

PREFACE

You'd be hard-pressed to find a topic as emotionally compelling and as personally interesting to people as family. It seemed that whenever I told people I was writing this book they'd either start to relate a family anecdote that they thought I should include ("You want to know about families? Just ask me. I'll tell you about *families*. Mine's a doozy!"); express their opinion about society-wide family problems ("Parents aren't disciplining their kids enough, and *that's* why there's so much crime in the streets!"); or ask for my advice on some difficulty they were having ("How can I get my kids to listen to me?!").

I began to think that everybody had something to say or some opinion about families. To probe this issue further, I decided to do some Internet browsing. Not surprisingly, I discovered thousands of sites devoted to different aspects of families. Most are sites related to either the academic research on various aspects of family life (marriage, divorce, children, and so on), political interest groups devoted to some family-related issue, or nonprofit family service organizations. But I also found something unexpected: over 2,500 *personal* family home pages—individual families simply presenting information about, well, *themselves*.

Most of these sites conveyed the sort of information you find in those letters people stuff in their Christmas cards each year. You know, "Fred finally passed the CPA exam"; "Suzie loves her new position as goalkeeper on her soccer team"; "Our trip to Tuscany was breathtaking"; "We're thinking of planting cherry tomatoes instead of Romas this year." Many of them contained elaborate family photo albums with pictures of weddings, christenings, children through various stages of development, beloved pets, redecorated houses, cruise trips, and so on. Some offered even deeper peeks into their lives by providing detailed family trees, religious testimonials, wedding vows, favorite cookie recipes, opinions on controversial issues such as home schooling or gay marriage, or space to submit suggestions for baby names. One woman even broadcast the birth of her child, *live*, over the Internet.

I wondered what would motivate people to open up the private details of their families to the vast, anonymous world of cyberspace. It's not as if there's a critical mass of people out there who need immediate access to information about Joe and Martha Klotzman's passion for Tupperware parties. Instead, people like the Klotzmans are taking this technological opportunity to make a

public statement about their commitment to and pride in their families. They're not the only ones. Lately there has been a parade of high-profile people declaring their commitment to their families and their willingness to sacrifice for them. For example:

- A major league baseball player on one of the best teams asks to be traded to an expansion team—and agrees to a large pay *cut*—so he can be closer to his estranged children.
- A powerful member of the presidential Cabinet resigns so that he can focus on the future of his three children.
- Several high-ranking members of Congress give up their seats to spend more time with their families.
- The president and chief executive of one of the largest multinational corporations in the world unexpectedly quits her job because she wants to devote herself to her family.
- A 15-year-old Olympic figure-skating champion decides to turn pro, forgoing a chance to win another gold medal. Her reason? She claims that the rigorous Olympic training regimen had separated her from her family too long.

Family has certainly become fashionable at the end of the millennium. You'd think that a topic that is so central and so deeply interesting to so many people would be the easiest thing in the world to write about, right? Not necessarily. For as long as there have been people ruminating over the human condition, there have been scholars, poets, novelists, musicians, and clergy examining, studying, celebrating, bemoaning, and making predictions and writing about every conceivable aspect of family life. And there is no shortage of contemporary “experts” who are willing to offer their 2 cents about the joys and sorrows of families. So how does one write about something so eternally important without treading over well-worn ground?

I knew from the beginning that I didn't want this book simply to be an encyclopedia of information that would be useful only in the context of a college course—easily discarded at the end of the semester. I wanted it to be something of a guide as well—not only *informative* in terms of current sociological knowledge of families, but *meaningful* in terms of contemporary family debates, and *applicable* to your everyday family lives. In other words, I wanted the book to connect to your personal experiences while, at the same time, showing you how sociologists understand and explain families.

One of the difficulties I faced in accomplishing this goal was that a student's first course or textbook on family is never a his or her *introduction* to the topic of family. Everybody has grown up in one type of family or another. Consequently, all students bring with them to these courses a lifetime's worth of personal information, data, values, expectations, and assumptions about family life. Many have seen their parents divorce and remarry. Most have some experience with siblings or grandparents or cousins. Some have even formed their own families. Indeed, it's often said that when it comes to a topic like family, everyone is a potential expert.

With this direct knowledge comes some deeply held beliefs about what a family is and how it should work. Such preconceived notions present special challenges to instructors—and, by extension, to textbook authors. Certainly we want our students to be able to apply the course material directly to their own lived experiences. I've discovered in my own classes that students are more attentive and learn more when they find the subject matter immediately relevant to their lives.

But at the same time we want our classes and our textbooks to be more than just an album of personally familiar snippets of family life. That “it-happens-to-me-therefore-it-must-be-true-for-everyone” approach to the material can be a serious obstacle to learning. Discussions that stay at this level become merely exchanges of personal anecdotes, and little is learned about understanding the subject sociologically.

So a course—and a textbook—on the family must go beyond simply telling stories you can relate to. It must show how professional scholars go about understanding the social patterns that underlie those family matters that everyone seems to have some experience with or some opinion about. A textbook must therefore provide you with the intellectual tools you need to *understand* the broader social implications of your own family experiences, *appreciate* the applicability of the sociological perspective to your own life, and critically *evaluate* the social information about families that bombards you every day. In short, it must strike a balance between the personal and emotional relevance of the material on the one hand and the scholarly understanding of it on the other.

One way to accomplish this goal is to teach (and write) “deductively”—starting with an examination of sociological theory and research and then “working down” to the level of personally relevant examples, “real-world” experiences, and controversial issues. This style of teaching often relies on a traditional lecture-style format and an authoritative textbook.

Unfortunately such an approach—especially with a topic like family—runs the serious risk of “losing” you early on. Certainly you should understand the sociological perspective on family. But a perspective that sounds technical and seems scientifically disconnected runs the risk of robbing personally meaningful topics of all their flavor and interest. Many very good, informative textbooks today that aim to be rigorous, scholarly, and thoroughly sociological turn off students before the end of the first chapter. As I’ve seen in my own teaching, students want the knowledge they acquire in college to be intellectually stimulating, but they also want it to be pertinent, provocative, and timely. I think they have a point.

Thus, I have organized this textbook on family around an “inductive” style of learning, the sort of “active” approach that more and more instructors are using these days. The book begins at the level of personal relevance or controversy with an examination of familiar contemporary issues—topics you are likely to know or feel strongly about. Once this personal connection has been made, we can “work up” to the deeper and more detailed sociological understanding of the issues at hand, using the theories and the data of social science to understand the meaning and broader relevance of those controversies and experiences.

The Design of This Book

Since this book is based on an inductive style of learning, it is organized very differently from most traditional and current family textbooks. It’s divided into two parts that are distinct from one another in style, content, and purpose.

Part I—*Private Experiences and Public Issues*—contains eight relatively short essays or “issues” that focus on various controversial topics and questions pertaining to family life. My purpose in these essays is to highlight some crucial and sometimes emotional questions that

bear on contemporary family experiences: Who gets to be called a family? How accurate are our popular images of families? How private should families be? Are people's personal interests incompatible with their family obligations? How do race, class, and gender come to bear on people's everyday family experiences? Does a family have to conform to a particular structure in order to be effective? Has family as an institution lost its influence over people's lives?

These essays are meant to provoke critical thought and debate. To that end, each issue concludes with a set of discussion questions. These questions are designed *not* to gauge your ability to recall facts from these essays but to spur classroom debate on the societal and personal implications of the material.

The ultimate teaching value of the issues lies in their connection to the chapters in Part II—*Sociological Dimensions of Family Life*. In these chapters I discuss the sociological concepts, theories, and research that can help you understand the social forces that influence your family experiences, thereby shedding light on the issues introduced in Part I. The specific topics covered in this part of the book closely resemble those you'd find in most family textbooks: attraction and love, marriage and work, parenting and child rearing, intimate violence, divorce and remarriage, old age, death, family policy. But my goal here is to move beyond simple descriptions of these phenomena to an intellectually challenging (and hopefully applicable) examination of the interrelationship between social structural forces and private family experiences that builds on the issues presented in Part I. Particular attention is paid in these chapters to the role of history, culture, economics, politics, and religion in family experiences. Furthermore, issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are woven throughout these chapters.

You will quickly notice that the book is organized around the assumption of interrelatedness among the issues in Part I and the chapters in Part II. One of the greatest difficulties in writing a book on family is that family matters don't align neatly in distinct and conceptually independent chapters. One can't talk about gender in families, for instance, without talking about work issues, power, children and child rearing, domestic violence, and so forth. A topic like divorce is closely related to economics, child rearing, work, social policy, perhaps even intimate violence. So the scholarly information provided in Part II is meant to be applied reflexively to shed some sociological light on the controversial issues raised in Part I. To help you to see these connections, a special feature called *hot links* alerts you to other chapters and issues that discuss related topics. Small triangles in the text mark the statements that can be linked to other sections of the book. ▲

▲ Look in the margins of the chapters in Part II (or between paragraphs in the issues of Part I) for this symbol, which indicates a "hot link" to a related matter in another chapter or issue.

Other Helpful Features

This book contains several other features that are designed to provide useful information in a way that makes teaching more effective. For instance, each chapter in Part II contains a photographic feature called *Windows on Family*. Most textbooks have an abundance of photographic material, but these images often seem to be simply filling up space. I wanted the visual aspect of this book to paint vivid and informative sociological portraits of family life. The multipage *Windows on Family* photo essays will help you "see" many of the concepts and ideas that you will read about in the chapter. As you study the visual essays, you will be practicing the skills of observation that can make you a more astute participant in your family and in your social world.

Each of the Part II chapters also contains a multipage feature called *Demo•Graphic Essay*. These sets of graphs and charts present statistical information on various aspects of families in a way that is easy to understand and visually appealing. The topic of family has been the subject of a vast amount of quantitative research, but a barrage of individual graphs, tables, or charts, like those in a typical textbook, may obscure the overall picture painted by the research. Each *Demo•Graphic Essay* is self-contained, with explanatory text and thought-provoking questions, but it is also tied conceptually to the chapter in which it appears. The purpose of this feature is not only to provide statistical support for the points made in the text but also to help you learn how to go beyond anecdotal understanding to broader sociological perspectives.

Each chapter in Part II also includes a short list of chapter highlights, to clarify the important concepts, and ends with a section called *Your Turn*. This section encourages you to study the “real world,” much as professional sociologists do, to get a better understanding of the similarities and differences among families.

Finally, this book comes with a companion volume of short readings—articles, chapters, and excerpts from other sources, edited by sociologist Cheryl Albers. These readings address provocative questions that echo many of the subjects covered in this book. The readings examine common, everyday experiences, controversial issues, or distinct historical events that illustrate the relationship between social forces and individual family life. Many of these pieces show how sociologists gather evidence about families through carefully designed research. An essay at the beginning of each group of readings points up the common threads as well as the discrepancies that make the sociological study of families so endlessly fascinating.

A Word about Words

As a sociologist, I know the power of language in shaping ideas, values, and attitudes. I have tried to be very careful in my choice of terminology. Consider, for instance, the title of this book: *Sociology of Families*. You will notice that I use the word *Families* and not *The Family*. One of the key themes of this book is that families are extremely diverse in form and function. No single family structure can serve as a prototype for all Americans. Hence in the title I have avoided using the term *The Family*. In fact, throughout the book I have opted for the more inclusive (and more accurate) term “families.” Only when referring to the *institution* of family or referring to a specific family (for example, “When she became the head of the family . . .”) do I use “the family.”

A Final Thought

As you’ve probably noticed, few subjects in today’s society carry as much social, political, and emotional freight as “family.” Whether spoken of reverently as the moral foundation of the entire society or referred to disparagingly by some rebellious teenager as the greatest obstacle to happiness and freedom, “family” permeates our lives and defines who we are as a culture like no other institution.

Sociologists may have some things in common, but our assumptions, perspectives, and attitudes can be quite different. Some sociologists focus on broad demographic information about large groups of people; others concentrate on the everyday experiences of individuals. Some

write from a specific political position or theoretical perspective; others are more pluralistic in the ideologies and theories they use. This book reflects my sociological perspective—one that draws heavily on the interrelationship between the everyday experiences of individuals and the society in which they live. I believe that family is both an individually lived experience and a systematic social institution. So our private lives are always a combination of the idiosyncrasies of the family to which we belong *and* the broader social rules and expectations associated with *families* in general. In that sense, our families are strongly influenced by large-scale social forces like culture, history, economics, politics, religion, the media, and so on. At the same time, however, we, as individuals, are vital contributors to our social structure. As individuals or in groups, we can, through our actions, change, modify, or reinforce existing elements of family life.

I hope you will find the unique organization of this book both informative and provocative. Above all, I hope you will find it useful in helping you understand why and how families have such great significance for all of us.

Good luck,



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A Note to the Instructor

One of the chief virtues of the two-part organizational strategy in this book is its flexibility. For instance, an instructor who wants to intersperse discussion of a particular controversy or question from Part I with consideration of related sociological concepts from Part II might ask students to read issues and chapters in the following sequence:

- Issue 1* What Is a Family?
- Issue 2* How Accurate Are Popular Images of American Families?
- Chapter 1* The Link Between Family Life and Social Science

- Issue 5* How Do Gender and Power Influence Family Life?
- Chapter 2* Intimate Relationships: Love, Sex, and Attraction
- Chapter 3* Gender, Marriage, and Work

- Issue 6* How Do Race, Ethnicity, and Racism Affect Family Life?
- Issue 7* How Do Wealth and Poverty Determine Family Experiences?
- Chapter 4* Parenthood and Parenting
- Chapter 5* Childhood and Child Rearing

- Issue 3* How Private Should Family Life Be?
Chapter 6 Intimate Violence
- Issue 4* How Should Individual Rights and Family Obligations Be Balanced?
Chapter 7 Divorce and Remarriage
Chapter 8 Family Transitions in Adulthood
- Issue 8* Is the Institution of Family Breaking Down—and Society with It?
Chapter 9 Changing American Families

Another organizational strategy might be to use some of the Part I issues at the beginning of the course and some at the end, thereby “bookending” the content-driven chapters of Part II with topics that lend themselves to interesting debate:

- Issue 1* What Is a Family?
Issue 2 How Accurate Are Popular Images of American Families?
Issue 5 How Do Gender and Power Influence Family Life?
Issue 6 How Do Race, Ethnicity, and Racism Affect Family Life?
Issue 7 How Do Wealth and Poverty Determine Family Experiences?
- Chapter 1* The Link Between Family Life and Social Science
Chapter 2 Intimate Relationships: Love, Sex, and Attraction
Chapter 3 Gender, Marriage, and Work
Chapter 4 Parenthood and Parenting
Chapter 5 Childhood and Child Rearing
Chapter 6 Intimate Violence
Chapter 7 Divorce and Remarriage
Chapter 8 Family Transitions in Adulthood
Chapter 9 Changing American Families
- Issue 3* How Private Should Family Life Be?
Issue 4 How Should Individual Rights and Family Obligations Be Balanced?
Issue 8 Is the Institution of Family Breaking Down—and Society with It?

The point is that, although the issues and chapters are arranged sequentially, they need not be read in the order in which they appear.

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My 9-year old son, Seth, helped me when I packed up the last chapters of this book to send to the publisher. “Wow,” he said as he looked at the imposing stack of paper, “it must have taken you *a whole month* to write this book!” I smiled at his naïveté. “Well,” I said in that condescending, fatherly tone that we use when we’re convinced we know more than the child we’re speaking to, “it actually took a *little* longer than that.” “What, like two months?” he suggested. “More like two *years*,” I replied. He looked astonished. “Two years?! Boy, you’re not very good at this, are you?”

I’m not sure if he’s right about that or not. What I do know is that writing a book like this one is an enormously time-consuming endeavor that simultaneously requires total seclusion and utter dependence on others’ expertise, guidance, and good will. Although it’s my name that appears on the cover, many people contributed their time, suggestions, opinions, emotional support, and sometimes simply a well-timed meal to bring this project to fruition.

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