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THE FAMILY AND THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

Selected Readings

Edited by Edwin M. Schur

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Edited by

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The Family and the Sexual Revolution

Preface

Since sexual and family relationships are so central to the human experience, it is understandable that they are of immediate and personal concern to most people. Recently, together with this individual interest, there has been a significant increase in open discussion and controversy about such matters. Patterns of sexual and family behavior, and the institutions and values underlying and surrounding them, increasingly are recognized as legitimate topics for public analysis and debate. Widespread concern about sexual “laxity,” best-selling books on the “roles of women,” and heated disputes about birth control policy, represent but a few of the many indications of heightened public attention to sex and family life.

Yet in standard works on sex and family problems written by social scientists and medical men, the reader is likely to encounter either of two less-than-helpful approaches. One is an oversimplified “guidance” orientation, in which the author implies he can specify *the* rules or techniques for achieving dating happiness, marital harmony, or sexual adjustment. The other is a scrupulously “objective” presentation of facts and research findings—highly informative, but often peculiarly unsatisfying to any but specialist readers. While each of these approaches has undoubted merits, both tend to neglect basic ethical dilemmas and issues of broad social policy.

This volume is intended to provide neither direct guidance on specific personal or interpersonal problems, nor a compendium of scientific information. Rather I have tried to bring together some provocative materials relating to three hotly disputed topics that lie at the center of key changes affecting the modern family—sex

standards, women's roles, and birth control. As a sociologist I believe strongly that scientific research and analysis are important ways of increasing our knowledge. Yet, as I also point out below, no amount of sex and family research is going to eradicate the need to make important value choices and policy decisions in these areas. The emphasis throughout this book is on these elements of value and policy; indeed, many of the readings are more in the nature of considered opinions, statements of values, or even polemics than of scientific reports. Additional facts and figures can easily be obtained elsewhere. Similarly, although I have tried to include diverse viewpoints, the volume is somewhat weighted toward unconventional views—on the assumption, again, that the conventional ones already predominate in existing works as well as constituting the outlooks which most Americans have more generally been conditioned to accept. It is hoped that these materials will prove illuminating and thought-provoking—for the general reader as well as for students in courses on the family, social problems, or contemporary American society. If this collection in some small measure exposes readers to a variety of challenging outlooks (the confrontation of which is so essential to the vitality of a democratic system) it will have served a useful purpose.

For first arousing my interest in the study of the family I am grateful to Fowler V. Harper, whose socio-legal casebook, *Problems of the Family* (recently revised with Jerome H. Skolnick) remains a pioneering interdisciplinary effort to illuminate key issues in this field. I am further indebted for specific ideas and general perspectives to various of my teachers at Yale Law School, New School for Social Research, and the London School of Economics, and to both colleagues and students first at Wellesley College and now at Tufts University. I would like also to acknowledge the thoughtful and skilled assistance of Bernard B. Perry, Miriam S. Farley, and others at Indiana University Press, and the fine work of Mabel F. Adams in typing the manuscript. Some final steps in preparing this volume were undertaken as I was beginning a year's

leave of absence from Tufts in residence at the Center for the Study of Law and Society, University of California, Berkeley. I am grateful to Tufts and to the Russell Sage Foundation for making that opportunity possible.

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The Family and the Sexual Revolution

INTRODUCTION

Social Science and the Sexual Revolution

Is Western industrial society today experiencing a "sexual revolution," and if so what is its nature? The term has been used by some writers to suggest a startling and cataclysmic disruption, a sharp decline in morals and in family stability that is symptomatic of broader social disintegration. Thus Pitirim Sorokin (in one of the readings presented below) deplores recent trends in family and sexual behavior; a similar aversion to our supposedly "atomistic" family system has been expressed by Carle Zimmerman.¹ The revelations of the Kinsey reports have lent added fuel to this alarmist theme—and in fact represent one of the indicators of "disaster" to which Sorokin points.

Critics of these analyses have objected first that (inferences from Kinsey to the contrary notwithstanding) there really may not have been any startling change in sexual behavior in the very recent years; and more generally that the vision of a society disintegrating with the decline of old-style family life is quite inaccurate. Does this mean, then, that it is incorrect to speak of a family or sexual revolution? I think not. Students of the family are almost all agreed that the major fact about this social institution, for the United States today and perhaps for the entire world, is that it is undergoing profound change. Textbooks on the family are replete with discussion of the impact of industrialism, urbanism, and secularism on family functions. The economic interdependence and self-sufficiency the family once had have all but disappeared; traditional husband-wife roles are in a state of flux; the reproduc-

tive function has declined (in the sense of family size decreasing); care of children and the transmission to them of basic societal values are increasingly delegated by the immediate family to outside agencies; the family no longer is the center of recreation, education, and moral guidance and support. These trends often are summed up by saying that there has been a decline in "familism" (or family-centeredness) with a corresponding increase of individualism in family behavior. While these changes have been gradual rather than sudden, their occurrence cannot be questioned; likewise the more explicitly sexual aspects of change are also beyond dispute.

In this volume attention is focused on three particular issues relating to social changes affecting the family: sex standards (with special reference to the question of premarital intercourse); the social roles of women; and the control of fertility. Many other areas of sexual and family behavior are also of great social significance and deserve the attention of students of society. For example, the matter of the public's attitude toward (and the legal measures taken against) various forms of sexual deviation has recently been subjected to some careful scrutiny from legal and ethical standpoints. The assertion by the Wolfenden Committee in Great Britain² that in the realm of sexual behavior the function of the criminal law is only "to preserve public order and decency, to protect the citizen from what is offensive or injurious, and to provide sufficient safeguards against exploitation and corruption of others, particularly those who are specially vulnerable. . . ." is a notable indication of new thinking in this area. (This was the rationale for their proposal that homosexual behavior between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offense; a similar proposal has been included in the American Law Institute's Model Penal Code.)

Another important aspect of the changes that are taking place involves the reform of marriage laws, particularly those relating to divorce (and alimony), but this can barely be touched on in the