



FAMILY
REALITIES

A Global View

Betty Yorburg

Family Realities

A Global View

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Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yorburg, Betty

Family realities : a global view / Betty Yorburg
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-13-578105-1

1. Family. 2 Family—Cross-cultural studies. 3. Multiculturalism. I. Title.

HQ728 .Y656 2001

306.85—dc21

2001034369

VP, Editorial director: Laura Pearson
AVP, Publisher: Nancy Roberts
Managing editor (editorial): Sharon Chambliss
Executive managing editor (production): Ann Marie McCarthy
Production liaison: Fran Russello
Project manager: P.M. Gordon Associates, Inc.
Compositor: DM Cradle Associates, Inc.
Prepress and manufacturing buyer: Mary Ann Gloriande
Art director: Jayne Conte
Cover designer: Bruce Kenselaar
Marketing manager: Chris Barker

This book was set in 10/12 Sabon by DM Cradle Associates
and was printed and bound by Hamilton Printing Co., Inc.
The cover was printed by Pheonix Color Corp.

Prentice
Hall

© 2002 by Pearson Education Inc.
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-13-578105-1

PEARSON EDUCATION LTD., *London*
PEARSON EDUCATION AUSTRALIA PTY, LIMITED, *Sydney*
PEARSON EDUCATION SINGAPORE, PTE. LTD
PEARSON EDUCATION NORTH ASIA LTD, *Hong Kong*
PEARSON EDUCATION CANADA, LTD., *Toronto*
PEARSON EDUCACIÓN DE MEXICO, S.A. DE C.V.
PEARSON EDUCATION—JAPAN, *Tokyo*
PEARSON EDUCATION MALAYSIA, PTE. LTD
PEARSON EDUCATION, *Upper Saddle River, New Jersey*

Family Realities

*To my granddaughters,
Jessica and Maggie Uschakow,
with special love*

Preface

I have written this book for a number of reasons. To begin with, after more than 100 years of social scientific research and observation of family life, we now know more about family realities than we have ever known. This information can be helpful in making decisions and diminishing unnecessary stress in our closest relationships. At the beginning of the 21st century, we can make much more informed choices than we could in the past; we can prevent mistakes and cope more effectively with problems in our family relationships than ever before. At this point in time, unrealistic expectations, ineffective defenses, and unnecessary provocations are preventable or even curable conditions.

The interdisciplinary social science research information on families that we now have can improve our ability to communicate, confide, reduce conflict, manage stress, and avoid crises in our family relationships. We can use these insights and this information to build, maintain, and strengthen relationships we value; or we can use this knowledge to terminate unsalvageable, unrewarding, and destructive relationships.

Even more important, perhaps, is the accumulated social scientific research information we now have about how family relationships have changed in major kinds of societies since the beginnings of human history. I have used what sociologists call the *comparative cross-cultural method* to classify societies on the basis of the scientific and technological discoveries and inventions that distinguish them and to describe typical family relationships in these societies. I have done this for three reasons.

First, by comparing families in different societies, or in the same society at different times, we can gain a much needed perspective on contemporary family life—a more positive perspective than many people now have. We can better appreciate certain advantages that most families, at least in advanced industrial societies, take for granted. In the past, hunger, disease, unrelieved pain, disability, infertility, untimely death, and other agonizing frustrations were commonplace. With developments in science and technology, we can now do far more to relieve human suffering; we can prevent, control, or postpone devastating and unnecessary losses and separations in family life. Given current concerns about where family life is headed, in the United States and elsewhere, it can be helpful to keep this larger picture in mind.

Second, we can also find some much needed guidelines about what to do and what to expect in family life by looking at the past. We live in a time when we have lost the comfort and security of knowing exactly what to do in the most important

areas of our lives—in our family, work, love, and friendship relationships. Cultural guidelines more often now are absent, ambiguous, competing, or irrelevant. These guidelines are constantly being challenged or outdated by a flood of new scientific inventions and discoveries in both the psychological and material realms of life. Eternal truths, especially in family life, evade us. Folk wisdom survives but is in disrepute; and experience is no longer viewed as the best teacher—quite the contrary. Knowing what worked and did not work in the past—and why—can provide helpful guidelines that are based on fact rather than fiction and collective illusions.

Finally, an understanding of historical changes and trends in family life can provide some valuable clues about what to expect in the future. If we understand how and why the roles, values, power, and conflicts of family members have changed historically, in all parts of the world, we can make more accurate predictions about the likely future of families everywhere. If we know where we are going and why, governments can plan for this future more rationally and effectively, given the standard of the greatest good for the greatest number of people—ideally. Planning on an international scale becomes especially appropriate now that nationalism and national borders are becoming obsolete and the idea of *one world* is more a reality than an ideal.

At a more personal level, my other reasons for writing this book have to do with my philosophy of teaching.

My primary goal in teaching has been to open up new horizons for students: to teach them how the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, can *liberate* the mind and promote critical thinking. This is the goal, after all, of the liberal arts. I have also tried to train my students to think *sociologically*, that is, to apply an insight, a concept, or a theory we are discussing in class (or have discussed in the past) to the news events that break daily in the media. If the course has to do with families, I bring in a news item about a family; if it has to do with ethnic minorities or women, I bring in articles on these topics. My aim is to help students relate current news events to the culture, the stage of scientific and technological development, and the government and economy of the country in which these events are happening. The next step is to apply these insights to their own lives and to the current situation in the United States.

Finally, I have tried to promote greater identification, empathy, and understanding in my students with people who are different, culturally or physically, who have lived in other times and places in the past, or who live in other countries or in different geographic or cultural spaces in the United States today. My goal here has been to promote more tolerance and acceptance of people whose traditions, beliefs, and behavior may be different, but whose differences are quite legitimate, as long as they are not being destructive to themselves or to other people.

My academic career reflects these goals. I started out majoring in cultural anthropology and shifted to sociology when it became clear that I would not be able to pursue this interest because I had married someone who was not an anthropologist. Given my values, and those of most college-educated women of my generation, I would not be able to go off alone to study exotic cultures in faraway places, intriguing as this might be, because of family responsibilities. This was the post-

World War II 1940s, and urban anthropology had not yet been invented. As an anthropologist, it was not possible at that time to study convenient communities in our own industrial society, since this was then the separate domain and the major distinction (now gone) between cultural anthropology and sociology.

As an undergraduate student in the two-year core curriculum program at the University of Chicago, I was exposed to literature, philosophy, and most of the physical and social sciences. I loved anthropology, was fascinated by history, did my best work in psychology, but found my calling, finally, in sociology. I have drawn from all of these disciplines in my portrait of family realities—here and around the world, today and long ago.

I want to thank the many people who have helped with this project—those I know and those I have never met in person but whose input was essential to the successful completion of my venture. But most of all, I am grateful to my students. They were the first to hear the accepted explanations of many of the facts about family life described here. Their questions and comments taught me to go back, reread, rethink, and make things clearer and more reasonable to them—and to myself.

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PART 1

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES
