

CONTEMPORARY

FAMILIES AND

RELATIONSHIPS

REINVENTING

RESPONSIBILITY



J O H N S C A N Z O N I

CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Reinventing Responsibility

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN SCANZONI is Professor and Chair of Sociology at the University of Florida. He has conducted a great deal of research, and has published widely in the area of families and primary (close) relationships. Some of his research interests include gender and paid employment, fertility control, comparisons between black and white husband-wife families, conflict, negotiation and decision-making, and, most recently, the formation of social family networks across several solo-parent black households. He has a strong interest in theories about families, as well as public policies for families. Professor Scanzoni is a member of the American Sociological Association, and the National Council on Family Relations.

Among other places, he has published articles in the *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Family Issues*, and *Policy Studies Review*. Some of his book titles include *The Black Family in Modern Society*, *Family Decision-Making*, *Shaping Tomorrow's Family—Theory and Policy for the 21st Century*, and, most recently, *The Sexual Bond: Rethinking Families and Close Relationships*. He was also co-author of the earlier and very popular McGraw-Hill book, *Men, Women, and Change*.

PREFACE

Margaret Mahoney, president of the Commonwealth Fund, recently observed that

The endurance and universality of the concept of family testify to its strength and vitality. Family patterns vary and compositions alter, but the need to belong to something larger than oneself is innate and compelling. This need is demonstrated over and over again by groups that refer to themselves as “family.” . . . Children play “family,” and *elders reinvent it when it does not exist.*¹

This book is all about what Mahoney calls *reinvention*—reinvention of the concept of family. Family is found in every society, it is universal. And that, says Mahoney, proves its endurance, strength, and vitality. She adds that people *need* family—human beings need to belong to something “larger than oneself.” But just as powerful as the need to belong to family is the demand to create its varied social expressions. Family is a social reality, and in every society, says Mahoney, people invent and later reinvent the kinds of family patterns that “work” and make sense for them. Societies never stand still; cultures are forever shifting. Family is part of society and of culture. Citizens who are reinventing society and culture are also reinventing family at the same time.

Reinvention of family is an ongoing, never-ending thing. Reinvention demands that people face complex sets of challenges that never seem to let up. During the ongoing reinvention, people invariably make mistakes. They get it wrong, they stumble. But then they start over again and try to get it right. Very often the parents and children doing the reinventing hurt themselves, and sometimes they hurt one another.

But in most cases they don't intend to. People hope to reinvent and be responsible at the same time.

And sometimes, they do get it right—the reinvention of family works! At least for a while. And when it works, people are pleased and wish they could finally cease reinventing. That's how most North Americans felt during the late 1940s and the 1950s. After centuries of struggling to get it right, they'd finally invented the Modern Family for modern times, and it seemed ideal.² Following the gigantic upheavals of World War II, America stood astride the world politically and economically. Internally, North America invented a new society of suburbs and freeways, and prosperity for everyone—that is, for almost everyone who was white and male and had a high-school diploma. People who were poor, or black, or Hispanic, or Native American, didn't have it so good. And many white women were afflicted by a strange malady: Betty Friedan called it “the problem that has no name.”³ After a while, some of the people who didn't have it so good got restless and started trying to reinvent society all over again. During the 1960s they were joined by some young white men who'd had it pretty good but felt the need to reinvent anyhow.⁴

Alongside trying to change many aspects of American society, they also began to reinvent family. The hope that the 1950s' family marked the climax of hundreds of years of reinvention was false, and they realized it. “The times they are a-changing,” sang Bob Dylan in the sixties. Among the things that have kept on changing ever since is family.

Family change worries many citizens, as in fact it always has.⁵ Turn on the television and we hear about family “breakdown, decay, collapse, disappearance, decline, disorganization,” and worse. We also learn that family, and especially its children, are in “crisis.” What to do? Many solutions are offered. Among the most prominent is to resurrect what some citizens believe was the Golden Age of the Family—the 1950s.⁶ But that's an impossible dream.

By contrast, asserts Mahoney, the twenty-first century calls for creative thinking that looks forward—not backward. The task ahead of us, she says, is to think up new ideas and fresh ways to reinvent family. During the past thirty years of reinvention, mistakes have been made—many adults and children have suffered and indeed are suffering now. But the Golden Age family had its own share of suffering. Reinvention can never totally eliminate hard times. Nevertheless, people keep on trying to make life better and that, after all, is what reinvention is all about. People must live in family, and so they try to make it the very best they can. And as they try to make it better, most people want to be responsible to themselves, to the adults and children who are with them in family, and to their community.

This book is about reinventing family—about how difficult it is to reinvent and be responsible at the same time. Reinventing responsible

families is part of a much broader theme that concerns growing numbers of today's sociologists. Many sociologists want to study how people go about changing all aspects of their society.⁷ Sociologists want to discover the social conditions that help and/or hinder people as they engage in continual struggles to reinvent society, including family. And sociologists want to investigate how people's struggles impact on what's known as the *social fabric*, or the *public household*.⁸ In plain English, how do people's reinventions harm themselves or others in their community and society? How might people's reinventions be beneficial?

One example of what some might call a reinvention that concerns just about everyone is the practice of adolescents having babies. Does this growing trend harm or help the social fabric? Or is it neutral? How responsible are these young women and men being to themselves? How responsible to their offspring? And how responsible to others who must help care for them and their offspring? These questions are tough because the solutions are so complex.

This book is full of tough questions like this for which there are no pat answers. My hope is that students will grapple with the questions and debate their complex solutions both in and out of class. And as they do so, my further hope is that they will come to view contemporary sociology as a stimulating and exciting intellectual pursuit. At the same time, I hope just as strongly that the intellectual debates will translate into practical, everyday behaviors. This book is designed to assist students in reinventing family for the twenty-first century—reinventing it, moreover, in a fashion that benefits not merely themselves, but the social fabric as well.

I am deeply indebted to the many colleagues and friends who at various times have engaged me in discussion or in vigorous debate over one or more of the ideas of this book, and thus contributed greatly to it. These include: Joanne Aldous, Joyce Arditti, Pauline Boss, Peter Carter, Deborah D. Godwin, Jay Gubrium, Mary Joyce Hasell, Nancy Kingsbury, David Klein, Ralph LaRossa, Gary Lee, Geoffrey Leigh, William Marsiglio, David Mitchell, Karen Polonko, Rose Rivers, Hyman Rodman, David Scanzoni, Constance Shehan, Jetse Sprey, Gordon Streib, Jay Teachman, Linda Thompson, and many others too numerous to mention. In addition, I would like to express my thanks for the many useful comments and suggestions provided by the following reviewers: Benigno E. Aguirre, Texas A & M University; Lee K. Frank, Community College of Allegheny County; Karen Hossfeld, San Francisco State University; Jan E. Mutchler, State University of New York at Buffalo; Ellen Rosengarten, Sinclair Community College; and Roger H. Rubin, University of Maryland.

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John Scanzoni

NOTES

1. Mahoney, Margaret E. 1986. Cited in *Work and Family Responsibilities: Achieving a Balance*. New York: Ford Foundation, 1989, p. 3; italics added.
2. Bell and Vogel, 1960.
3. Friedan, 1963.
4. Gitlin, 1987.
5. Mintz and Kellogg, 1988, pp. 177ff.
6. Ibid.
7. Alexander, 1988.
8. Bell, 1990; Etzioni, 1991; Avineri and De-Shalit, 1992.

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