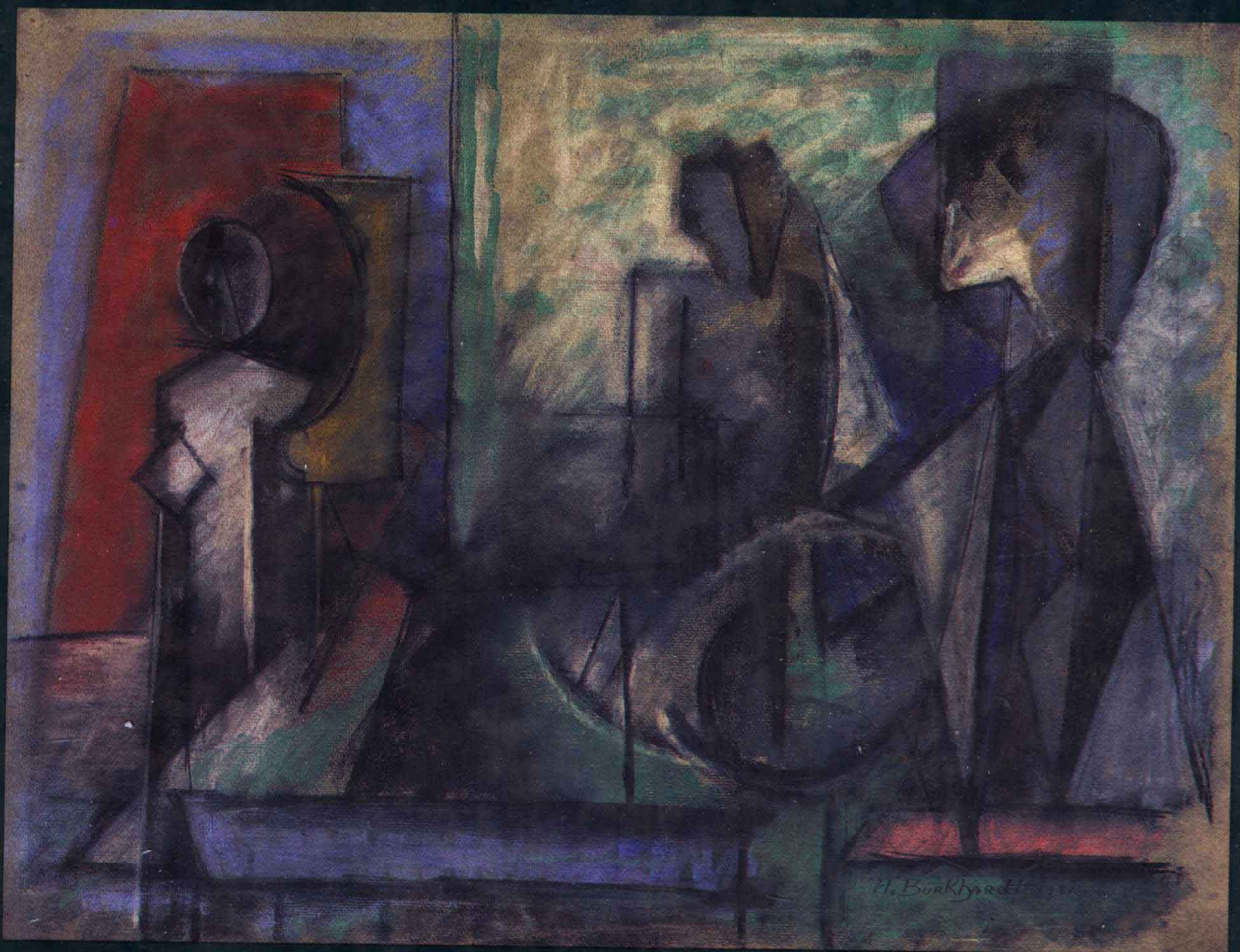


Understanding
FAMILIES

DIVERSITY, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE



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Understanding Families

DIVERSITY, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE

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Understanding Families

Preface

Since almost everyone is involved to some extent with family situations, you may think of the study of family as a “commonsense science.” Being involved with a situation, however, does not make a person an expert. In fact, our subjectivity tends to overcome objectivity. *Understanding Families: Diversity, Continuity, and Change* will make you aware of different marriage and family forms; alert you to diversity in the family; stress that different does not necessarily mean better or worse but simply different; and place the family in sociological, historical, and cross-cultural perspective. The book focuses, too, on current and emerging social trends affecting American families.

This book is written on the premise that becoming aware of potential crises in the family will help you actually to cope with problems when they arise. Knowledge of social problems will alert you to the fact that you are not the only one facing such problems; it will also help you to be more supportive of others as they attempt to cope.

Each chapter concludes with a review of important points from the chapter, discussion questions, and annotated suggested readings. Short articles (boxed readings) appear throughout the book. These human interest reports give diversity to the format, present application materials, and provide food for thought. A glossary of key terms is at the end of each chapter; references for all chapters are at the end of the book.

Though we collaborated throughout the twenty-four months of writing this book, a division of labor was established from the outset. Chapters 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 16 were primarily the responsibility of George Dickinson. Michael Leming was responsible for chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 14, 15, 17, and the Appendix. Thus, if you occasionally encounter a reference to “I” in a chapter, the first person singular refers to the primary author of that particular chapter. It is our hope that these personal anecdotes throughout the text will give

a more personal touch to the chapters and make the reading seem less “textbookish.”

Understanding Families: Diversity, Continuity, and Change is written with the assumption that many readers will have no other sociology, or perhaps social science, courses. Therefore, we wish to introduce you to the ways a social scientist conducts research. Part One is about “studying the family.” Chapter 1 discusses how various social science disciplines might approach the topic of family. Chapter 2 presents families in cross-cultural perspective. The last chapter in Part One introduces “Theoretical Orientations to Research in Family Sociology.” In addition to the theory and research presented in Chapter 3, an illustration in the Appendix will walk you through a research study.

Part Two looks at social change and families. Chapter 4 examines social and historical roots of American families. Gender roles in the context of family life are the subject of Chapter 5. Subcultural variations families in six ethnic American groups are discussed in Chapter 6—black, Jewish, Mexican, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese. Social class and American families is the topic of Chapter 7.

The institution of marriage is the theme of Part Three. Chapter 8 (mate selection), Chapter 9 (issues in human sexuality), and Chapter 10 (marriage and marital issues) include discussions of dating, love, cohabitation, sex education, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual dysfunctions, communication in marriage, and marital satisfaction.

Part Four, on the institution of family, follows a life-cycle approach and has chapters on the parenting years (Chapter 11), the middle years (Chapter 12), and the retirement years (Chapter 13). Among topics treated are feminists’ views on motherhood, parents versus peers, grandparenting, and marital quality in later life.

The crises of divorce (Chapter 14), death (Chapter 15), and family violence (Chapter 16) are presented in Part Five. Discussions include the whys of divorce, resingling, remarriage, explaining death to children, sexual abuse, and physical abuse of children, parents, spouses, and elders.

Understanding Families: Diversity, Continuity, and Change concludes with Part Six and the Epilogue (Chapter 17). This final chapter sums up important points from our study of American families and looks ahead to changes the future may bring. Topics include the AIDS crisis, the expanding size of the elderly population, and the day care crisis in America.

This book represents not a “how-to” cookbook approach to marriage and family but an approach evolving from theoretical frameworks and empirical research. *Understanding Families: Diversity, Continuity, and Change* is designed primarily for undergraduate

students. It is our hope that this book will stimulate your interest in marriage and family relationships.

As chapters of this book were written, they were reviewed by several professionals teaching marriage and family and sociology of the family. The reviewers provided very helpful suggestions toward this final product. Reviewers of the book were Ben Aguirre (Texas A&M University), Judy Aulette (University of North Carolina at Charlotte), H. Hugh Floyd (University of New Orleans), Martha E. Giminez (University of Colorado at Boulder), Jane Hall (Western Carolina University at Cullowhee), Michael Irwin (Louisiana State University), Ross Klein (Iowa State University), John Middleton (State University of New York at Plattsburgh), Jack W. Sattel (Normandale Community College in Minnesota), and Constance L. Shehan (University of Florida). We are grateful to them for their contributions.

Computers, like marriages and families, do not always have complete compatibility. We wish to extend a word of appreciation to Robert E. Tournier and Daniel P. Dickinson for technical assistance in making our personal computers communicate in an understandable way.

We also acknowledge the professional guidance of our acquisitions editor, Karen Hanson, for her able contributions in the completion of this book. We are grateful to Judy Langemo for acquiring permissions for the book. Finally, special thanks to Susan McIntyre, production editor, and Jay Howland, copyeditor, for overseeing the manuscript's transformation into book form.

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Studying the Family



Introduction: Why Study the Family?

◆ *Families then and now serve as the locus of our most intense, highly charged, and important human relationships. Indeed, many have argued that as the alienation and impersonality of the modern public world, including the pressures of market society, have increased, the family's function as a haven and a reminder that human beings can transcend cash exchange relationships has been enhanced. The family today is both a resilient and a vulnerable institution.**

Recently, I saw a television news report on the popularity of walking as a form of exercise. The television reporter interviewed a man who taught courses on techniques of walking. Even though most of the students in his class were in mid-life, they did not find it strange that they had paid fifty dollars to be told to "put one foot in front of the other." To my way of thinking, this reporter had just provided good evidence for P. T. Barnum's statement that "there's a sucker born every minute."

When I was in college, I think that my parents had the same response to the news that I was taking a course dealing with marriage and family living. They had probably assumed that my twenty years of family living had given me adequate insights into the topic. Furthermore, I suspect that they wished that I had spent their money more judiciously.

My motivations for taking this course were many. First, it was a popular course on campus and many of my friends were enrolled

*Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 131.

in the class. Second, I had an intrinsic interest in many of the topics I thought might be covered. Third, I had become interested in the discipline of sociology and wanted to find out what insights into the family might be gleaned from a sociological perspective. Finally, I was in the process of developing a relationship with a female friend and was interested in taking a course that might prove to be of practical utility.

Like the recreational walkers, in the process of taking the family course I discovered that family behavior is more complex than I had realized and that “doing what comes naturally” is a poor substitute for systematic study and analysis. In fact, I found that the course was a liberating experience.

This book is about the family as a social institution. Yet readers ought to be suspicious of any book that claims to impart knowledge concerning *the* family. One does not have to survey the family backgrounds of many friends before one realizes that there are many different types of American families. There are couples with and without children, there are siblings living together without parents, there are single parents living with children, there are blended families (stepparents and stepchildren), there are foster families and families created by adoption, and there are three-generation families. You probably can name friends or relatives who are examples of each of these common American family forms. Yet people still speak of *the* American family, as if American families were of only one type.

Furthermore, how can one really understand any American social institution if America is all that one knows? In order truly to appreciate the many forms and functions of American families, it is helpful to make comparisons with other cultural pathways or traditions governing marriage and family relationships.

As we attempt to describe and to promote understanding of the many family patterns found in the United States, we will make use of **ideal types** as an analytical and methodological tool. The concept of the **ideal type** was developed by Max Weber, a German sociologist of the early twentieth century. For Weber, ideal types were logical constructs that might not have concrete counterparts in the observable world. For example, it is possible to conceptualize two ideal types of mate selection: free mate selection, where couples arrange their own marriages without influence from their family members, and arranged marriages, where other family members totally control the mate selection process. For most, if not all, societies, mate selection procedures may be classified along a continuum with these two types as polar extremes. According to Eshleman (1985:5):

An ideal-type construct performs several basic functions: 1) it provides a limiting case with which concrete phenomena may