

**A Demographic Perspective on Depictions of the Harmfulness of Single-Parent Families
in U.S. Magazines and Social Science Journals, 1900-1998**

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The number of American children living in single-parent families has risen rapidly since 1960 due to increases in divorce and non-marital childbearing (Ellwood and Jencks 2002). But neither single-parent families created by divorce and non-marital childbearing nor controversy about these families is new (Riley 1990; Kunzel 1993). In this paper, I examine articles published in popular magazines and social science journals between 1900 and 1998 that testify to the longstanding nature of debate over the effects of single-parent families formed through divorce and non-marital childbearing. I use primary data to examine trends over the 20th century in depictions of the harmfulness of single-parent families in popular magazines and social science journals. I examine debate over several aspects of harmfulness, including whether authors and commentators who write about single-parent families depict them as harmful and, if so, who or what is harmed and how.

I begin by establishing trends over time in depictions of harmfulness. I then use multivariate models to explore factors that may be associated with these depictions. These include: trends in magazine and scholarly publishing over the century, such as the growth of women's magazines and the increasing dominance of empirically-based studies in scholarly journals; change in the characteristics of the authors and commentators who depict single-parent families, such as the increase in female authors; demographic trends in divorce and non-marital childbearing; and selected socio-economic and political factors that may be associated with attitudes about the harmfulness of single-parent families, such as trends in unemployment, crime and political party.

For this research, I use two data sets I have created for my dissertation regarding depictions of single-parent families resulting from divorce and non-marital childbearing. The first data set is based on a non-proportionate, stratified, random sample of articles about single-parent families published between 1900 and 1998 in popular American magazines indexed by the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. The second data set is based on a non-proportionate, stratified, random sample of articles about single-parent families published between 1900 and 1998 in sociology, demography, economics and political science journals indexed by JSTOR.¹

The popular magazine sample is drawn from the universe of articles indexed under subject headings related to single-parent families in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, the most comprehensive index of popular American magazines. Because the term “single-parent family” was not widely used until the 1970s, I identified this universe by compiling a list of subject headings used by the *Reader's Guide* to index articles relevant to divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing and single-parent families. I then created a computerized data base of 3,967 articles indexed under these headings between 1900 and 1998 and used the data base to draw a sample of 500 articles, of which I was able to obtain all but four, resulting in a response rate above 99 percent. After discarding articles irrelevant to single-parent families formed through divorce or non-marital childbearing, I retained a sample of 365 articles.

The scholarly sample is drawn from the universe of articles about single-parent families published online in social science journals included in JSTOR, a database that provides full text and citation information for articles from major academic journals. Initial

¹ Both samples focus exclusively on articles about single-parent families resulting from divorce or non-marital childbearing. Articles about single-parent families resulting from parental mortality and articles about divorce that did not discuss divorce involving children were screened out of the samples.

key word searches identified 10,903 articles as potentially relevant to single-parent families of which 2,923 were judged to be “in universe” based on screening of article titles, abstracts and text.² I drew a non-proportionate, stratified, random sample of 758 articles from this universe, which resulted in a sample size of 341 articles relevant to single-parent families formed through divorce or non-marital childbearing.

I designed a coding instrument that enabled me to code several dozen variables for each relevant article and hired two research assistants to help with coding and to establish inter-rater reliability. I have completed coding of the magazine sample and am currently finishing coding the scholarly sample, which will be included in the final version of this paper. The magazine data form the basis for the preliminary analysis presented below. I expect to complete coding and analysis of the scholarly sample by February 2004.

Because the authors of many magazine and some scholarly articles quote or cite other individuals, I present results at the level of the individual “speaker.” This allows me to capture the views of both authors and others they quote, including cases in which authors of magazine articles quote social scientists and cases in which social scientists cite journalists or other professionals outside academia. Thus, while the preliminary analysis of the magazine sample presented here is based on 365 articles, it represents the views of 546 speakers. I expect the scholarly sample to include between 360 and 400 speakers.

In this paper, I examine variation over time in speakers’ depictions of the harmfulness of single-parent families. Since not all speakers depict single-parent families as harmful, I present my findings in two stages. First, I examine the trend over time in the proportion of speakers who discuss any type of harm done by single-parent families. Then, I limit the

² Articles with titles or abstracts including at least one key word were considered part of the universe as were articles without abstracts that contained a key word on at least 20 percent of their pages. Additional information about the identification of the universe is available from the author.

analyses to those speakers who *do* discuss harm and examine trends over time in the types of harm they depict.³ The final paper will include graphs illustrating time trends for all dependent and key independent variables as well as multivariate regression models. Independent variables will include magazine or journal type; speaker sex, occupation, and academic field; demographic measures related to the prevalence of divorce, non-marital childbearing and single-parent families; and selected socio-economic variables. Here, I present graphs of descriptive statistics for the dependent variables and one set of nested multivariate models from the magazine sample.

The first dependent variable is a dichotomous measure coded one if the speaker depicts single-parent families as causing any harm to individuals, to society or to both. The proportion of speakers who depict any harm (Graph 1 middle line) rises from almost 60 percent at the beginning of the century to a peak of about 90 percent around World War II. The prevalence of harmful depictions then falls and rises several times, ending the century at about 60 percent near where it began. During most of the century, a majority of speakers depict single-parent families as harmful, with the likelihood of a speaker depicting harm greatest from the mid-1920s through WWII and from the late 1950s through 1970. Speakers are least likely to depict harm during the late 1970s and the mid 1950s.

The remaining dependent variables trace the nature of the harm depicted by magazine authors and commentators. Cases in which speakers do not depict any harm are excluded from these analyses. The second and third dependent variables are dichotomous measures coded one if the speaker depicts single-parent families as harming individuals (Graph 1 top line) or harming society (Graph 1 bottom line). These measures are not mutually exclusive.

³ In subsequent analyses, I will compare the results of these models with those of a Heckman selection model in an effort to gage the impact of limiting these multivariate models to cases in which the author or commentator depicts single-parent families as harmful.

Throughout the century, the vast majority of speakers who discuss any type of harm depict harm to individuals. Harm to society is cited far less often and varies much more over time, rising from about 20 percent of speakers at the century's beginning to a peak of over 50 percent around World War I. Depictions of societal harm virtually disappear during the late 1960s and early 1970s but then rebound so that about one third of speakers cite societal harm by the century's end.

Graph 2 answers the question, "Who is harmed by single-parent families?" by tracing trends in depictions of harm to children, mothers and fathers. These three variables are dichotomous and not mutually exclusive since speakers may depict one, two or all three groups as harmed. During the first half of the century, more than 80 percent of speakers who cite individual harm depict children (black, triangle-studded line) as harmed by single-parent families. With the exception of the World War I period, harm to parents is cited much less commonly than harm to children, with harm to mothers (blue, circle-studded line) depicted more often than harm to fathers (green, cross-studded line). After mid-century, the pattern shifts. Mothers and children are depicted as harmed with approximately equal frequency from 1970 onward, while fathers remain far less likely to be portrayed as suffering from single-parent family formation except during the 1970s.

The final set of dependent variables captures how single-parent families harm individuals. Five types of harm are coded. Social harm indicates the speaker depicts single-parent families as harmful to human relationships or as detrimental to social status. Emotional harm relates to psychological effects of single-parent families, such as loneliness or sadness. Moral harm is coded only if the speaker uses the terms "moral" or "morality." Economic

harm involves financial suffering, while physical harm involves death, illness or abuse. These five variables are dichotomous and not mutually exclusive.

Trends in harm type are shown in Graph 3. Social harm (violet, triangle-studded line) is cited most frequently and consistently by at least 60 percent and as many as 95 percent of speakers over the century. Emotional harm (blue, diamond-studded line), cited by no more than 40 percent of speakers during the first three decades of the century, fluctuates much more than social harm, reaching peaks near 80 percent around 1950 and during the 1970s and a low point of near ten percent during the late 1960s. Economic harm (green, straight line) is cited less often than social or emotional harm during most of the century but also fluctuates widely. Physical harm (black, rectangle-studded line) and moral harm (purple, cross-studded line) are depicted least frequently and are most common during the first three decades of the century.

Some of these time trends appear to be consistent with historical and demographic patterns in U.S. social phenomena. For example, concern about the moral impact of single-parent families (Graph 3) may have faded over time as single-parent families became more common and more widely accepted. Similarly, the emphasis on harm to children versus parents (Graph 2) is consistent with parents' greater role in choosing to form single-parent families. Other trends are less expected. For example, depictions of harm to mothers (Graph 2) become as common as depictions of harm to children after 1970, and societal harm (Graph 1), which declines for most of the century, begins to rise after 1970.

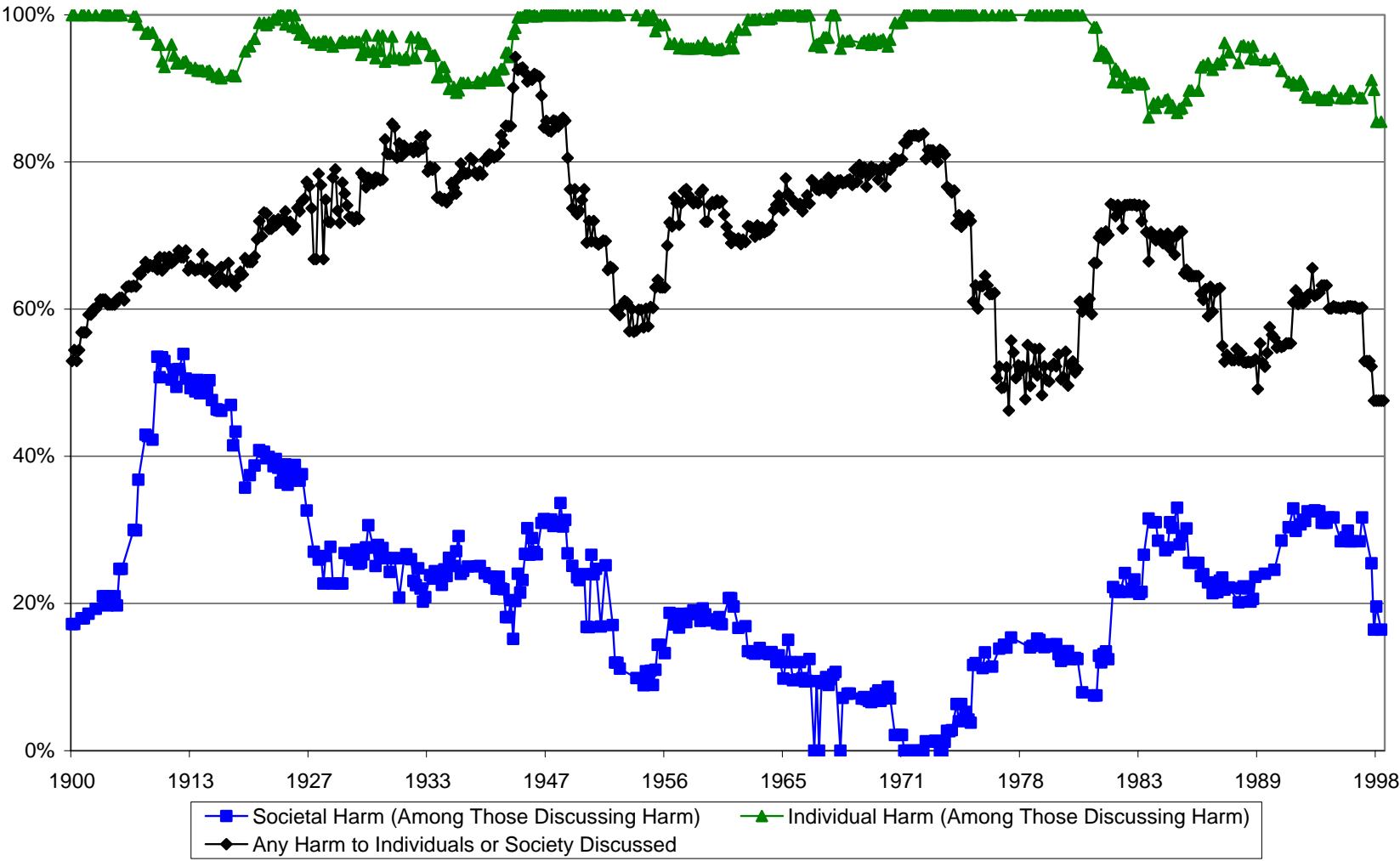
Multivariate regression models can shed light on these and other patterns by holding time constant in order to reveal associations between the dependent variables and potential explanatory factors, such as demographic change and change in the magazine and scholarly publishing industries. By way of illustration, Table 1 shows a set of nested logistic regression

models predicting that the speaker depicts single-parent families as harmful either to individuals, to society or both. In the models shown in Table 1, I control for time by using a linear term for year in combination with a series of polynomial terms (year raised to the second power through year raised to the eighth power). In alternative sets of models (not shown), I explored the effect of using other measures of time, including decade time periods and smaller numbers of polynomial terms and found similar results.

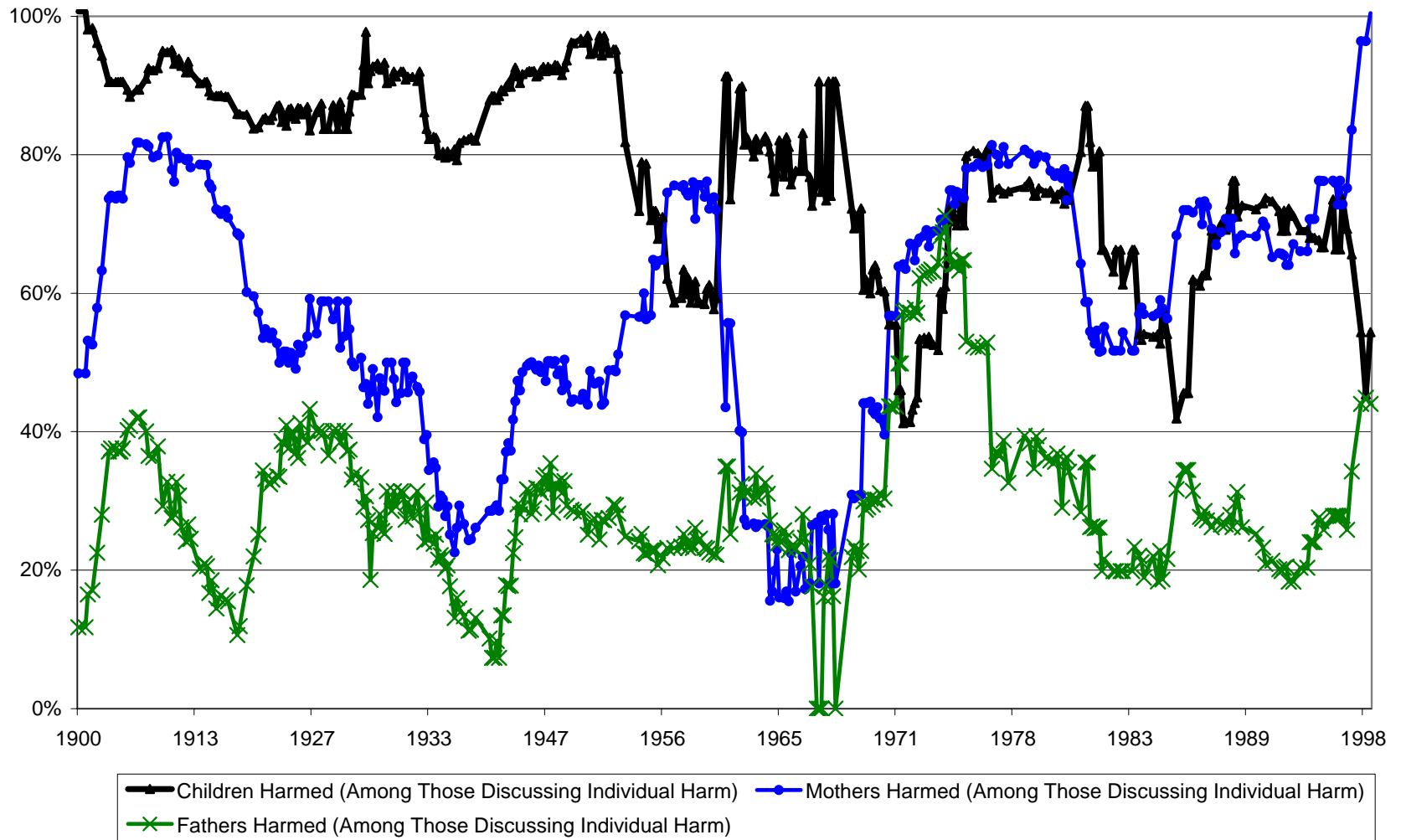
The models in Table 1 suggest that after controlling for time, the important predictors of the discussion of harm relate to the magazine industry rather than to characteristics of speakers or demographic factors. Compared with speakers writing in general interest magazines, speakers writing in religious magazines are less likely to discuss harm, while speakers writing in news magazines are more likely to discuss harm. Article type also matters. Speakers who write opinion articles are more likely to discuss harm than speakers who write fact-based articles. The likelihood that a speaker will discuss harm does not appear to vary with speakers' individual characteristics. Male and female speakers and academics and journalists appear equally likely to discuss harm. Nor do demographic factors appear to explain variation in the discussion of harm.

The full version of this paper will include interactions of selected explanatory variables and time and will present descriptive and multivariate models for depictions of harm in both popular magazine and scholarly journal articles. Alternative measures of demographic factors will also be examined.

Proportion of Magazine Authors and Commentators Who Depict Single-Parent Families as Harmful to Individuals or Society



Propotion of Magazine Authors and Commentators Who Depict Which Individuals Are Harmed by Single-Parent Families



Proportion of Magazine Authors and Commentators Who Depict How Single-Parent Families Harm Individuals

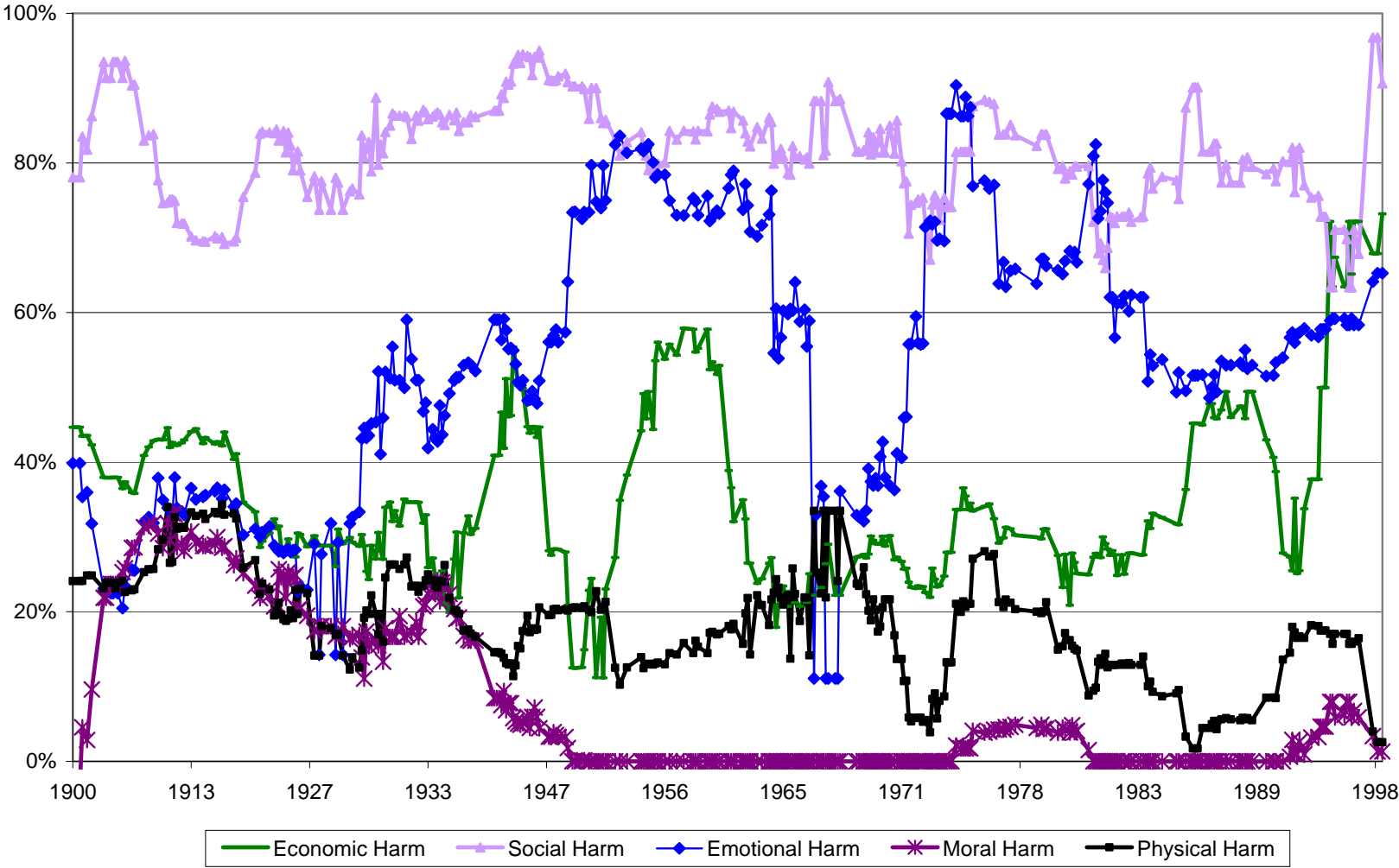


Table 1. Nested Logistic Regression Models Predicting that the Speaker Depicts Single-Parent Families as Harmful

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coefficient	P> z	Coefficient	P> z	Coefficient	P> z
<u>Independent Variables*</u>						
Polynomial Measures of Time						
Magazine Type						
Women's Magazine	-0.73	0.15	-0.64	0.22	-0.58	0.27
Religious Magazine	-1.53	0.07	-1.48	0.08	-1.48	0.09
News Magazine	1.16	0.07	1.19	0.05	1.10	0.08
Specialty Magazine	-0.86	0.10	-0.74	0.14	-0.73	0.16
Article Type						
Not an Opinion Article	-2.04	0.00	-1.95	0.00	-1.87	0.00
Speaker Sex						
Female Speaker	-1.22	0.48	-0.25	0.47	-0.28	0.43
Speaker Sex Unclear			-0.56	0.27	-0.63	0.22
Speaker Occupation						
Academic Speaker			-0.11	0.85	-0.17	0.76
Speaker Not						
Academic/Journalist			0.21	0.66	0.14	0.76
Demographic Trends						
Divorce Rate			-1.07	0.57	-0.14	0.32
Year Before 1940					3.34	0.54
Divorce Rate x Pre-1940					-0.74	0.18
Non-Marital Birth Rate					-0.12	0.51

* Omitted categories: General interest magazines; opinion articles; male speakers; journalist speakers

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