

Marriages & Families

NEW PROBLEMS, NEW OPPORTUNITIES



Ernest Havemann-Marlene Lehtinen

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Preface

The title of this book summarizes the four chief aspects of its purpose, viewpoint, and content. First, of course, the title indicates that the book is designed for the college course in marriage and the family. To this bare statement we should immediately add that it is addressed in particular to students who are especially interested in knowledge that can be applied to their own marriages—or indeed to any of their human relationships—and to instructors who take a functional as well as scientific view of the course.

Second, the words *Marriages and Families* are in the plural to indicate our conviction that intimate human relationships in our pluralistic society must be discussed not as a matter that is the same for everyone but with a constant regard for individual differences among the millions of people who take part in these relationships. Third, the words *New Problems* are a recognition of the simple fact, so obvious from the divorce statistics, that marriages and families face many unprecedented difficulties in these times of rapid change. Fourth, the added words *New Opportunities* express our belief that today's male-female relationships offer more people more chances for self-fulfillment and mutual

growth than existed in the more stable but also more rigid past.

Hence the full title: *Marriages and Families: New Problems, New Opportunities*.

On the matter of pluralism, there seems to have been a sort of culture lag in both popular and scientific circles. At one time there may in fact have been a generally accepted pattern and set of norms for all marriages and all families, though we do not really know this and should probably be skeptical. If a single pattern ever did exist—despite all the individual differences that have now been so well documented by social scientists in all areas from inborn tendencies and capacities to socialization into varying cultures and subcultures—this pattern has now been shattered. At some point in the recent past, marriage changed “from institution to companionship,” the famous observation of Burgess and Locke (see p. 13). When it did, the mold was broken. An institution imposes its own rules and encourages conformity. A companionship can be as varied as its partners care to make it.

ters. Where cross-references seem to be helpful, they have been provided. An Instructor's Manual with Tests, expertly prepared by Mark Kassop of Bergen Community College, available to those who assign the book to their classes, offers many suggestions for using it to full advantage.

? As will be quickly apparent, this is not a "preachy" book. Our concern for the pluralism of American society makes us unwilling to try to set rules for other people's behavior. Moreover we have kept pasted above our desks the warning of Arlene Skolnick that there is no other subject or college course that presents such a great temptation to over-generalize on the basis of one's own experiences (see p. 18). We were determined to resist the temptation—and have been able to help each other because the two of us are of different generations and from different family and marital backgrounds. Thus we have simply tried to present what is known—and to let students make their own choices.

More than 1/4 of the references are dated in the 1980s and 80% go back no further than the 1970s. This reflects the fact that conditions affecting marriages and families have been changing so rapidly that most of the current problems and opportunities could not be studied until recently because they did not exist.

On the other hand, many of today's difficulties and possible solutions were intuitively

foreseen by scholars long before most of today's students were even born. Some of the early insights—such as those of Burgess and Locke, Clifford Kirkpatrick, Mudd and Hey, and in the sex field Kinsey—are as pertinent today as they ever were. We have tried to do justice to the ideas of these pioneers and to persuade students that there is always more continuity between past and present than new generations like to think.

Similarly we have avoided embracing new ideas just for the sake of their novelty, especially if they have not yet met the test of solid verification and replication. We have seen too many fads come and go—new revelations hailed as the great modern hope of humanity, only to be discarded a few years later. We are skeptical anyway of formulas for success. We have little faith in the ten easy rules for marriage (or sex, or quarreling, or being a parent). We do have an abiding faith in humanity—and in the knowledge social scientists have acquired about the ways in which human beings can understand and love one another.

We are indebted to the following reviewers of the manuscript, who have given us numerous valuable criticisms and suggestions: Ross A. Klein, Iowa State University, and Robert J. Stout, St. Petersburg College.

Ernest Havemann
Marlene Lehtinen

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CHAPTER 1

Marriage in Today's World: How It Has Changed



Most people today, young and old, have mixed feelings about marriage. On the one hand, people are cynical and pessimistic. A public opinion poll in the 1970s found that 70 percent of Americans believed marriage was a weaker force in our society than in the past. A sizable number—35 percent—agreed with the statement, “You see so few good or happy marriages that you have to question it as a way of life” (Roper, 1974). Divorce has become so commonplace that “the silver screen and the tube constantly bombard us with intimate scenes from a marriage headed for the rocks” (Levitan and Belous, 1981). There are more unmarried adults and childless couples today than ever before—and one sociologist has told a congressional committee that if present trends continue “not one American family will be left” by the mid-1990s (Etzioni, 1978).

Yet Americans continue to flock to this “weak,” “questionable,” and perhaps disappearing institution. Close to 5 million women and men a year buy the license and take the vows (National Center for Health Statistics, 1984). Indeed more than 90 percent of the population winds up married (Bureau of the Census, 1984a), and an even higher proportion of young people—97 percent of 18-year-olds who took part in one survey—expect to join the club (Institute for

Social Research, 1980). Moreover, people who are currently married seem to have a generally high esteem for the institution. One opinion poll found that nine out of ten were either very satisfied or mostly satisfied with their marriage, and the pollsters concluded that their findings “completely refuted . . . any belief that Americans do not place top priority on the family” (Gallup, 1980).

College students, by and large, share the mingled optimism and pessimism. Many young people take a dim view of their parents’ marriage, as can be seen in the box on *Opinions and Experiences*,* but this does not seem to make them any less confident that they themselves can find marriage a highly satisfactory way of life. Indeed one study found that 96 percent of students feel they are personally capable of building a good marriage (Whitehurst, 1977b).

**Opinions and Experiences* boxes are found throughout the book. In some cases, as in this first one, they are the spoken or written comments of social scientists on matters of special interest. In other cases they are reports of interviews the authors have conducted with people of all walks of life who have talked about their own experiences with matters discussed in this book.

Opinions and Experiences

SOME STUDENT VIEWS OF MARRIAGE

Luella K. Alexander, who teaches the marriage and family course at the University of South Florida, discusses some of the attitudes her students bring to class.

By rough count over the last few years, perhaps as many as 80 percent of my students have been disillusioned with their parents' marriages. They don't like what they have seen. In many cases the parents have been divorced. In others the students feel that the marriage, though it still exists, has brought very little happiness to either the mother or the father. It certainly hasn't been the kind of marriage that they themselves would want.

That figure of close to 80 percent can't be taken at full face value because part of it has to be attributed to the generation gap. Undoubtedly quite a few of these parents are perfectly happy by their own lights, but they do not seem happy to their children because they no longer feel in their forty's like doing all the exciting and glamorous things that twenty-year-

olds enjoy. Like lots of partying and riding a motorcycle, just to mention a few aspects of the generation gap. But even allowing for misunderstandings, the fact remains that many of my students seem to have come from homes that would hardly inspire any great optimism about marriage.

Nonetheless, most of the students are optimists. The women, in particular, usually take the course to learn what they can about marriage because they definitely think of marriage as part of their own future. They may plan to have their own careers, but they also expect to get married. The men tend to be more skeptical, but probably this is because many of them still enjoy being footloose and fancy-free. I don't think they would take the course unless they too figured that marriage was somewhere around the corner. In general, the parents' failures—or what have been interpreted as failures—have definitely not scared off many of these students.

Courtesy of Mrs. Luella K. Alexander, University of South Florida

TODAY'S ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Mixed feelings about the merits of marriage and the future of the family are by no means brand new. One scholar has traced harsh criticism of the family to as far back as the ancient Greek philosopher Plato and the early Christians. The people of Medieval Europe also held marriage and the family in low esteem, as did such eminent social commentators as Thomas Paine in the early days

of our own nation (Pickett, 1975). Yet there have been enough optimists throughout history to keep marriage alive in every known society of every known period. As one social scientist has written:

Marriage is one of the oldest, most universal, and most distinctive of human institutions. There is no record of any society, however simple its economic and political system, that does not have marriage as one of the key elements of its social structure.

(Fuchs, 1983)



Eric Kroll, Taurus

A loving and optimistic start for one of the 2.5 million American couples who get married each year.

The conflict between pessimism and optimism is perhaps more widespread and insistent today than ever before. Many people seem convinced that *The Death of the Family* (the title of an influential book of the 1970s) is taking place under our very eyes. Yet people continue to marry, with every expectation that their own marriage will be happy, successful, and immune to whatever malady is plaguing marriage in general.

Why is marriage the subject of so much controversy—and regarded with such a strange mixture of cynicism and hope? Where are marriage and the family headed, and what lies ahead for the individuals who

are or will be engaged in them? How can we ourselves best avoid the disaster predicted by the pessimists and fulfill our own optimistic hopes? Answering such questions—by presenting the most pertinent and useful knowledge that sociologists and other experts on family matters have acquired—is the purpose of this book.

The Modern-day Family

It must first be noted that marriage and the family have been undergoing vast and unprecedented changes, all taking place at breakneck speed. Perhaps the most dramatic evidence is this startling statistic: As recently as the 1950s, the typical American family was composed of a father whose earnings provided the financial support, a stay-at-home mother, and at least one and often two or three or more children living in the home. That kind of family, which then made up 70 percent of all households, has now dwindled to a mere 15 percent (Yankelovich, 1981).

About 23 percent of today's households are not really families at all but are made up of one person living alone (Bureau of the Census, 1984a). Many young adults, still unmarried or having been divorced, have established their own home. Among older people, many widows and a smaller number of widowers have done likewise. Besides these one-person households there are also many single-parent families—headed by a divorced woman or sometimes a divorced man with children—and nearly 2 million households in which the two partners are living together without being married (Spanier, 1983). Many married couples have never had children, and in others the children have grown up. Even in families with children under 18 years of age, about half of all the mothers have jobs outside the home and

contribute to the family income (Bureau of the Census, 1984a).

Thus the once-typical family of bread-winning husband, stay-at-home wife, and young children has been turned into a small minority by developments of the past three decades. We now live in "a more variegated society with many types of households, no one of which predominates" (Yankelovich, 1981).

Modern-day Society

Not only the family but all other social institutions have had to cope with the startling developments that have made the United States of the 1980s a far different place from the United States of the past—even the recent past. An *institution* is a part of the social system that helps meet the basic needs of society. The family is the institution that enables a society to survive by reproducing itself and training the new generation. The political institution, or government, maintains internal order and stability and protects the society against outside enemies. The economic institution produces and distributes the food, clothing, and other goods that society requires. The religious institution provides a set of shared beliefs and rituals. The educational institution offers the specialized training that individuals need to function as effective members of society.

Society's institutions have been affected in many ways by the sweeping developments of recent years. The economic institution has been revolutionized by twentieth-century technology (for example, computers and other electronic discoveries, medical techniques, communications satellites, the jet airplane, and space ships). The political institution has undertaken such new responsibilities as welfare, Social Security, regula-

tion of industry, enforcement of civil rights, and protection against pollution. The educational institution has expanded immensely to afford more years of schooling to greater numbers of students, particularly women and members of minority groups.

All these developments, coming in such rapid succession, have created problems as well as benefits. As Talcott Parsons (1955) has pointed out, "Major structural changes in social systems always involve strain and disorganization"—and no institution has been spared the strains and upheavals of the twentieth century. Today's economists sometimes throw up their hands when they contemplate such problems as inflation, recession, unemployment, and the question of how the industrial system can survive shortages of oil and other resources. Political scientists are baffled by overpopulation, international tensions, the threat of military conflict, and the question of how government can perform all the tasks it has undertaken without going bankrupt. The religious institution no longer has as much influence over the lives of as many people as it once did. The educational institution is embroiled in controversy over its standards and teaching methods and the question of how to handle such urgent problems as discipline, dropouts, and reading disabilities.

HOW AND WHY MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY HAVE CHANGED

With all other institutions in turmoil, it would be strange indeed if marriage and the family had stayed firm in their 1900 pattern, untouched by the benefits and blissfully free



This old photograph is awkwardly posed in the fashion of the day, but it tells a lot about the valuable part played by children in the family as an economic unit.

from the problems that are altering the rest of the social structure. Change in the family was inevitable as society changed.

In the early days of America, when the whole structure of society was far simpler, the majority of colonial families lived on isolated farms where they had to be almost entirely self-sufficient. They built their own homes, raised their own food, and made their own clothing and furniture (Adams, 1974). They conducted their own religious services. Often, because schoolhouses were rare, they tutored their own children in reading, writing, and arithmetic. They de-

vised their own recreation and provided their own security, symbolized by a rifle hanging over the fireplace (Kirkpatrick, 1963).

Many of these duties, of course, have now been shifted from the home and family to outside agencies—the local police force, the movie house and football stadium, the schools and colleges, the churches and Sunday schools. In these respects the family is no longer so essential as it once was. In a phrase that William Ogburn made famous in sociology, it has suffered a “loss of function”—so severe that Ogburn himself despaired of its future (Ogburn, 1933).