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SOCIOLOGY OF FAMILIES

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# SOCIOLOGY OF FAMILIES

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*Visual Essays edited by Shelley Kowalski*

*University of Oregon*

*Demo•Graphic Essays edited by Jill Grigsby*

*Pomona College*



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*For my family*

## BRIEF CONTENTS

### **PART I Private Experiences and Public Issues**

- Issue 1* **What Is a Family?** / 3
- Issue 2* **How Accurate Are Popular Images of American Families?** / 19
- Issue 3* **How Private Should Family Life Be?** / 35
- Issue 4* **How Should Individual Rights and Family Obligations Be Balanced?** / 49
- Issue 5* **How Do Gender and Power Influence Family Life?** / 63
- Issue 6* **How Do Race, Ethnicity, and Racism Affect Family Life?** / 79
- Issue 7* **How Do Wealth and Poverty Determine Family Experiences?** / 95
- Issue 8* **Is the Institution of Family Breaking Down—and Society with It?** / 113

### **PART II Sociological Dimensions of Family Life**

- Chapter 1* **The Link Between Family Life and Social Science** / 129
- Chapter 2* **Intimate Relationships: Love, Sex, and Attraction** / 159
- Chapter 3* **Gender, Marriage, and Work** / 201
- Chapter 4* **Parenthood and Parenting** / 245
- Chapter 5* **Childhood and Child Rearing** / 283
- Chapter 6* **Intimate Violence** / 327
- Chapter 7* **Divorce and Remarriage** / 371
- Chapter 8* **Family Transitions in Adulthood** / 417
- Chapter 9* **Changing American Families** / 459

*Bibliography* / 495

*Glossary/Index* / 527





# CONTENTS

## **PART I Private Experiences and Public Issues**

### **ISSUE 1 What Is a Family? / 3**

#### **Definitions of Family / 5**

Changing Family Forms / 6

The “Official” Definition of Family / 6

#### **Blood Families and Chosen Families / 11**

#### **The Controversy over Gay Families / 12**

The Push to Legalize Gay Marriage / 13

Opposition to Legalizing Gay Marriage / 14

#### **The Symbolism of Family / 15**

### **ISSUE 2 How Accurate Are Popular Images of American Families? / 19**

#### **Media and Families / 21**

The Role of Television in Everyday Family Life / 22

Television Images of Families / 22

TV Families over Time / 23

#### **Historical Ideas about Families / 25**

Colonial Families / 25

Nineteenth-Century Families / 26

Early Twentieth-Century Families / 27

The Baby Boom of the 1940s and 1950s / 28

The Sixties and Beyond / 31

#### **SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT / 32**

ISSUE 3	How Private Should Family Life Be? / 35
	<b>The Ideal of Family Privacy / 37</b>
	The Location of Privacy / 38
	The History of Privacy / 40
	<b>The Paradox of Privacy / 42</b>
	<b>Parents and Children / 44</b>
	<b>Variations in Family Privacy / 46</b>
	<b>SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT / 47</b>
ISSUE 4	How Should Individual Rights and Family Obligations Be Balanced? / 49
	<b>Rights and Responsibilities / 50</b>
	<b>Culture and Family Obligation / 51</b>
	Collectivist Cultures / 51
	Individualist Cultures / 52
	Cultural Conflict / 53
	<b>Gender and Family Obligation / 54</b>
	<b>Costs, Benefits, and Family Decisions / 55</b>
	<b>Family Obligation and Social Policy / 55</b>
	<b>A Balance of Individualism and Family Obligation / 57</b>
	<b>SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT / 60</b>
ISSUE 5	How Do Gender and Power Influence Family Life? / 63
	<b>Power in Families / 64</b>
	<b>Sex, Gender and Power / 66</b>
	The Cultural Context of Gender / 68
	The Devaluation of Women in American Culture / 70
	<b>Sources of Marital Power / 70</b>
	Social Stratification and Family Power / 70
	Conflict over the Control of Resources / 71
	<b>The Consequences of Power / 74</b>
	<b>Changing Family Power Relations / 75</b>
	<b>SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT / 77</b>

ISSUE 6 How Do Race, Ethnicity, and Racism Affect Family Life? / 79

**Racial and Ethnic Identity / 81**

Multiracial Identity / 82

Differences and Similarities / 83

Race, Racism, and Class / 84

**African-American Families / 85**

Slavery, Racism, and Blocked Opportunities / 85

African-American Family Diversity / 87

**Asian-American Families / 88**

Immigration and Racism / 88

Contemporary Asian-American Families / 90

**Hispanic Families / 91**

Early Immigrant Families / 91

Contemporary Hispanic Families / 91

**SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT / 93**

ISSUE 7 How Do Wealth and Poverty Determine Family Experiences? / 95

**Class Stratification / 97**

Upper-Class Families / 98

The “New Rich” / 99

Working-Class Families / 100

Downwardly Mobile Families / 101

**Poverty and Family Life / 102**

The Debate over Welfare / 103

Poverty and Housing / 107

Homeless Families / 108

**SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT / 110**

ISSUE 8 Is the Institution of Family Breaking Down—  
and Society with It? / 113

**The Family Decline Perspective / 115**

The Declining Influence of Family / 115

Social Change and Family Structure / 116

**The Family Transformation Perspective / 120**

Rebutting the Notion of Family Decline / 122

**Examining Cross-Cultural Evidence of Family Decline / 125**

**SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT / 126**

**P A R T II Sociological Dimensions of Family Life**

**CHAPTER 1 The Link Between Family Life and Social Science / 129**

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY Family Matters: A Sociological Quiz / 131**

**Everyday Research / 134**

**Theory and Research / 136**

Theoretical Perspectives on Family / 136

Variables and Hypotheses / 141

**The Modes of Research / 142**

Experiments / 142

Field Research / 143

Surveys / 144

Unobtrusive Research / 145

**The Trustworthiness of Family Research / 147**

Units of Analysis / 147

Samples / 148

Indicators / 150

Values and Interests / 151

**Family Privacy and Research Ethics / 151**

**Conclusion / 153**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 153**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY Households versus Families / 155**

**YOUR TURN / 158**

**CHAPTER 2 Intimate Relationships: Love, Sex, and Attraction / 159**

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY Do You Think I'm Sexy? / 162**

**The Cultural Context of Intimacy / 165**

Romantic Love / 165

Sexuality / 169

**Dating and Courtship / 176**

The Purposes of Dating / 177

A Brief History of Dating in America / 177

Contemporary Dating / 180

**The Influence of Social Structure in Mate Selection / 182**

Religion / 183

Race and Ethnicity / 183

Social Class / 186

**Social Theories of Intimate Relationships / 187**

A Sociobiological Model of Mate Selection / 187

A Stage Model of Relationship Formation / 189

The Social Exchange Model / 191

**Conclusion / 194**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 194**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY Trends in Marriage / 196**

**YOUR TURN / 199**

**CHAPTER 3 Gender, Marriage, and Work / 201**

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY Colliding Spheres / 204**

**The Transition to Married Life / 208**

**Two Worlds: Work and Family / 208**

The Ideology of Separate Spheres / 209

Gender Ideology in the Workplace / 213

**Dual-Earner Families / 216**

The Disappearing Boundary Between “Home” and “Work” / 218

The Guilt Gap / 220

Work Expectations in Same-Sex Couples / 223

Men’s Changing Commitments to Work and Family / 223

Equality in Dual-Career Marriages / 225

Nontraditional Lifestyles of Dual-Earner Couples / 227

**The Domestic Division of Labor / 229**

Women’s Work, Men’s Help / 230

Perceptions of Inequity / 233

Manufactured Equity / 236

**Conclusion / 237**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 238**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY** Patterns of Labor Force Participation  
for Women and Men / 240

**YOUR TURN / 244**

**CHAPTER 4** Parenthood and Parenting / 245

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY** Familiarizing Father / 248

**Pronatalism / 251**

Adoption and the Primacy of Genetic Parenthood / 252

Infertility / 254

The Stigma of Voluntary Childlessness / 259

Pronatalism and Public Policy / 260

**The Process of Becoming Parents / 262**

The Social Construction of Childbirth / 262

The Transition to Parenthood / 264

The Stress of Having Children / 265

**Gender and Parenthood / 266**

Images of Motherhood / 268

Images of Fatherhood / 274

**Conclusion / 276**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 277**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY** Trends in Motherhood / 278

**YOUR TURN / 282**

**CHAPTER 5** Childhood and Child Rearing / 283

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY** Free to Be You and Me? / 286

**The Historical Construction of Childhood / 290**

Children as Miniature Adults / 290

Children as Little Monsters / 292

Children as Natural Innocents / 294

Children as Property / 296

**Adolescence / 297**

The Social Construction of Puberty / 297

The Culture and History of Adolescence / 298

Adolescent Sexuality / 301

**The Social Complexities of Child Rearing / 304**

Culture and Child Rearing / 305

Social Class and Child Rearing / 308

Race, Ethnicity, and Child Rearing / 309

Gender and Child Rearing / 313

**The Issue of Child Care / 318**

**Conclusion / 320**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 321**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY** Effects of Race and Ethnicity  
on Child Rearing Practices / 322

**YOUR TURN / 326**

**CHAPTER 6 Intimate Violence / 327**

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY** Signs of Violence / 330

**The Roots of Intimate Violence in the United States / 334**

**Violence in Dating Relationships / 336**

Sexual Coercion / 337

“Date Rape” / 337

Remedies for Sexual Violence in Dating Relationships / 340

**Violence Between Spouses / 341**

Spousal Violence Across Cultures / 342

Explanations of Spousal Violence / 344

The Escape from Abusive Relationships / 349

Power and Violence in Gay and Lesbian Households / 355

**Child Abuse / 356**

Child Abuse Across Cultures / 356

The Emergence of Child Abuse as a Social Problem / 358

Explanations of Child Abuse / 360

Corporal Punishment / 363

**Conclusion / 365**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 366**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY** Child Abuse and Maltreatment / 367

**YOUR TURN / 370**

CHAPTER 7 Divorce and Remarriage / 371

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY Children of Divorce / 374**

**Divorce in Cultural Context / 378**

**Divorce American Style / 379**

Racial, Ethnic and Religious Variation / 380

Historical Trends in Divorce / 382

Changes in Divorce Laws / 383

**Uncoupling / 388**

The Process of Breaking Up / 388

The Pain of Going Public / 392

**Divorce and Children / 393**

Children's Adjustment to Divorce / 394

Custody Decisions / 396

The Father Role after Divorce / 400

**Remarriage and Stepfamilies / 406**

The Complexities of "Blended" Families / 407

Step-Siblings / 407

Relationships Between Stepparents and Stepchildren / 408

**Conclusion / 410**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 410**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY Trends in Divorce and Remarriage / 412**

**YOUR TURN / 415**

CHAPTER 8 Family Transitions in Adulthood / 417

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY Generations of Family across Time / 420**

**The Influence of Birth Cohorts / 424**

**The Transitions of Adulthood / 426**

Delayed Adulthood / 426

The Empty Nest / 429

Menopause / 431

Grandparenthood / 433

**Old Age / 436**

Culture and the Elderly / 436

The "Graying" of America / 440

The Effects of "Graying" on Families / 442

Generational Obligations / 442



**Death and Families / 448**

Widowhood / 449

The Death of a Parent / 450

The Death of a Child / 450

**Conclusion / 451**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 452**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY Family Transitions and Living Arrangements / 454**

**YOUR TURN / 458**

**CHAPTER 9 Changing American Families / 459**

**WINDOWS ON FAMILY What Will This Family Be Like? / 462**

**Social Change / 465**

Sources of Social Change / 465

Social Movements / 469

**Future Family Trends / 473**

Risks of Sexual Freedom / 473

Increasing Life Expectancy / 474

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage / 475

Complexities of Gender Equity / 477

The Science of Childbearing / 478

The Disappearance of Childhood / 480

Ethnic Diversity / 481

The Influence of Globalization / 482

Expanded Definitions of Family / 482

**Family Policy / 483**

**Final Word / 486**

**Conclusion / 487**

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS / 488**

**DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY Families in the Twenty-First Century / 489**

**YOUR TURN / 493**

*Bibliography / 495*

*Glossary/Index / 527*



## 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 someone 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, students all 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, marginal *hot links*, alert you to other chapters and issues that discuss related topics.

## 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 which 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David M. Newman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

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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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*[list of reviewers’ names here—to come from PFP]*

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*Grateful acknowledgments is also made to the following for permission to reprint photos:*

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SOCIOLOGY OF FAMILIES

