

CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES

A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW



RICHARD J. GELLES

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUDY S. GELLES



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CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES

To my brother, Bob

■ ■ Acknowledgments

The germ of the idea that I should actually write a Sociology of the Family text came from Judy Greissman, who edited our Social Problems text and was then with Harcourt Brace. Judy has left college textbook publishing, but I would never even have thought of undertaking this text without her push. I took so long to write this book that many people at Sage Publications were involved. Al Goodyear believed in the idea of this text and signed me to my contract. C. Terry Hendrix guided the book for a year or so until Mitchell Allen returned from his foray into managing a folk dance company. Mitch provided the editorial guidance and spiritual motivation during most of the journey. He, too, went through a number of significant personal and family changes during the time I was writing the book. Mitch has an incredible touch. He knows when to be compassionate and when to be tough and demanding. He has a gifted insight into family studies and combines that with nearly the perfect temperament to be an editor. Mitch has also become a valued personal friend. The book would never have been completed without him. Sara Miller McCune and George McCune have published my books for more than 20 years. I can never repay Sara for her support over the years. I deeply regret that George is not alive to see this project come to fruition.

Quite a number of my students aided in this undertaking. Diane Hanscom, Margaret Rauch, and Lani Dingman served as assistants during parts of this project. Heidi Reckseik was my assistant for the majority of the work done on the book. Heidi was an invaluable aid, in addition to being one of the most gifted students with whom I have ever worked.



Ann Levine did not actually write any of this book, but she has been my coauthor on so many books that I owe her one of my most important debts. Ann, more than anyone, taught me how to actually write. Of course, since she did not coauthor this book she is not responsible for any of the lessons I did not learn nor for any of the errors in the book.

Roz Sackoff was the developmental editor for the book. Roz brought me down the home stretch and added a great deal to the final product.

Like any text author, I owe a major debt to the hundreds (probably thousands by now) of my students. They were the final arbitrators of which ideas, concepts, and materials work and of those that do not. Their individual contributions to my ideas and approaches are innumerable and helped to mold this book.

Finally, my own intimate environment has provided me help and, most of all, nurturance for this project. My wife Judy was my partner, providing nearly all the photographs for the text. My sons Jason and David grew up with this book. My love of all three is unending. I finished the book during a 6-month period when Jason was in college, David worked in Washington as a Senate page, and Judy taught three courses.

A number of reviewers read and criticized my manuscript in various drafts. I sincerely appreciate the contributions of the following people in the shaping of this book: Tricia Dyk, University of Kentucky; Keith Farrington, Whitman College; Roma Hanks, University of South Alabama; Rudy Ray Seward, University of North Texas; and Maxi Szinovacz, Old Dominion University.

■ Preface

The family, as I say in the first sentence of Chapter 1, is both obvious and elusive. The family is an intimate environment as well as a social institution. This book is about families and the family. I present some material that seems obvious and some that penetrates the elusive nature of families. I will also go back and forth between families as intimate environments and the family as a social institution.

The Preface is supposed to tell students why they should read the text. Of course, one reason is because it is the basis of the course in which you are enrolled. I am going to take a more unconventional path to explain why I think you should read this text.

My first contact with the Sociology of the Family was as a sophomore in college. I had recently declared a major in sociology, having changed from history. The Bates College sociology department was small, and having taken both “Introduction to Sociology” and “Social Problems,” the only course offered that I could take was “Marriage and the Family.” The course was not entirely memorable. The instructor had not completed his doctorate and was not entirely familiar with the subject matter. The text was a bit dry—no photographs, tables, or “boxes.” I remember two things about the course. First, I received a B+ and thought I deserved an A. Second, although I do not remember much of the actual course content, I vividly remember my surprise that the course discussed issues and problems that I had thought were unique to me and my family. The course provided me a view or perspective that I had never had into my own life and my own family.

I had no further contact with the “Sociology of the Family” or family studies for a number of years. I never enrolled in a family sociology course of any



type in either my M.A. program or even during the first two years of my doctoral program. Quite by chance, in my fourth year in graduate school, I began a working relationship with my then major professor, Murray Straus, that would span more than two decades. Murray was in the first stages of his research on family violence. I was a fourth-year student in search of a dissertation topic. I was intrigued by the topic of family violence, although I knew nothing about child abuse or wife abuse (and had never even considered the issue of elder abuse).

My studies of family violence provided me a new and different window into understanding families and the family as a social institution. Studying the darker side of family relations not only uncovered family secrets, it helped illuminate my understanding of how families actually worked.

I began my teaching career at the University of Rhode Island in 1973 and taught my first family sociology course. My goals were to take my students beyond their knowledge and understanding of their own families and to place their own experience in a larger social, cultural, and historical context. "Don't generalize from an *N* of 1," I repeatedly told my students. "Don't assume that you know everything there is to know about even your own family." And finally, "Remember that social structures affect people." Everything that goes on in families is not the result of individual acts or individual motivations. Social class, race, age, and gender affect families and family life. Other social institutions influence the family. The family as a social institution has a history. Finally, family life both varies and is consistent across cultures and time. To understand the family, one needs to recognize the consistencies and the differences.

Somewhere around 1979 I got the idea of writing a textbook on the Sociology of the Family. I had just completed the first edition of my text *Sociology: An Introduction* (with Michael Bassis and Ann Levine), and I thought the next logical step would be to write a family sociology text. My own text would allow me to not only fashion my own course the way I wanted it, it would provide me a chance to contribute to how my colleagues approached and taught a topic to which I had grown deeply committed.

The project began in fits and starts. I actually began to write in earnest in 1982. Eleven years later, almost to the day, I finished the book. The delay was not due entirely to lack of time or lack of interest. I actually completed three more editions of my introductory sociology text and a number of other book projects during this time.

There were many reasons why it took me so long to write this book, and many of the reasons reflect some fundamental truths and insights about families. When I started to write the book I was married and had two sons, 8 and 5 years old. I was an Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology. Over the years, I was promoted, served one year as Associate Dean of Arts

and Sciences, served six years as Dean of Arts and Sciences, and coached Little League baseball and youth soccer. I spent two years as a “househusband” when my wife returned to graduate school. My father died after a short but difficult illness. I aged from a young man to what I thought was a middle-aged man—my brother cruelly pointed out that since no one in our family had lived to be 90, I am older than middle-aged. In short, I went through many of the family developmental stages and crises that I talk about in this book. Each change, each stress, each new opportunity not only delayed the book but gave me more insight into the family as a changing intimate environment.

During the same 11 years, the family as a social institution changed. There were consistent claims that the family was declining, but real changes happened as well. The divorce rate peaked the year I began to think about writing this text. At the time, many of us thought the divorce rate would continue to climb—it did not. Child abuse and wife abuse went from being deviant acts committed behind closed doors to public issues and social problems so significant that they are discussed in major political addresses. Childbirth and marriage became increasingly disconnected, and the proportion of children who live in single-parent homes increased. The war on poverty was lost, and more and more families, and especially children, lived below the poverty line. Racial and gender issues took a more central position in the national conversation. Progress was made, backlash fired up, and there were times of retrenchment in efforts to achieve equity for women and ethnic minorities. AIDS became an important facet of dating and intimate relations. Homosexuality was also an issue that received more attention—some good and accepting, some vindictive and harmful.

It was clear to me as the years unfolded, and as my editors called in anguish about how little progress I was making with the text, that a major facet of this book had to be the notion of change and families—both as intimate environments and as a social institution.

A second thing happened during the 11-year effort. I began the book as a faithful and loyal sociologist. However, as I continued my research on family violence, I began to realize that sociology and sociological variables could not fully explain why intimates abused and hurt those they professed they loved. I began to look beyond my discipline and read more psychology—especially developmental psychology and clinical psychology. Freud, who had been the straw man target in many of my lectures, became more relevant to me as I looked deeper into the roots of physical and sexual abuse. I conducted cross-cultural research, and so the writings and findings of anthropologists became relevant. Finally, I returned to my original roots as a history major to try to uncover more about the historical roots of family violence.

As I applied each of these disciplines to my research, the disciplines became more relevant to this text. I would not, I decided, strictly limit this



text to research and theories of sociologists. The text is still primarily a “sociological view” of “contemporary families,” but that view is complemented, when appropriate, by the work and thoughts of psychologists, anthropologists, and historians. And while I focus on contemporary intimate environments and the contemporary family as a social institution, I also bring to bear historical and cross-cultural evidence and comparisons to illuminate what we know about families and the family.

■ Notes to the Instructor

The course you teach on families has a lasting effect on your students' lives. Almost all of your students come from families of their own and many will have fiancés, spouses, and their own children when they take your class. We know from research that a large number will have already experienced divorce, stepfamilies, family violence, family stresses, and other subjects discussed in depth in this book firsthand. Thus your class on families will be inherently interesting to your students. I have prepared this text with you and your students in mind, trying to capture this inherent fascination with families in the pages of the textbook to reinforce the excitement you generate in the classroom.

Traditionally, courses on families and the family have been divided into one of two kinds: institutional or functional. The institutional course is generally offered in sociology departments. This course, often titled "Sociology of the Family," stresses the family as a social institution and applies a sociological perspective to studying families. The functional course is usually offered in colleges or departments of family studies or human development. Although in many ways similar to the institutional course, it includes more material and advice about "how to have a good marriage." This textbook is designed for the institutional course. I place a great deal of emphasis on social science research findings related to the important dimensions of family life but spend little time on issues such as contraception techniques, how to communicate better with your spouse, or proper child-rearing techniques.

I have kept in mind that there are a variety of paths that students take into this course and various paths that they follow when they complete it. Many students enroll in a family course after having taken "Introduction to Sociol-



ogy” or “General Sociology” classes. However, a number of colleges and universities, including my own, offer “Family Sociology” or “The Family” without a prerequisite course in sociology. Thus I have not presumed that your students are well acquainted with theories, methods, and basic terminology of sociology or psychology and have included a detailed glossary to help them.

For many of your students, your class will be their only exposure to the social-scientific study of families. I have aimed at providing these students a thorough overview of the main topics and issues in family studies. A smaller number of students may enroll in additional family studies courses and these students will receive a firm foundation for their future study of families from reading this book.

Let me point out to you *special features* I have included in the book:

■ As I indicate in the Preface, I began writing this book a decade ago as a sociologist and completed writing the book from the more interdisciplinary perspective of a sociologist/psychologist. Although I retain my discipline’s roots, I do not want to pigeonhole all the material in this book into a strict sociological framework. When appropriate, I introduce psychology (e.g., Chapter 10: Child Socialization). I have also drawn on the disciplines of anthropology and history (Chapter 3: Families Across Time and Cultures), as well as introducing a biosocial perspective (Chapter 9: Parents and Parenthood).

■ I chose *three major themes* to run throughout the book. Each is highlighted in a boxed format:

1. *The Family Over Time*. There is a historical box in almost every chapter. I begin many of the chapters with historical perspectives on the topic of the chapter. My goal is to provide the students with a *historical* understanding of the important family issues that concern students today.
2. *The Global View*. I also want students to see the broad trends of similarities and differences in families as intimate environments and the family as a social institution *across cultures*. Many chapters have global boxes that examine specific issues cross-culturally.
3. *Diverse Families*. I also want students to know about and understand *multicultural differences* within American society. Thus many chapters contain multicultural boxes that examine in depth family issues within and between specific ethnic and racial groups in the United States.

■ Two additional boxes, *What the Research Shows* and *Thinking About Families*, afford students an in-depth look at current research on and theoretical issues addressed in family studies. Almost all of the chapters contain a research box, and several offer a theory box.

■ The book examines families across the *entire life span*. Although the primary consumers of this book may be students 18 to 24 years of age, colleges and universities have increased enrollments of what we used to call “nontraditional students.” Because of the wider age span of students, and because I believe students can only understand families if they know how issues affect families across the entire life course, the book includes more discussion of the later part of the life span than many other texts in this field.

■ I focus on the different levels at which families are experienced—*institutions, intimate environments*, and by *individuals*. I repeatedly emphasize in this text that there is an interface between the family as an institution in society, families as intimate environments in which people interact, and individuals and their relationships to their families. As a sociologist, I believe that structures affect people, and I have attempted to illustrate how the main social structures in our society—social institutions, social stratification, gender stratification, racial and ethnic stratification, and age stratification—affect families and individuals. Within the broad macrostructural context, I examine the structures, processes, and interactions between individuals within families. I feel it is important for students to study all three structural levels—and how they intersect—to gain a full understanding of this crucial social institution.

■ I have organized the text somewhat *developmentally*. The first two chapters set the stage for the student of families—terms, issues, theories, and methods. The following three chapters examine families across time, across cultures, and in terms of structural variations and similarities in the United States. Chapters 6 through 12 follow the important stages of the life course. The family issues of divorce, stress, and family violence are examined in a three-chapter sequence toward the end of the volume. The book concludes with a discussion of the future of families. I have not divided the book into specific sections or parts because I assume that most instructors, like me, have a specific sequence of topics or issues they like to follow and that sequence might differ from the one I use for this book.

■ I have worked closely with a colleague and experienced teacher, Patricia Hyjer Dyk of the University of Kentucky, in developing a comprehensive and useful Instructor’s Manual. The manual contains descriptive information about the textbook, well-designed test questions in a variety of formats, and ideas to assist you in preparing for class. It also contains numerous suggested writing assignments to give to your students, in line with the increased emphasis on writing-across-the-curriculum that is a feature in most contemporary colleges and universities. The Instructor’s Manual, which is available at no charge from the publisher for teachers who adopt this textbook for their class, should enhance your use of this book with your students and improve your students’ mastery of the material in the course.



■ Finally, I have endeavored to present what sociologists know about families. I have drawn on some of the *best social science research* to paint a portrait of what families are like in contemporary society, across cultures and groups, and over time. I have included both exemplary contemporary studies as well as classic research and theoretical analyses on the topic.

Although many of my colleagues might know me best for my research and writings on family violence, I have also been passionately concerned about teaching and improving the quality of teaching over my entire career. I edited the journal *Teaching Sociology* for 10 years. I was deeply involved with those in the American Sociological Association who worked to raise the importance of teaching in the profession and to improve the quality of sociologists' teaching. Finally, I have coauthored two other sociology texts through multiple editions.

I have tried to bring my passion and commitment to teaching to the textbook. My goal was to make the text accessible, interesting, and informative for students without violating the basic rules of evidence for social theory and research. I hope that you, the instructor, share my passion and commitment for teaching and will find this text a useful foundation for your own course on families.

Richard J. Gelles

Richard J. Gelles

. . . is Professor of Sociology and Psychology and Director of the Family Violence Research Program at the University of Rhode Island. His book *The Violent Home* was the first systematic empirical investigation of family violence and continues to be highly influential. He is author or coauthor of 15 books and more than 90 articles and chapters on family violence. His most recent books are *Intimate Violence* (Simon & Schuster, 1988), *Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations in 8,145 Families* (Transaction Books, 1990), *Intimate Violence in Families* (Sage, 1990), *Current Controversies on Family Violence* (Sage, 1993), and, with Ann Levine, the fifth edition of *Sociology: An Introduction* (McGraw-Hill, 1995).



Gelles and Isacoff Family, 1982



Gelles and Isacoff Family, 1993

Gelles received his A.B. degree from Bates College (1968), an M.A. in sociology from the University of Rochester (1971), and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of New Hampshire (1973). He edited the journal *Teaching Sociology* from 1973 to 1981 and received the American Sociological Association, Section on Undergraduate Education's, "Outstanding Contributions to Teaching Award" in 1979. Gelles has presented innumerable lectures to policy-making groups and media groups, including *The Today Show*, *CBS Morning News*, and *Good Morning, America*. In 1984, *Esquire* named him one of the men and women under the age of 40 who are "changing America."

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