Finite horizons: the American family

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 1992, while I was reading and thinking about Martha Minow’s latest book, I was struck with my double role as a responsible adult. Vacationing in the north woods of Wisconsin with my mother, I suddenly needed to care for her as well as my own small children. Generational connections, important before, swelled hugely in crisis. As I caught my breath between hospital runs and kids’ activities, I was thankful that I had received so much from my parents during my childhood. And I resolved to rethink the relationships between parents and children, adults and elderly.

Policy makers wonder why American children do not outshine their foreign counterparts on standardized tests and other measures of intellectual achievement. In a seemingly unrelated context, they ask why fathers systematically fail to meet their child support obligations and why an “epidemic” of reported

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1 Making All the Difference (1991). Minow’s provocative essay addresses the marginalization of various groups including children and suggests that each group has a positive contribution to make.


child abuse exists. If children are a good, perhaps the most important product of a marriage and certainly the nation's greatest capital asset, why don't we invest in them?

This paper argues that as adults we do not put our resources into children because we have lost one important benefit of our bargain. We cannot count on our progeny for support when we are no longer income-producers. If we look upon the historical family as an intergenerational relational contract, Western society has cut off a vital link. The break in the chain occurred when society prescribed that private family-based care of the elderly would be the exception rather than the rule. In doing this, in contrast to non-occidental societies, we have lost at least two valuable things. We have weakened the incentives for investment in children and we no longer enjoy the many valuable benefits that would otherwise come from senior citizens.


In several cases, a father has unsuccessfully that he had no duty to be responsible for his child because he offered to pay for the mother’s abortion. See, e.g., People ex rel. S.P.B., 651 P.2d 1213 (Colo. 1982); Linda D. v. Fritz C., 687 P.2d 223 (Wash. App. 1984); Harris v. State, 356 So. 623 ( Ala. 1978); Ince v. Bates, 558 P.2d 1253 (Or. App. 1977).


This is not a one-sided proposition, of course:

Peple live their lives embedded within various relationships, among which the family for most of us is paramount. Since these relationships tend to grow stronger over time, they take on added significance for most older persons. These relationships have an empowering