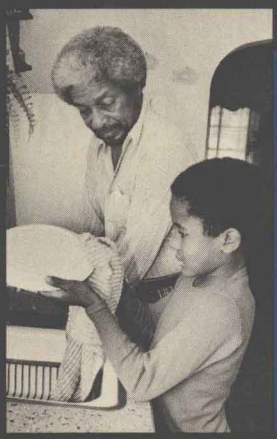
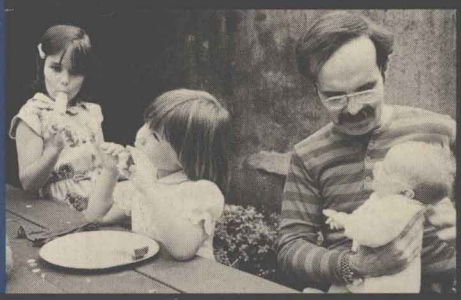
Family in Transition





Arlene S. Skolnick
Jerome H. Skolnick

Fifth Edition

Family in Transition

Rethinking Marriage, Sexuality, Child Rearing, and Family Organization

Fifth Edition

Arlene S. Skolnick
Jerome H. Skolnick
University of California, Berkeley

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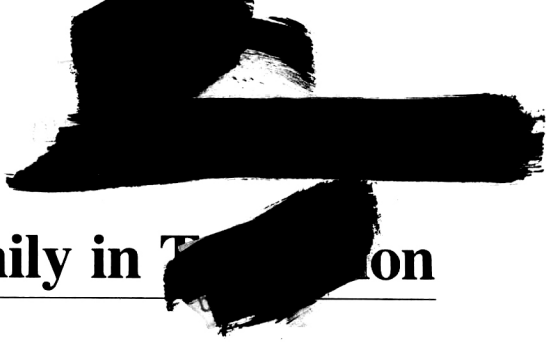

Family in T[illegible]on

For the fifth time, for Michael and Alexander

Preface to the Fifth Edition

Family life in America has been "in transition" since we began work on the first edition of this book in the spring of 1970. In looking over the earlier editions we have been struck not only by how much families themselves have changed, but also by how different was the climate of opinions about the family each time we set about doing a new revision. We have tried to describe these differences in the Introduction.

In this fifth edition, nearly half the articles are new. We have been torn between keeping old favorites and making room for new writing, which continues to grow in quantity and quality. We have maintained the basic perspective of the book in this new edition, but with some slightly different themes to reflect current family research and controversies. These emphases include: 1) demographic and large-scale quantitative research; 2) a wider range of family experiences, including couple problems, sibling relationships, and incest; and 3) the politics of the family, especially the politics of abortion.

By now we have had so many conversations with colleagues that it is hard to know how to single them out. However, for this edition Nancy Chodorow's suggestions were especially helpful. We are grateful to the students and teachers who have used this book and helped shape its contents with their comments and assessments of articles that appeared in the last editions. As always, the Center for the Study of Law and Society and its staff—headed by Rod Watanabe—have provided able and critical assistance. In particular we thank Susan Peabody for her careful job of reading and commenting on the galley and page proofs, and Margo Martinez who always assisted with the typing—even at a moment's notice.

Arlene S. Skolnick
Jerome H. Skolnick
Berkeley, California
April, 1985

Contents

Introduction: Family in Transition

As the 1980s began, a conservative columnist predicted that the family would be to the coming decade what the Vietnam war had been to the 1960s. By the middle of the 1980s, "family" had become a fighting word, linked to some of the most explosive issues in American politics: abortion, school busing, the Equal Rights Amendment, sex education, censorship, school prayer, the rights of homosexuals.

The 1984 presidential campaign revealed the power of family-related issues to arouse political passion. Democrats and Republicans argued about which party was the true defender of the American family. The candidates' families were prominently displayed at both conventions and on the campaign trail. While both sides agreed in their devotion to "the family," they were deeply divided about specific policies. Abortion was the most hotly debated issue of the campaign.

At the same time as politicians were singing the praises of "the family," other voices were sounding a different theme. Nineteen eighty-four was also the year incest was discovered by the media as a prominent social problem, along with child abuse and wife beating. Deficiencies in the American family were blamed, moreover, for such disturbing trends as the increase of adolescent suicide, juvenile crime, drug use, and the decline of the work ethic.

The political uproar followed almost two decades of dramatic changes in family life. Divorce rose to record levels; if current rates persist, almost half of all marriages will end in divorce. Marriage rates declined to the lowest level since 1940; the 1980 census revealed a fifth of all women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty had still never married. Single-parent families increased by more than three quarters during the 1970s, while married-couple families with children actually declined in number.

Birth rates also declined. Despite the fact that the women born during the post-World War II baby boom are now starting to have babies, there is little likelihood that we will see a repetition of the original baby boom. During the 1970s, the number of women in the labor force, including married women with children under eighteen, increased and reached what Jessie Bernard (1975) has called a "tipping point." This is the moment that a formerly "normal" pattern of behavior—in this case being a full-time housewife—becomes the choice of a minority. Premarital sex also passed a tipping point in the 1970s; by 1980, few

brides were virgins, and sex became, for most Americans, a normal part of male-female relationships.

The number of unmarried couples living together also rose. In 1980 the number of such couples counted by the Census Bureau reached 1,560,000—three times the number in 1970. Although the proportion of unmarried adults in such arrangements is small, the younger generation is approaching the level of Sweden, where 12 percent of all couples live together informally (Trost, 1979). Attitudes toward unmarried cohabitation have changed also. No longer considered living in sin or confined to the very poor, "living together" has become a socially acceptable way of life in middle-class circles, especially among educated and professional persons.

The rise of the single-person household marks another significant departure from the past, when the unattached individual was likely to live with relatives or with an unrelated family. In 1980 about 23 percent of American households contained only one person. This population consists mainly of two age groups: young people who have not yet married and the formerly married, mostly older people who have lost a spouse. Not only are unattached individuals more likely to live in nonfamily households, but there has been a marked increase in the population of young singles. Whether these young men and women will marry later or never remains to be seen.

In addition to census data, a variety of surveys also indicates important changes in attitudes. The avant-garde ideas of the 1960s concerning such matters as premarital sexuality, women's equality, and the value of self-realization have spread to the mainstream of the American population. By the middle of the 1970s, surveys of women's attitudes revealed a consistent trend away from tradition and toward greater similarity between men's and women's roles inside and outside the home (Mason, Czajka, & Aiker, 1976).

A major study of changes in American attitudes over two decades revealed a profound change in how people think about family life, work, and themselves (Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). In 1957, four fifths of the respondents thought that a man or woman who did not want to marry was sick, immoral, and selfish. By 1976, only one fourth of the respondents thought that choice was bad. Two thirds were neutral, and one seventh viewed the choice as good.

Summing up many complex findings, the authors conclude that America has undergone a "psychological revolution" in the past two decades. Twenty years ago, people defined their satisfactions and problems—and indeed, themselves—in terms of how well they lived up to traditional work and family roles. Today, people have become more introspective, more attentive to inner experience. Fulfillment now means finding intimacy, meaning, and self-definition, rather than the satisfactory performance of traditional roles.

All of these changes, occurring in a relatively short time, have given rise to fears about the failure of the family. Anyone who watches television or reads newspapers, *Time*, or *Newsweek* will hear again and again that the family is "breaking down," "falling apart," "declining," "disintegrating," "disappear-

ing," "besieged," or at the very least, "in trouble." In part, these anxieties about the family account for much of the appeal of the so-called Moral Majority and the New Right. There is a great nostalgia for the "good old days," a happy past when families were strong and stable and life was uncomplicated.

Meanwhile, during the same years in which the family had become the object of public anxiety and debate, a large number of researchers quietly turned out a torrent of studies on the family, past and present. Once something of a scholarly backwater in the field of sociology, the study of the family over the past two decades excited the interests of scholars in a range of disciplines—history, demography, economics, law, psychology, and psychiatry. As a result of this new interest and new methods, we now have more information about family life than has ever before been available. Ironically, much of the new scholarship is at odds with the public perception that the family is in crisis, as well as with the nostalgic notion that in the past, families were strong and stable.

Because of the continuing stream of new family scholarship, as well as shifts in public attitudes toward the family, each edition of *Family in Transition* is different from the one before it. In the first edition of this book, we argued strenuously that the middle-class family patterns of the 1950s and early 1960s did not represent a model of the family in all times and places. Strange as it now seems, most family sociologists discounted the possibility that there could be serious changes in family roles, expectations, and behavior.

When we put together the first edition of this book in the early 1970s, the changes that are now commonplace were just beginning to be felt. The youth movements of the 1960s and the emerging women's movement were challenging many of the assumptions on which conventional marriage and family patterns had been based. The mass media were regularly presenting stories that also challenged in one way or another traditional views on sex, marriage, and family. People were becoming aware, for example, of "the population explosion" and of the desirability of "zero population growth." There was a growing realization that the ideal three-, four-, or five-child family of the fifties might not be very good for the country as a whole, nor for every couple. Meanwhile, Hollywood movies were presenting a new and cynical view of marriage. It was almost taken for granted that marriages were unhappy, particularly if the spouses were middle class, middle aged, or affluent. Many people were openly defying conventional standards of behavior: College girls were beginning to live openly with young men, unwed movie actresses were publicizing rather than hiding their pregnancies, and homosexuals were beginning openly to protest persecution and discrimination.

It seemed as if something was happening to family life in America, even if there were no sharp changes in the major statistical indicators of family life, or in sexual behavior, or in the division of labor between husbands and wives. People seemed to be looking at sex, marriage, parenthood, and family life in new ways, even if behavior on a mass scale was not changing very noticeably. Thus, we

argued that significant social and cultural change could happen even without massive changes in overt behavior patterns. John Gagnon and William Simon (1970) had observed that the moment of change may be when new forms of behavior seem "plausible." For example, even though there was no evidence that the homosexual population had grown, homosexuality had become a more plausible form of behavior. Knowing someone was a homosexual did not automatically mean that he or she was to be defined as a moral pariah. In the same way, whether or not there had been great changes in rates of premarital sex or unwed motherhood, the fact that people could now be open about such behavior and go on in normal ways with the rest of their lives seemed highly significant.

In putting together the readings for that first edition of *Family in Transition*, we found relatively little awareness that changes in sexuality, marriage, and parenthood were happening. More importantly, as we have seen, the professional literature seemed to deny that change was possible in family structure, the relations between the sexes, and parenthood.

Most social scientists shared a particular set of assumptions about the nature of the family and its relation to society: human beings were equipped with a fixed set of psychological needs and tendencies, which were expressed in the family. An extreme version of this view was the statement by an anthropologist that the nuclear family (mother, father, and children) "is a biological phenomenon . . . as rooted in organs and physiological structures as insect societies" (La Barre 1954, p. 104). Any changes in the basic structure of the family roles or in childrearing were assumed to be unworkable, if not unthinkable.

The family in modern society was portrayed as a streamlined, more highly evolved version of a universal family. The traditional or preindustrial family was a workplace, a school, a hospital. According to Talcott Parsons and his followers (1951, 1954), the modern family underwent structural differentiation or specialization. It transferred work and educational roles to other agencies and specialized in childrearing and emotional support. No less important for having relinquished certain tasks, the modern family was now the only part of society to carry out such functions.

These ideas about the family have lost their credibility. As Glenn Elder (1978) recently observed, the study of the family and its relation to social change during the postwar era was "shaped more by simplistic abstract theory and ideological preferences" than by the detailed study of the realities of family life in particular times, places, and circumstances.

The family theories of the postwar era were descriptively correct insofar as they portrayed the ideal middle-class family patterns of a particular society at a particular historical period. But they went astray in elevating the status quo to the level of a timeless necessity. In addition, the theories could not embrace variation in family life. For example, the working mother or the single-parent family could be seen only as deviant. Similarly, social change in family life on a large scale, as in the rise of women's employment or of divorce, could be interpreted only as social disorder and the disintegration of the social system.

Still another flaw in the dominant view was its neglect of major internal strains within the family, even when it was presumably functioning as it was supposed to do. Paradoxically, these strains were vividly described by the very theorists who idealized the role of the family in modern society. Parsons, for example, noted that when home no longer functioned as an economic unit, women, children, and old people were placed in an ambiguous position. They became dependent on the male breadwinner and were cut off from society's major source of achievement and status.

Parsons saw women's roles as particularly difficult; being a housewife was not a real occupation. It was vaguely defined, highly demanding, yet not considered real work in a society that measures achievement by the size of one's paycheck. The combination of existing strains and the demystifying effects of the challenges to the family status quo seem to have provided, as Judith Blake (1978, p. 11) points out, a classic set of conditions for social change.

A Time of Troubles

The recent changes in the family would have been unsettling even if other social conditions had remained stable. But everything else was also changing quickly. Despite assassinations and turmoil in the streets, the sixties were an optimistic period. Both the dissident movements and the establishment agreed that progress was possible, that problems could be solved, and that today's children would live in a better world. Both sides believed in limitless economic growth.

No one foresaw that the late 1970s would dramatically reverse this optimism and the social and economic conditions that had sustained it. Rather than hearing of limitless abundance and an end to scarcity and poverty, we began to hear of lowered expectations, survival, and lifeboat ethics. For the first time in history, Americans had to confront the possibility that their children and children's children might not lead better lives. A popular country and western song expressed the national mood when it asked, "Are the good times really over for good?" (Haggard, 1982).

The "malaise" of the late 1970s, followed by the conservative renewal of the 1980s, once again changed the terms in which family issues were discussed and debated. There was a general withdrawal from political activity among all Americans, most surprisingly, perhaps, on the part of the young people who had been active in the 1960s and 1970s. (The movie *The Big Chill* was Hollywood's version of the transformation from activist to yuppie.) The return to a focus on private life was accelerated by the fact that the large baby boom generation, who had begun to enter college in the 1960s, were moving on to marriage and parenthood by the end of the 1970s.

Among family scholars and other social commentators, the terms of the debate about the family were also changed by shifts in feminist thinking. Some of the most vocal feminists of the 1960s had criticized the family as the major source of

the oppression of women. By the 1970s, many feminists had articulated a new emphasis on nurturance and care and intimacy. In fact, one of the surprising themes of recent years is the celebration of family in the name of social criticism. A new domesticity of the left has emerged on the intellectual scene. For example, one scholar argues that the family is the only institution that saves capitalistic societies from total domination by market values. Parental love and adult intimacy are an "affront" to an economic system that tries to put a price on everything.

Some radical attacks on the modern world and its ways seem consonant with traditional conservative arguments. Historian Christopher Lasch (1978) argues that while the family once provided a haven of love and decency in a heartless world, it no longer does so. The family has been invaded by outside forces—advertising, the media, experts, and family professionals—and stripped of its functions and authority. Corporate capitalism, with its need for limitless consumption, has created a "culture of narcissism," in which nobody cares about anybody else.

While Lasch laments the passing of the strong, authoritarian father, Alice Rossi (1978) denounces the intrusion of technological society into the natural biological processes of motherhood. In a startling reversal of her early feminist writings, Rossi revives the idea of biologically based maternal instincts.

All of this ferment has made our task here more complicated. In the past we had to argue against the overly optimistic assumptions of the 1950s view that all was for the best in the best of all possible family and social worlds. Now it is necessary to deal with pessimism of the 1980s. In its most extreme form, this pessimism turns the notion of progress upside down and replaces it with a fierce nostalgia. The past is portrayed as a time of strong and stable families, while the present is interpreted as a nightmarish wasteland with hardly a single redeeming virtue. Reality, of course, lies somewhere in between. Change does not always mean progress, but it does not always mean social disorganization either.

The State of the Contemporary Family

What sense *can* be made of the current changes in family life? The various statistics we quoted earlier can and are being interpreted to show that the family is either thriving or falling apart. Falling birthrates can be taken to mean that people are too selfish to want to have any or many children. Or they can mean that people are no longer having children by accident, without thought, or because of social pressure, but because they truly want children. High divorce rates can signify that marriage is an institution on the rocks or is considered so important that people will no longer put up with the kinds of dissatisfactions and empty-shell marriages previous generations tolerated. High rates of remarriage could mean that people are giving up not on marriage but on unsatisfactory relationships. Or they can be thought to mean that the strain of living in a