DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN FAMILIES

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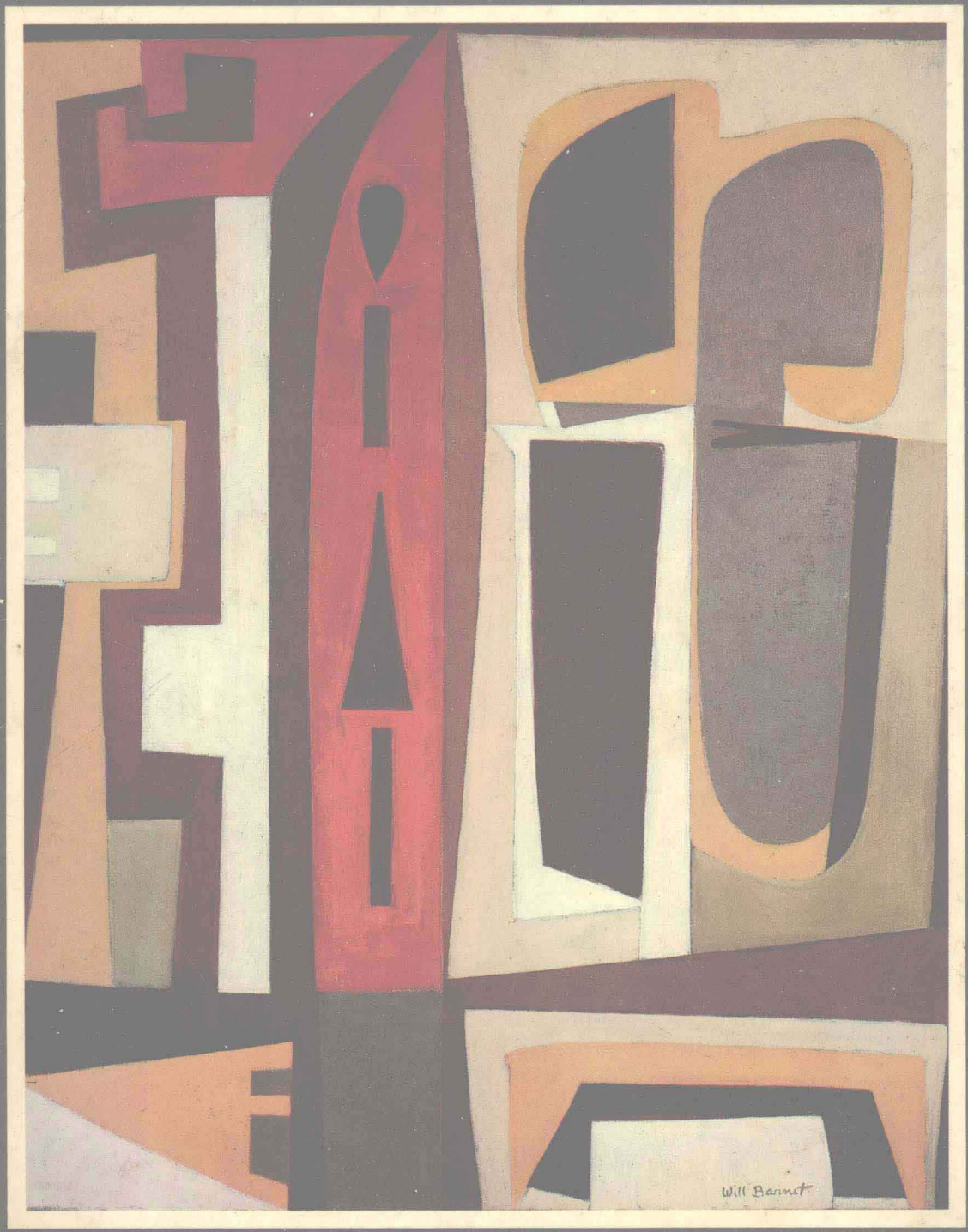

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This book reflects the critical tradition of those family sociologists, economists, and historians whose scholarship is structuralist, feminist, and humanist. We dedicate this book to these scholars who have pushed us and others toward a fuller understanding of intimate human relationships in their social context.

PREFACE

The subject of this book—families in American society—is inherently interesting because each of us is part of a family and more than nine out of ten of us will form families of our own. Families interest us because familial relationships are built on the compelling and mysterious feelings of intimacy, sexuality, and love. Families fascinate us because they also may involve a dark side of domination, trauma, and conflict. Families absorb our attention, too, because they are at once private and public. They are private places of refuge yet they are often at the center of political and public controversy. And, at a very personal level, families are crucial shapers of who we are and what our opportunities have been and will be.

The purpose of *Diversity in American Families* is to understand families in our society. This requires that we demythologize the family. We must substitute, for example, the reality of how families are structured for the ideal images of the family that are commonly portrayed historically. The demythologizing of the American family also requires that we examine the diversity of contemporary families. Contrary to what we are often led to believe, the American family is not monolithic—there is no single type of "American family." Rather than a unified whole, "the family" is experienced differently by people in different social classes, different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and even by the sexes. And variations in families occur within a social class or ethnic group. In fact, with such common occurrences as cohabitation, marriage, birth of children, divorce, remarriage, and widowhood, most Americans will experience more than one family type in the course of a lifetime. An important implication of our understanding of diverse family forms is that no one family structure is best for all people in all situations.

Understanding families compels us to examine how they are related to the larger social world. A fundamental assumption of this book is that families are *not* the "building blocks of society" but are, rather, the products of the political economy of that society. The material conditions of people's lives, in other words, are critical in determining their attitudes, behaviors, and family patterns. The institution of the economy, for example, affects private lives in profound ways. The structure of the economy in society affects which family members work outside the home, lifestyles of family members, how material needs are met, the opportunities for children, and even how the labor and decision-making within the family will be divided. Clearly, too, the economic rewards of occupations are key determinants in family diversity.

Most crucial economic conditions in American society make family life prob-

lematic. This does not mean that families are incapable of being warm and loving places for people, but that structural conditions often preclude this ideal for many. Further, this view does not imply a rigid structural determinism. Families do not simply respond passively to their changing situations. Historically, families have played key roles in shaping public life as well as in providing a major survival mechanism for many groups.

The sociological perspective is the foundation for the analysis of families in this book. Our focus is on how people organize their intimate relationships as a consequence of the social forces that so keenly affect their interests, preferences, perceptions, choices, and other behaviors. The sociological approach to the family finds family forms and the behaviors of family members to be largely the result of structural influences rather than the consequences of their genes, biology, or psychology. Rather than look for explanations within people, sociologists focus on social structures outside individuals.

Our structural approach incorporates many of the assumptions and perspectives of conflict theory. In this view the family is shaped by structural demands. At the macrolevel, the family is a vital part of the American economy because it produces both workers and consumers. The family is one of the primary mechanisms for perpetuating social inequality. Wealth is locked up in elite families and then passed down through inheritance. This economic domination limits the resources and opportunities of those who are lower in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Thus, families pass on their advantages and disadvantages to their offspring.

The family is not necessarily the haven assumed in American cultural mythology. At the microlevel, conflict is generated by female resistance to male domination, and by the demands of occupational and economic hardships that can work against intimacy and companionship between spouses. Thus, the modern family is not always a tranquil institution, but one fraught with potential and sometimes actual conflict.

The isolated nuclear family has positive consequences for our economic system, but it can be highly negative for individuals. The economic system benefits when employers are able to move individuals (and individual families) from place to place without great disruption. The economy is served when employers do not have to worry about satisfying the emotional needs of workers. And the system benefits when the family is isolated and therefore cannot affect society.

This isolation can have negative consequences for individuals because families have sole responsibility for maintaining a private refuge from an impersonal society and for providing personal fulfillment. The demands are often just too great. Families alone cannot provide for all the emotional needs of their members, although their members try to fulfill these needs through consumerism, physical relations, and child-centered activities.

An important aspect of our approach is the critical examination of society. We ask such questions as, How do families really work? Who benefits under the existing arrangements and who does not? This critical stance is based on the assumption that the social world is human-made and therefore not sacred. Thus, a keen sociological analysis demystifies and demythologizes social life by ferreting out the existing myths, stereotypes, and dogmas. This means, for example, that families must be examined not only from middle class, white, male viewpoints, which have dominated the scholarly study of the family, but must be viewed from other vantage points as well. Several bodies of new scholarship are infused throughout this book to inform us of the variations in family organization and experience by social class, gender, and race.

To summarize, this book examines families from the sociological perspective. This examination requires a critical analysis of society and the structural forces that impinge on families, affecting the behaviors of family members and ultimately affecting the forms that family units take. Most important, the structured inequalities in society based on wealth, race/ethnicity, and gender are viewed as key determinants in the diversity of family forms and differential experiences within families. Finally, the sociological analysis of families examines them in historical and contemporary contexts to challenge the myths and erroneous assumptions about family living that persist.

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CONTENTS

chapter 1

Images, Ideals, and Myths

American families are in flux. Far-reaching changes in society are altering family life and bringing forth contrasting interpretations of these changes. There is a growing concern that all is not well in American families. Widespread divorce, the growth of single-parent families, cohabitation, and the rise of out-of-wedlock births suggest that the family is disintegrating. On the other hand, these patterns can be interpreted to show that although some families may be troubled, the family is very much alive as it changes in response to the surrounding world.

This book presents a sociological analysis of family life in American society. In order to do this we must expose the mythical ideals that influence our perceptions and replace these myths with an understanding of how families are embedded in a larger social context. As a beginning, we need to be aware that the family is an ideal as well as a form of social organization. This places us in a better position to sort out what is myth and what is reality.

Family life is difficult to think about objectively. As much as we seek objectivity, our perceptions are guided by our own family experiences, our ideals, and, paradoxically, the very familiarity of family life. Because the family is familiar, we tend to take it for granted, to view it as "natural" without questioning the whys or even the hows of family dynamics. As a result, family behavior can be camouflaged in such a way that individuals may misunderstand family processes in general and even have some misconceptions about their own families. Family life can also be "hidden" by what R. D. Laing terms "mystification," which is the deliberate misdefinition of family matters or "complicated strategems to keep everyone in the dark" (Laing, 1971:77). Family life can become mystified as one individual defines reality in order to suit his or her own purposes, and in so doing negates the needs of other family members.

Families, like governments, do not find candor a necessary ingredient for their day-to-day operations. Often, it is quite the opposite. One of the discoveries of recent family research is that families have myths, secrets, and information processing rules which determine the kinds of communication that goes on—what can be said, and more important, what *cannot* be said. Families filter information not only about the wider culture but also about their own functioning (Skolnick, 1983:55).

Objectivity is thus obscured by two different qualities—familiarity and mystification. Other obstacles that handicap the goal of objectivity are sacredness and secrecy (Skolnick, 1983:55). The family is not merely a social institution; it is associated with what is good and proper. Moreover, it is the most private of all society's institutions. The saying that "a family's business is nobody's business but their own" is not merely a statement about the right to family privacy; it is also a statement with strong moral overtones that reflect the sacredness granted to the family. The norm of family privacy gives the family an elusive quality that exists alongside its familiarity. In contemporary Western society, the family is, to use Erving Goffman's (1959) term, a "backstage" area, where people are free to act in ways they would not in public. This accounts for the deceptive quality of family life. Privacy results in "pluralistic ignorance"—we have a backstage view of our own families, but can judge others only in terms of their public presentations. Often we have "inside" interpretations of other families' "outsides." However, the gap between public norms and private behavior can be wide; marital relationships tend to be even more private and invisible than those between parents and children (Skolnick, 1979:300).

The ideals that we hold about "the family" color not only how we experience family life but also how we speak of our experience. This is not unique to our society. Anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell has found that in all societies a gap may exist between family processes and family ideals, between what people say about their family behavior and the real behavior that takes place in families. This distinction between ideals and behavior, between "talk and action," is one of the central problems in the social sciences (Mills, 1963:467). A fundamental problem in the study of the family is making a distinction between cultural ideals about the family and the social realities that shape family living.

Many images surrounding the American family obscure our understanding of family life. Images provide an idealized picture of the family by distorting some of the realities. The purpose of this chapter is to narrow the gap between family imagery and family reality. This will be accomplished by examining the images, ideals, and myths that shape our perceptions of families and our expectations of what our lives should be inside our own families. This analysis sets the stage for the chapters that follow.

IMAGES AND IDEALS

"Family" in American society is a symbol, a visual image that speaks to us through the senses, including smells, tastes, textures, motions, and sounds from our own remembered experiences (Tufte and Meyerhoff, 1979:11), as well as our dreams and longings about what family should be. "The family" evokes a visual impression, a mental picture of adults and children living together comfortably as they go about their lives in

mutually satisfying, mutually enhancing, and harmonious ways. "Family" evokes warmth, caring, and physical and psychological nurturance in a setting apart from the troubled world. Tufte and Meyerhoff have described the image of the contemporary family:

> It is quintessentially the private (and some feel the only contemporary private) opportunity for vulnerability, trust, intimacy, and commitment, for lasting pleasant and peaceful relations, for fullness of being in the human realm. The family thus is located as the physical site for a vast (and repressed) range of human expression, the valid arena (and again perhaps the only arena) where quality of life is a concern. It is in the family that we find the opportunity for psychologically bearable, nonexploitive personal life (Tufte and Meyerhoff, 1979:17–18).

At least three distinct images of the family have emerged: the family as haven; the family as fulfillment; and the family as encumbrance.

Family as Haven

This image of a refuge from an impersonal world characterizes the family as a place of intimacy, love, and trust where individuals may escape the competition of dehumanizing forces in modern society. Christopher Lasch (1977:8) has named this image a "haven in a heartless world," and described it as a glorification of private life made necessary by the deprivations experienced in the public world. This "family as haven" image has two distinct themes: love and protection. The family as a special place of protection for individuals emerged as the nation industrialized. The family as a repository of warmth and tenderness (embodied by the mother) stands in opposition to the competitive and aggressive world of commerce (embodied by the father). The family's task was to protect against the outside world. As the nineteenth century passed, the ideal family became "a womblike 'inside' to be defended against a corrupting 'outside' " (Keniston, 1977:11).

Family as Fulfillment

The protective image of the family has waned in recent years as the ideals of family fulfillment have taken shape. Today, the family is more compensatory than protective. It supplies what is vitally needed but missing in other social arrangements. If work does not provide excitement and stimulation, individuals can turn to their family lives. The image of family life today is one of intimacy; that is, spouses, lovers, and even children make us feel alive and invigorated. In short, the family brightens up a social landscape that might otherwise seem grey (Demos, 1979:57). The image is still that of a haven, but it is not a haven of primary fulfillment and meaningful experience.

Self-fulfillment and enjoyment, the essential qualities of modern family life, may be contrasted with an older morality of duty, responsibility, work, and self-denial. Duty has been replaced with the obligation to enjoy family life. The "fun" morality expressed currently by the advertising industry glorifies the family united in pursuit of common activities that are enjoyed by all.

Duty has been replaced with the obligation to enjoy family life. (*Source:* © Jane Scherr/Jeroboam Inc.)

Family as Encumbrance

Loading the family with compensatory needs has created still another image—this one negative. The antiimage of the family is new. For the first time in American history, we blame the family for inhibiting our full human development. According to this view, domestic relationships look dangerously like an encumbrance, if not a form of bondage inhibiting the quest for a full experience of self. Monogamous marriage can become boring and stultifying. After all, variety is the "spice of life." Responsibility for children can compound the problem. The needs and requirements of the young are so constant, so pressing, that they leave little space for adults who must attend them. "Spice" and "space"—these are, in fact, the qualities for which we yearn. In this antiimage, the family severely limits our access to either one (Demos, 1979:58).

These three images of family life are different faces of reality. In each image the family is the primary institution through which the goals of personal growth and self-fulfillment are achieved. The difference lies in the effects of family on the individual. In the first and second images the effects are beneficial; in the third they are adverse. All three images separate the family from society, creating in Demos's words "a sense