



Brent C. Miller

**FAMILY  
RESEARCH  
METHODS**

FAMILY STUDIES  
TEXT SERIES **4**

# FAMILY RESEARCH METHODS

Brent<sup>N</sup> C. Miller

FAMILY STUDIES  
TEXT-SERIES 4

C 913.11  
M 647



**SAGE PUBLICATIONS**  
Beverly Hills London New Delhi

*Dedicated to Reuben Hill (1912-1985)  
Family Scholar, Mentor, and Friend*

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*For information address:*

SAGE Publications, Inc.  
275 South Beverly Drive  
Beverly Hills, California 90212

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.  
M-32 Market  
Greater Kailash I  
New Delhi 110 048 India



SAGE Publications Ltd  
28 Banner Street  
London EC1Y 8QE  
England

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Miller, Brent C.

Family research methods.

(Family studies text series; v. 4)

Includes index.

1. Family—Research. 2. Family—Research—

Methodology. I. Title. II. Series.

HQ728.M488 1986 306.8'5'072 86-964

ISBN 0-8039-2143-8

ISBN 0-8039-2144-6 (pbk.)

FIRST PRINTING



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# Preface

RESEARCH METHODS TEXTS are “how to” books. They tell how studies should be conducted to answer research questions. There are many social or behavioral research methods books, but few of them feature marriage and family examples (Adams and Schvaneveldt, 1985, is an exception). The relatively few sources in family studies that emphasize research methodology tend to be written for professionals rather than students. There are, for example, several chapters in the classic *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (Christensen, 1964) devoted to family measurement (Straus, 1964), prediction studies (Bowerman, 1964), field studies (Nye, 1964) and demographic analyses (Glick, 1964). Monographs about family measurement (Straus and Brown, 1978) and methods (Winter and Ferreira, 1969) have occasionally appeared. In 1982 the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* devoted an entire issue to family research methodology as did the *Journal of Family Issues* in 1984. Advanced methodology summary statements are continuing to be written for professionals (Larzelere and Klein, in press), but most methodological writing in family studies has appeared in hundreds of widely scattered journal articles.

Unlike this professional literature to which I have referred, the present text has been written as a simple “primer.” It is an elementary research methods text that uses marriage and family examples. I have tried to write informally and to keep the text brief and basic so that both upper division undergraduates and beginning graduate students could understand and benefit from it.

I am indebted to many mentors and colleagues who have helped me learn about marriage and the family and how it can be studied. Jay Schvaneveldt was an excellent first methods teacher at Utah State, and when I was at Minnesota, Joan Aldous, David Olson, and Ira Reiss all helped me gain a better understanding of marriage and family research

methods. David Klein and Steven Jorgensen, two of my graduate student buddies, have been especially helpful over the years in integrating my understanding of research methodology (Klein et al., 1978). Although he was not best known as a methodologist, Reuben Hill was probably more influential than anyone else in shaping my thinking about marriages and families as objects of scientific study. After leaving Minnesota I had the delightful learning experience of team teaching a graduate research methods course with Jo Lynn Cunningham at the University of Tennessee. More recently, I had the good fortune to collaborate with Boyd Rollins and Darwin Thomas in writing an overview about marriage and family research methods (Miller et al., 1982). To all of these friends and teachers I am greatly indebted for what they have helped me to learn.

I must also thank Richard Gelles and Alexa Albert, the series editor and associate editor, for pushing me to get this text onto paper and for not giving up when I had fallen behind. I likewise appreciate anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, especially the most critical reviewer from whom I benefited the most. I also thank Sally Carles for patiently revising the manuscript, and the editors at Sage who have continued to be interested in this book long after it was to have been completed.

Brent C. Miller  
Logan, Utah  
December 1985



## CHAPTER

# 1

# Introduction to Studying Families

Whatever else it may be, science is a way of generating and testing the truth of statements about events in the world of human experience.

Walter E. Wallace

ALL OF US KNOW about marriages and families. Parents, siblings, spouses, children—these are not remote academic subjects but virtually everyone's first-hand experiences. In addition to direct experiences we learn much about marriage and family life through observations of those around us, from the mass media, and from literature and drama. Many of our views about marriage and family life are shaped by religious and political traditions. Religious doctrines and state laws have institutionalized expected marriage and family behavior in human societies everywhere. Doctrine and laws, for example, frequently regulate the choice of marriage partners by age and relatedness, confine sexual relations to marriage, limit the number of children permitted (as in contemporary China), and specify the rights and obligations of spouses. In sum, our own experiences, family traditions, religion, and