient, whereas now, there is almost an expectation that there have to be two salaries. But not all women are career-oriented. The majority of women who work are probably just working the average job—they may enjoy them in their own way, but these are jobs where it's not so difficult to take out some time and go back.**

Popenoe: But women have a lot better jobs today, and at better pay, than they ever would have had in the fifties. My first job when I was a freshman in college in the early 1950s was as a salesman in Gimbel's Department Store in Philadelphia, and women from my college also had jobs there. I was paid $32 a week and they were paid $28, but we did exactly the same job. What was that all about? It was a legacy of the past when it was felt that men were the wage-earner head-of-families and women were the dependents.

Iannone: **There is a funny movie set in the early forties, in which Carole Lombard leaves her husband in comical anger and gets a job in a department store. But when they find out she is actually still married, they dismiss her. Only single women could hold jobs in that store.**

Popenoe: During the Depression and World War II, and maybe earlier, in the school systems of America if a teacher married, she was out of a job.

Iannone: **But isn't that part of how society coaxed people into marriage? Encouraged men to think of themselves as breadwinners and women to see their destiny in family, not the workforce?**

Popenoe: Yes, and it reflects a clear conflict of interests—women's rights versus patriarchal families. With today's values the father-dominated family simply had to change. The problem is that not only has the family changed, it has seriously weakened. We have not yet been able successfully to establish the so-called egalitarian family.

Iannone: **We have touched on this, the rise in out-of-wedlock births, in children being raised mainly by mothers. Maybe it started out as an effort to be humane and understanding, but it's almost to the point where we celebrate the "single mom," as if that were an achievement in itself.**

Popenoe: I think we have gone *way* too far. Again, it's the kindergarten effect. Somebody, perhaps a friend of yours, has a child without a father in the home, maybe through an anonymous sperm donor—what are you going to do, denounce her and say, well, you've made a terrible mistake? I mean, you are going to respect her, even congratulate her. But when widespread, this attitude becomes a kind of national tragedy, for two reasons. One is that more children are going to be raised without a father, which has major

negative consequences. The second is that men are let off the hook. We haven't talked about this, but men and marriage is a very important issue. Men tend to be reluctant to get married, hard to get to commit, but men really need marriage for all sorts of civilizing reasons. When women are having so many children on their own, what are the men doing who would normally be with them? That's a serious problem. They can become playboys or criminals, or at the very least not make their major contribution to society as the "good family men."

And a single mother raising children is the most problematic form of childrearing that there is, with the possible exception of single fathers, who in some respects are worse. They usually bring more money to the scene, but are not as good nurturers. There are a few studies that suggest that.

Iannone: **Also, many men have gotten the message that they are not necessary, that they are free to be grownup children. That's part of it too. And women have abetted this by making sex so available, no?**

Popenoe: Yes, the sexual revolution has been devastating for men's family roles and for marriage. Traditionally, probably the biggest reason men married was for sex. So why should they marry today? Why shouldn't they just fool around for the rest of their lives? That is exactly what increasingly is happening.

Once married, there is the problem of high breakup rates. Interestingly, America is no longer the Western world's leader in breakup rates, although it still has the highest divorce rate. That dubious distinction has shifted to northern Europe, especially Scandinavia. There, far more couples just live together outside of marriage, and when they break up it isn't reflected in the divorce statistics. So the tendency in modern societies is for multiple partnerships over the course of life, many of which involve children. This is something we should be talking much more about than we do.

Iannone: **Well, you have written that in order to help preserve marriages, we should move more in the direction of European-style government support for the family, and yet you also want to preserve the family as a private unit. Does this, too, represent some tension in your thinking? Can we have both? The European example seems to suggest that family becomes less important and birthrates go down the more government gets involved.**

Popenoe: Those are very tricky issues, and there's no doubt about the fact that the welfare state is in some ways not advantageous for the family. Initially, it is advantageous in that it provides resources that aren't provided by the absent father and to poor families. But the stronger the welfare state, it's very clear, the less marriage there is—and the more lone parents, alternative family forms, and rising family breakup. One respect in which I do want to move in the direction of the European welfare state is family leave. I believe it is very important for women to be with their young children at least, let's say, for the first eighteen months. If they have two children, that means three years or more. In today's world, where most women hold jobs, it's very hard to achieve that unless there is some means of compensating them. A number of things have been proposed, for example, giving women something like the G.I. Bill, where you pay them money to get back into school after they finish childrearing. You pay them afterwards for the important service they performed, just as is done with soldiers. Another policy is family leave. In Sweden, almost every mother is out of the labor force for one year to eighteen months per child. Sweden has come in for a lot of criticism, especially from conservatives in America, but it has many good aspects, such as this one—Swedish parents, women mainly, spend much more time with their young children than American parents do, mainly thanks to their paid family leave policy. Interestingly, left-feminists in the United States don't like it, because they think it sets women back. I saw a paper recently by an American feminist arguing for no more than six weeks leave because otherwise women are too disadvantaged in the workplace. It is the case, in fact, that Swedish women do not occupy as many high positions in the Swedish economy as women do in America.

Iannone: **And they provide just for the mother to take this leave?**

Popenoe: No, the father also. Typically, it's the mother who is going to stay home, but many fathers take a month or two. The latest wrinkle is that they are more or less forcing the father to take time by providing money only for him. If he doesn't take it, the money is lost. I consider that going too far, too much Big Brother social engineering. The decision of who takes care of the children ought to be left to the family.

Of course, businesses would have to get on board with paid family leave. But it's difficult for many businesses, and you can see why most are not thrilled about the idea. There are a lot of other welfare state measures that I

don't favor, but family leave is one thing I think is an absolute good. Without paid family leave, many American women return to work two or three weeks after their kids are born, which I think is unconscionable. By the way, no politician would ever say, "That's unconscionable for you to go back to work so soon." Did they say that about Sarah Palin even?

Iannone: **I was so shocked at that. Conservatives saying, "She has five children including a new baby with special needs and how dare you say she can't also run for vice president!"**

Popenoe*:* So there you have it. A very controversial issue.

Iannone: **Do you think that even if a woman takes out just a few years to get a couple of children started, that that would set her profession back irrevocably? Because there was the "mommy track" that people were talking about.**

Popenoe: Right. And the mommy track basically involves a seriously weakened position in the profession. Once you get on the mommy track you are much less likely to make partner in the law firm, for example. And in some fields, like my daughter's field of medicine, you've got to keep up, you are taking these re-exams all the time, you can't just drop out. Of course, we are talking about the small percentage of women who have professional careers. But across the world of work, since so much of our home and family support today requires the income of two parents it's hard for women to leave the workforce for that reason alone. You need the money. Realistically, of course, we are not going to see paid family leave anytime soon. There are so many other domestic issues, such as healthcare, that have a higher priority.

Iannone: **Well that brings in your own efforts to influence things. What are the aims of the National Marriage Project that you head at Rutgers? Do you believe that your work demands that you be active in promoting what the scholarship clearly points to as best for human fulfillment?**

Popenoe: I was associated for many years in the early nineties with a New York-based group called the Institute for American Values. I co-chaired a commission of prominent Americans that we had established—it was the first national marriage commission—and we issued a report to the nation on the

state of marriage. It was widely circulated and got some play in the press, but not as much as we had hoped. Our whole idea was to influence the nation to see that marriage is important, that it is weakening, and that we should do something about it. Much of the mainstream media treated us with suspicion as a bunch of right-wingers, which we were not.

So later on, after I'd stepped down as social sciences dean and was looking for new things to do back in the mid-nineties, I decided, well, why don't I set up a university institute to look into marriage and issue reports on what's happening to it. And maybe then the media and others would listen more. And sure enough, they did. I invited a partner to join me, a prominent author and social historian, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, who also had worked with us at the Institute for American Values. She and I carried on for ten years doing original research and issuing annual reports to the nation entitled *The State of Our Unions*. Our work received a lot of media publicity, and the fact that we had a university base seemed to make a huge difference in how well we were received.

I never could have done this at Rutgers as, let's say, an associate professor. I was able to do it because I had relatively high status within the university and nobody could blow me off. Also, I kept a very low profile. I never spoke about these issues on campus, for example. We just issued reports and talked to the media. With the exception of a few gay students who challenged several statements that we made, I never had any flack from anybody at Rutgers. That was quite heartening. Over the years I'm sure that many of my colleagues thought the venture was questionable at best. I was apparently thought of by some segments of the campus as "the marriage dude." But eventually, I think, there came to be a fair amount of respect for the whole enterprise. And the university administration loved us because of all the publicity Rutgers was getting in the media.

Iannone: **So you proved that the academy can have a good influence. You also showed that doing things quietly may be a good way to go and perhaps you've set an example for other academics in senior positions. Will the Marriage Project continue?**

Popenoe: Yes. I am recently retired and the National Marriage Project will soon be passed on to other scholars at another university. I hope it can continue to be a major academic force helping to rebuild American families.

Iannone: **I was thinking, regarding women in the workforce, maybe there are tradeoffs. If they felt the children were important enough to give time to, then that's a reward that makes worthwhile the sacrifice of some professional advancement.**

Popenoe: There was a lot of discussion of this in the media a few years ago, of course, about more and more professional women, Yale law graduates and so on, opting for the mommy track. I don't think that there is much evidence that this is happening on a large scale. In fact, I think things are moving in the other direction. One interesting thing is that American women with children are able, much more than women in the European welfare states, to work part-time. This greatly helps to compensate for our lack of paid family leave.

Iannone: **Well, I often feel that when we do hear of rising percentages of women in the workplace, there is no effort made to distinguish the part-timers from the full-timers.**

Popenoe: That's true. In some reports a woman is considered to be in the workplace if she works only a week a year, or so.

Iannone: **Do you have views on daycare? On nanny care?**

Popenoe: The modern family is in a situation very different from anything before. People used to live in large family groups, often with grandmothers and other relatives around and with elder children helping younger ones. Today it's often a lone mother in a household who may not even know the neighbors. Obviously, then, the mother—even if she stays at home and is not in the workforce—can use some help. So I am not really as adverse as some people, say, on the far right, to women having help with childcare in various ways. The ideal thing is to have a grandmother or other close relative come in. After that, the next best thing is to have a well-trained, full-time nanny, which perhaps 5 percent of the population can afford. I have clearly been influenced by my long contact with Sweden (one of my daughters is married to a Swede and lives there with their two children), including close observations of the operation of the Swedish daycare system. It's really quite wonderful. And remember, the Swedish child usually is at home with his or her mother for the first year and a half, and then goes into daycare.

Iannone: **That's because they've provided paid parental leave for the early care.**

Popenoe: Right, the mother is at home with the children in the early years. So, that's kind of an ideal arrangement in my opinion. I am certainly against daycare or any kind of care other than parent care, if possible, for children aged zero to one, and even a little bit older. When we are talking about daycare for older children, think pre-kindergarten. I mean, nobody has anything against kindergarten at age five. Well, how about age four, and then how about age three? I am not opposed to having more collective childcare at the younger ages. A word of warning, however. In America, childcare is typically not the same as it is in Sweden. In Sweden childcare workers are your Swedish peers; often they are mothers themselves and they have the same culture, the same values, as you do. Moreover, they are all well trained. Sweden, one must also say, is more child-centered than America. The culture shows more concern for children and their needs. America is gradually drifting away from being child-centered, if it ever was.

Iannone: **Really? How awful.**

Popenoe: In America, daycare workers tend to be pulled in at very low salaries from the lower classes where there may be very different parenting styles and even values than in the middle class. So, in theory I would not object to more daycare in America, but in practice there are many problems. It could be different, however. One doesn't hear too many complaints about the quality of our kindergartens. Anyway, I have always leaned in the other direction—of encouraging women to stay home more with their children—which is another reason I have never been very popular in many academic circles.

Iannone: **You've said some good things about Sweden, but as you said at the outset, that's where you first started seeing the decline of the modern family.**

Popenoe: The family is, I deem, weaker in important respects in Sweden than anywhere else in the Western world.

Iannone: **Even though it's more child-oriented and has paid parental leave and good daycare?**

Popenoe: This is one important way in which Sweden is not child-centered. The Swedish family is weaker in the sense that the government has stripped it of most of its traditional functions. And so many things have become individualized in Sweden, surprisingly for a collective-oriented welfare state. For example, the Swedish government does not permit the joint income tax for married couples. Women and men in the family have completely separate income streams, which they mostly keep to themselves.

Iannone: **But many are cohabiting. You mean even married people?**

Popenoe: Even married people. That's one reason they cohabit, because there's almost no advantage to being married in any financial respect. In fact, there are many advantages to cohabiting. For one thing, you don't have to go through a messy divorce when you break up. The marriage rate in Sweden may be the lowest in the history of the world, by my reckoning, at least for a major society. By one recent account, only 60 percent of the current generation of Swedish women will ever get married, and that percentage may well drop. Those who don't marry typically cohabit instead.

Cohabiting couples, even those with children, break up at a far higher rate than married couples. So, right there you have the family as we have known it growing weaker. One can make a case for the welfare state having picked up a lot of the pieces, but we can also make the case that the welfare state has contributed to this kind of family collapse. Also, I might note, in Sweden you can take family leave to stay home with your kids in the first year and a half of their lives, but staying home after that becomes extremely difficult because there is no government subsidy for it, thus making it almost impossible to afford. There could have been a government policy that pays women to stay home rather than subsidizing, or as an alternative to, daycare. But Swedish feminists and others have led the way to block that idea; they want the women in the labor force.

Iannone: **Your suggestions in *Life Without Father* on strengthening marriage are just super. For example, you exhort those in education to eliminate the anti-marriage bias in school curricula, to promote education for successful marriage, to discuss the desirability of marriage for successful childrearing. You mention family scholars and how textbooks should be written with a pro-marriage viewpoint. How the**

entertainment fields should stop glamorizing unwed motherhood, sexual promiscuity, alternative lifestyles. You are a lone person and you've had tremendous influence, done a lot of good. Imagine if different segments of society came together to try to support this strengthening of the family.

Popenoe: There are many active groups today promoting marriage, far more than in the past. In fact, this has been one of the bright spots of the Bush administration. It's the first national administration ever that has tried to promote marriage, or even use the word. Clinton promoted the family, but he never would use the word marriage.

After welfare reform the welfare rolls dropped 50 to 60 percent and there was a bundle of money left over. The question was, what to do with it? The Bush administration decided to use some of it to promote marriage education. So there are now government-sponsored programs all over the country helping people to have better marriages. Also, importantly, a great deal of evaluation research is underway to see whether these programs actually work.

One recent development is that traditional marriage counseling is gradually being superseded by marriage education. Marriage counseling too often has involved people without much training telling you to get a divorce. Marriage education is different. It takes place in a classroom setting, and people are taught how to communicate better and resolve conflicts. Also, it's clearly pro-marriage. Whether this might really help to turn marriage around we don't know yet. The larger cultural currents, obviously, are far more important than anything that marriage educators could do.

Iannone: **What are your views of homosexual marriage?**

Popenoe: I am opposed to it, but I'm for civil unions—as were our two presidential candidates in the recent election, but for different reasons. I am against same-sex marriage because I am strongly pro-marriage, and I think that same-sex marriage is going to change the cultural debate considerably and further weaken the institution of heterosexual marriage, such as the importance of fathers in childrearing. If it weren't for that, I would not have any problem with it.

Iannone: **Your list of suggestions mentions religious leaders and organizations and the part they can play in rebuilding family. It's funny**

the way authority has sort of filtered out of our society. People could once accept the idea that there were "goods" even if they couldn't always achieve them. And now there's a kind of recalcitrance—how dare you tell me what is good? So even churches are afraid to preach as they used to.

Popenoe: Right. There has been a tremendous shift in our society toward a cultural relativism and away from a set of moral values based on religion. And the social sciences, of which I am part, have certainly been no bit player in this shift. It's a real loss, in my opinion. I grew up in a secular home in Pasadena, California, and we seemed to be one of the very few families there that never went to church. Pasadena was a very churchgoing place in those days. Most people in our area came from the Midwest—migrants, newcomers to California. This was back in the thirties and forties. A strongly religious culture prevailed in the schools, in the summer camps that I went to, in the scout meetings. There was a tremendous emphasis on character and doing good. Those values are increasingly absent in today's culturally relativistic world. So I am a reluctant secular humanist, really. Someone said the other day, and I agree, "God is dead, but I really miss him." I often think, well, religion is so intricately connected with the family that the decline of religion and the decline of the family seem to be going hand-in-hand. The more secular the culture the weaker the family. This is one of the reasons I am generally a pessimist about modern times—I don't see what's going to turn the situation around. New religions? Well, maybe there will be some new religions that arise, but the new religions that have come forth in recent years—which I often refer to humorously as Shirley MacLaine religions—not only have nothing to say about the family, they are so individualistic that they are anti-family.

Iannone: **Do you think that a part of the decline of authority is also the denigration of men and fathers in popular culture? In popular culture they have become the butt of every joke, in advertisements, sitcoms, everything. Men represent authority, to some extent, so this mass ridicule has to be having bad effects.**

Popenoe: I haven't gone as far along that avenue of thinking as some others, partly because I am in a family of all women [wife, two daughters] and I can't [laughs]. Clearly, however, the scene has shifted in my lifetime. Early on the whole issue was the problem of women. Today, it's increasingly the

problem of men. It's not only that men are falling behind in the educational realm but, as we've talked about, the fact that men are abandoning family life and not sharing the load when it comes to childrearing. Of course, the men who are in families often do more with children than their own fathers did, but so many men are just escaping responsibility entirely. There is evidence, some coming out of Europe, that once men are removed from being the family breadwinner they take on a new and less responsible character. Earlier, a man had an obligation to support the family. Everything rested on him. He had to work hard to earn money, even at some cost to his own health. In today's world, men can much more easily just sort of drift off into a situation of irresponsibility, and the media certainly doesn't help the situation.

Iannone: **And maybe the popular culture is reflecting that, to some extent. These kinds of loser type men, these kind of childlike men who haven't yet developed themselves, and so on.**

Popenoe: Some of the problem also stems from the fact that men marry much later in life than they used to. Many men are now going through the college experience, for the first time in history, which typically frees them up at an early age from parental control. Then they spend another five or ten years in a new "young adulthood" period of life. During this time they do not have much responsibility for anything except trying to get ahead. And then it's very hard for them suddenly to be expected to settle down. On the other hand, women typically still want to have children, they want to have them at a fairly young age, and they want to have a guy, if possible, to have their child with. So they don't look at the situation in quite the same way.

Iannone: **Is there any scholarship on education and the family? For instance, are educated people more likely to marry successfully and have children?**

Popenoe: There is a large—and growing—marriage gap, as it is being called, in America between the better educated and the less educated. The highest out-of-wedlock birthrates, highest divorce rates, and lowest marriage rates are among the less educated part of the population. And the lowest out-of-wedlock birthrates, lowest divorce rates, and highest marriage rates are found among the better educated portion of the population, namely those who get into and graduate from college. My view is that colleges are more and more

choosing people on the basis of merit, and the personal characteristics that enable one to graduate from college are probably similar to those that can lead to a successful marriage. Also, the college grads are more likely to realize that a good marriage is a tremendous advantage in life, divorce is not a great thing, and an out-of-wedlock birth is even worse. And so they are more traditional in that sense, especially if they are religious. The educated parts of the population are also able to distance themselves more from the currents of popular culture—what people in Hollywood do or say, for example. If you are a college-educated person who comes from an intact family, are religious, and marry somebody of the same faith, I would say that your risk of divorce is very low, perhaps 10 percent or a little higher.

Iannone: **Two things come to mind. It is important, then, in the lower schools to have some education in marriage and family issues.**

Popenoe: Absolutely, because more and more young people today are growing up in unstable families. They have no idea what a good marriage is.

Iannone: **And the second thing is that even with all the feminism and anti-marriage propaganda, higher education is still somehow conveying some good values, even if it is just more thoughtfulness or more planning or things like that.**

Popenoe: Yes, the group that is able to graduate from college already has relatively strong values, and I am not sure we know exactly what values one picks up in college. Yet college certainly must broaden one's perspective and understanding of the world and its forces, and, as you point out, one's thoughtfulness and ability to plan and take the measure of what life throws at us. At the same time, the residential climate at many colleges is certainly not what most parents would desire, especially the relatively promiscuous sexual atmosphere.

Iannone: **It seems that it would be the opposite of good family formation.**

Popenoe: Remember that, despite the marriage gap, it still is the case that family life is deteriorating, even for the college-educated population. More and more college-educated women are having a child on their own, partly because they are waiting too long to marry. Cohabitation is becoming more

common. Family breakup, while it is much lower than in the lower classes, is probably increasing. And most importantly, the college educated population is not having as many children as the lower classes, which has major implications for our future. Also, by the way, it's easier to have a lasting marriage if you don't have children.

Iannone: **Well, that speaks to what you were saying earlier, that we are becoming less child-oriented. The whole movement against population—population control and the idea that human beings are a tax, if not an outright curse, on the planet. The sustainability movement, that we have to watch every bit of what we are consuming, what it's doing to the planet. It almost seems to argue against family and children, against people in general, as a good thing. Would you agree with that?**

Popenoe: To some extent—to a large extent—environmentalism has become a replacement for religion in the minds of a lot of young people. Nature has now replaced God. The idea is that we should almost worship nature, and do everything we can to protect it. Also, in a sense, environmentalism today is the equivalent of what socialism was in my generation. I have never carefully studied what environmentalists are saying about the family, but a part of it seems to be that there are too many people who are doing too many things to hurt nature. The major reason for the low fertility and coming population decline of modern societies, however, is that women are able to do so many other things during their lives.

Iannone: **You think that's it?**

Popenoe: Most women still want to have at least one child, which is not enough for population replacement, but there also seems to be a growing sentiment for (and acceptance of) permanent childlessness. It's hard for a woman to have more than one or two children if she wants to have a decent career, and a lot easier if she has no children at all. Women can bear children to thirty-five or forty and decreasingly after that. But there is a strong correlation between how late their first child comes and what the birthrate is. The later the average age of childbirth in a society, the lower the birthrate.

Iannone: **Well, would you say then that there is a kind of large civilizational conflict regarding women? If women want it all then**

something is going to have to give, or maybe women themselves will need to reorder priorities about what is important and come back more on the side of natalism rather than career.

Popenoe: In America the pressure for natalism is relatively weak because we have such a high immigration stream, and we are such a multicultural society. Certainly, however, if Italy wants to continue being filled with Italians some big-time changes are going to have to be made. I don't see any signs that Italians are prepared to make those changes.

Iannone: **Have we covered why you say we are less child-oriented? Just having fewer children?**

Popenoe: The birthrate among white, non-Hispanic Americans is about the same as in the higher birthrates nations of Europe, such as France and Sweden. By the way, in those countries there is evidence that family-supportive welfare programs such as family leave help to increase the birthrate above those nations that have much weaker government programs, such as Germany, Spain, and Italy.

Iannone: **But are there other things at work in America, just sort of selfishness in the culture, not wanting children?**

Popenoe: America is much less child-centered than France and the Scandinavian countries, for example. In all modern nations child-centeredness is declining, partly because there are fewer children, partly because women and men spend longer times without children in their lives, partly because women are working, and for cultural reasons. A major reason America is less child-centered than a place like Sweden, I would say, is because Sweden has a more intact culture and places a larger premium on cultural continuity.

Iannone: **You mean intact culture in the sense that it has cultural identity, homogeneity?**

Popenoe: Exactly, a common set of norms, values, and traditions that are widely shared. Swedes want their children to be living in a society where these values continue. America is extremely diverse, and we don't have the

same concern for generational continuity. Also, of course, America has a much more commercial and materialistic culture than Sweden, and an enormously powerful popular culture that caters to young, childless adults. All modern nations appear to be moving in a common direction, but nations like Sweden and France still maintain a simpler, family-oriented lifestyle, to the degree that the family still exists. Another difference is that feminist ideology in these countries has been much more child- and mother-oriented than in America. In the past fifty years American feminism, contrary to earlier periods in our history, seems to have been dominated by one theme: getting women into the workplace.

It is difficult to overstate the negative effects on child-centeredness in this country of Hollywood and advertising. Advertisers appeal primarily to young people who haven't yet formed their tastes. And these young people don't have children. The same holds true for movies, televisions shows, and most of popular culture. The focus on stable marriages with children that used to be central in the television programs of an earlier era no longer exists, having been replaced by themes that appeal to the restless youth. There is virtually no reinforcement within popular culture today for strong marriages, devotion to children, responsible sex, or normal family life. Quite the opposite, and it is a tragedy.

Iannone: **You have given us much to think about and I thank you for taking the time for this interview.**

Popenoe: Well, I have followed and appreciated the work of the National Association of Scholars for a long time. I think that I am an original member of NAS and subscriber to *Academic Questions.*

Iannone: **That makes me feel that we are doing our part as well.**