



PERSPECTIVES

*on the*  
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FAMILY

history, class, and feminism

CHRISTOPHER CARLSON







# **PERSPECTIVES ON THE FAMILY**

History, Class, and Feminism

**Christopher Carlson**

Cornell College

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## Preface

The 1970s and 1980s were remarkably productive and exciting years for those interested in the sociology of the family. During this time, scholars explored new areas of inquiry, asked new questions about subjects of continuing interest, and reexamined the research findings of previous decades. Research on the family in the 1990s promises to be no less provocative or plentiful.

For those of us teaching the sociology of the family, incorporating the results of this new scholarship into our courses is a continuing and challenging endeavor. In this collection of readings, I have attempted to make a contribution to this integrative task. I have done so by focusing on three diverse but interrelated perspectives represented in current research on the family. These perspectives are: history, class, and feminism. Each chapter includes readings representative of these three perspectives.

Briefly, the readings representing the perspective of history reflect the recognition that the family is not an unchanging entity in either its form or function, and they examine the development of specific family patterns over time. The readings representing the perspective of social class focus on variations in family patterns associated with socioeconomic status. Finally, the readings representing the perspective of feminism examine the impact of gender as a socially constructed category on the organization and experience of family life.

The book begins with a general introductory chapter that describes the three perspectives in greater detail and explains their relevance to the study of the family. This introduction is followed by seven chapters, each focusing on a substantive area in the study of the family. I have not attempted to be exhaustive in the substantive areas that I have chosen to include or in the coverage of specific topics within each chapter. The study of the family now includes so many



subfields covering such a vast array of topics that an attempt to be comprehensive would necessarily have been unsuccessful. I have chosen instead to include chapters on substantive areas that are likely to be central to any course on the family. I selected the readings for each chapter to illustrate the importance of the three perspectives in the study of specific topics.

Each chapter includes an introduction that discusses some important research findings and issues in the area covered. In these introductions, I have attempted to provide students with information that will help them place the reading selections in the chapters in broader context. For example, the introduction to Chapter Three, Dating and Mate Choice, discusses the history of courtship, theories of mate selection, and homogamy in mate choice. The introduction to Chapter Four, Love, Marriage, and Intimate Relationships, discusses the concept of marital adjustment and the issue of power in intimate relationships. Each introduction ends with a discussion of how the readings included in the chapter are related to these and other research findings and issues.

The selections included in this reader come from a variety of sources. Most are from professional research journals such as *Social Problems*, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Signs*, *Sex Roles*, and *Journal of Family History*, to name a few. There are also several selections from books, such as Lillian Rubin's *Worlds of Pain* and Susan Strasser's *Never Done*. I have attempted to include readings that students will find both challenging and interesting. I have assumed that students in upper-level sociology courses have had sufficient introduction to research methods to allow them to manage readings with data analysis. Although students may require guidance in reading some of the selections, they should not be overwhelmed by any of them.

This book can be used in several ways in courses on the sociology of the family. For those who use textbooks, the selections in each chapter will provide students with examples of research in areas covered by text chapters or will allow students to investigate topics omitted or covered only briefly in their texts. The selections may also illustrate viewpoints on specific topics not found in a particular text. In addition, the selections lend themselves to provoking class discussions and developing paper and research topics. For those who use a set of monographs as an alternative to a textbook, the book can serve similar purposes. However, it can also serve a more integral function by filling in the gaps often left by a particular set of monographs. In this case, the book can link the various parts of the course together and provide a foundation on which to build the course. I hope that the introductions to each chapter will make this book particularly useful for those who do not use textbooks.

Although the organization of the book is similar to the organization of many textbooks, instructors can easily recombine the selections to suit their own needs. For example, several of the selections on the history of the family could be added to the selections in Chapter Two to form an expanded section on the emergence of the modern family. "Selling Mrs. Consumer" by Susan Strasser and "Marriage" by Robert and Helen Lynd could be used in this way. As another example, several selections on class differences in family life could be combined to complement a text chapter on this topic. Lillian Rubin's "Marriage: The



Dream and the Reality—The Middle Years” and Melvin Kohn’s “The Effects of Social Class on Parental Values and Practices” would be useful for this purpose. Certainly, many other combinations are possible.

Many people have made contributions to this book, and I would like to express my appreciation to them. At Wadsworth, sociology editor Sheryl Fullerton helped me develop my initial ideas for the book and urged me to pursue them. Serina Beauparlant took over the book when Sheryl moved on to become executive editor for Wadsworth and saw the project through to its completion. I thank both of them for their skillful guidance and words of encouragement. Sara Hunsaker was in charge of production and competently steered the book through the final stages to publication. I enjoyed working with her and appreciated her politely but firmly established deadlines. Pam Fischer did the copyediting. It was a pleasure to observe the results her fine hand, and this book is much improved because of her efforts. My appreciation also goes to those who reviewed the manuscript for Wadsworth: Kathleen Blee, University of Kentucky; Pamela Hewitt, University of Northern Colorado; Rachel Kahn-Hut, San Francisco State University; David Klein, University of Notre Dame; Ross Klein, Memorial University; David Lee, California State University, Sacramento; Gary R. Lee, University of Florida; Boyd Rollins, University of Utah; Ruth Sidel, Hunter College. Although I was unable to incorporate all of their many excellent suggestions for improvement, I am sure that the book is much better because of the careful and critical examination they gave it.

I would also like to thank Dennis Damon Moore, Dean of Cornell College, for his generous support at a very crucial time in my work on this book. He made a very difficult year a little easier. Finally, I wish to extend special thanks to Richard Peterson and Charlotte Vaughan of the sociology department at Cornell. They have been an unfailing source of encouragement and counsel throughout my work on this book and my career at Cornell. I am fortunate indeed to have them as colleagues and as friends.



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# 1

## Three Perspectives on the Family

In 1949, anthropologist George Murdock defined the family as “a group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction.” He went on to suggest that the family “includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, with one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting pair.” In the 1950s, this definition did not generate much controversy. The media were filled with images of happily married suburban couples and their children, and many American families conformed or aspired to this ideal. However, in the following decades, sociologists began to recognize the diversity among American families, calling into question the usefulness of Murdock’s definition. Contributing to this recognition were a series of important changes in the family. For example, in the 1960s the percentages of single-parent families, couples choosing to remain childless, and unmarried couples living together all began to increase substantially. The divorce rate also began to rise, and the marriage rate began to decline. Some individuals began to experiment with communal forms of family life, and the gay and lesbian movements called attention to the fact that not all couples were heterosexual.

Most families continue to conform to many or all of the characteristics included in Murdock’s definition. By present estimates, for example, approximately 90 percent of American men and women will marry at some point in their lifetimes, and only about 10 percent of American women will remain childless. Nevertheless, defining the family as a “fixed, unchanging, and singular entity” is clearly inadequate for capturing the variety manifested in the American family (Glenn, 1987:349). Instead, it is necessary to conceptualize the family more broadly, and it has become the task of the sociology of the family to explore the



multiple and changing ways in which people arrange their sexual, reproductive, emotional, and domestic lives. As a result, the “family” has become a sensitizing concept, directing our attention to the study of specific phenomena, rather than a precise term telling us in advance what we will find.

Three perspectives have proven useful as sociologists have begun to explore diversity and change in American family life. These are the perspectives of history, class, and feminism. Each is an alternative way of examining the family and calls attention to aspects that escape the view of other perspectives. Just as viewing an object from a new angle calls attention to features that have gone unnoticed or unseen, the perspectives of history, class, and feminism provide different angles from which to view the family. Together they contribute to a comprehensive understanding of contemporary family patterns. This chapter describes the three perspectives and explains their relevance to the study of the family. Subsequent chapters illustrate the utility of the three perspectives in understanding various facets of family life.

## History

The rapid changes in the family since the 1950s have contributed to a widespread belief that the family is in the process of dramatic transformation. However, as profound as these changes are, they are not without precedent. A series of changes in the structure, functions, demographic characteristics, and internal dynamics of the American family have taken place in the past three centuries (Mintz and Kellog, 1988:xiv). Contemporary changes in the family must be placed in this historical context if we are to appreciate their magnitude and understand their significance.

Prior to the 1970s the American family was virtually ignored as a subject of historical inquiry. With the exceptions of Arthur Calhoun’s (1917) *A Social History of the American Family* and Edmund Morgan’s (1966) *The Puritan Family*, those seeking the history of the American family would have found the record virtually bare. However, beginning with some notable studies of the family in colonial New England (Demos, 1970; Greven, 1970), interest in and research on the family among historians grew rapidly (Gordon, 1978:5). Consequently, family history is now a recognized and thriving field of study.

Several factors help explain the explosion of interest in the history of the family. First, the dramatic changes in the family itself drew the attention of scholars to the process of family change and demonstrated that the family is as much a part of the historical process as are other institutions (Mintz and Kellog, 1988:xiv). Second, the growth of the field of social history in the 1960s focused attention on the lives of common people rather than on the lives of those playing key roles in great events (Gordon, 1978:1). Social historians seek to discover the meaning of societal changes for ordinary individuals, as well as the role of ordinary individuals in the process of social change. This emphasis led to research in such areas as labor movements, migration, social mobility, slavery, and eventually the family. A third reason for the increase in research in family history was the development of some innovative methodological techniques (Gordon,



1978:3). In the absence of traditional sources, social historians have found it necessary to exploit new types of data to illuminate the lives of people for whom few written records exist. For example, the use of birth, death, and marriage records has allowed historians to reconstruct the typical life course for individuals at different times. Similarly, census data have allowed historians to examine the composition of households in communities in various historical periods. In many cases, the computer has expedited the analysis of these new data sources.

Early studies of the history of the family promptly discredited many preconceptions concerning the family in past times. According to the “traditional view,” industrialization and urbanization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were responsible for a number of drastic changes in the family (Seward, 1978:27). For example, many scholars maintained that households in preindustrial America often included extended kin and that industrialization was responsible for a decline in the importance of kinship ties. However, research shows conclusively that extended family households were no more common in the past than they are today. In fact, historians have discovered a remarkable stability in household structure over time. As another example, we now know that the average age at marriage actually declined throughout most of the twentieth century rather than rising as many believed. In fact, teenage brides and grooms were probably more common in 1960 than in either 1860 or 1760. Other changes, such as the increasing importance of romantic love as a basis for marriage and declines in fertility rates, actually preceded industrialization.

As a result of these and many other discoveries, we have begun to develop an understanding of the complexity of the process of social change in the American family. It is now clear that change in the family is a continuous process and that no single development such as industrialization can account for the multitude of changes that have taken place. Although economic changes associated with industrialization were a potent force in bringing about alterations in family patterns, many other developments have contributed to family change. Some scholars have broadened their focus to examine the impact of modernization on the family (e.g., Hareven, 1976; Shorter, 1975; Wells, 1978)—a process more encompassing than industrialization. Modernization refers to a set of societal changes occurring over several centuries in Western Europe and North America, including the development of market economies, the emergence of political democracies, and an increasing pace of technological and scientific change. These societal changes were associated with an emphasis on the values of personal freedom and autonomy. According to advocates of modernization theory, these developments help explain changes in the family that occurred well before industrialization. Other scholars have narrowed their focus to the impact of limited factors or short-range changes such as economic fluctuations, the availability of land, and death rates (e.g., Elder, 1974; Greven, 1970; Uhlenberg, 1980).

Recent research has also demonstrated that family change does not take place evenly. Some groups adopt new patterns long before others, so at any one time a society will be composed of a diversity of families rather than a single family type. Similarly, some groups may change in one aspect of their family



behavior but remain unchanged in other aspects, so families will contain a mix of old and new characteristics. It is also clear that many developments have different effects on some groups than on others. For example, the separation of some productive labor from the home in the nineteenth century affected both middle- and working-class families, but in different ways. Therefore, we now understand that the pathways of family change are diverse and that multiple and even contradictory directions of change characterize the history of the American family (Elder, 1981:499).

When historians suggest that one reason to study the past is to better understand the present, they mean that we can appreciate the distinguishing features of our own times only by contrasting them with the characteristics of the past (Demos, 1986:x). In the process of discovering the differences and similarities between our own lives and the lives of men and women of past times, we gain an increased understanding of what is unique about our own experience. The importance of placing the present in historical context is well illustrated in the study of the family. Precisely because current patterns of family life are so familiar, viewing them from the perspective of history helps us appreciate their distinctiveness.

## Class

Even the most casual observer of American life is aware of the inequalities existing between individuals in our society. The gulf that divides the bottom fifth of the population, which receives less than 5 percent of the total of all income and wages, and the top fifth, which receives nearly 45 percent, is a tremendous one. Even between these two extremes, however, Americans are divided into groups whose life conditions vary substantially. These differences extend beyond income to include access to many other resources and benefits, such as health care, education, and housing.

Although inequality is an important feature of American society, the study of inequality does not have a long history in American sociology. Some sociologists did recognize the importance of this topic earlier in the century, but the first textbook dealing with the subject did not appear until the 1950s. According to Lucille Duberman (1976:3), several factors accounted for the failure of sociologists to address this topic. First, the United States was a land of expanding opportunities with a steadily increasing standard of living. Second, most people believed that these opportunities were available to everyone. Third, many Americans were reluctant to admit that their society contained the same inequalities that pervaded other societies. Although the Depression of the 1930s temporarily made many people aware of the existence of inequality, the immediate postwar years witnessed the return of prosperity. The percentage of the American population with a middle-class standard of living doubled between the late 1920s and the early 1950s, rising from 30 to 60 percent (Skolnick, 1987:154). As a result, concern with inequality again became less prevalent.

However, in the 1960s public attention began to focus on the continuing disparities of wealth in the United States. In *The Other America* (1963), Michael



Harrington estimated that between thirty and forty million people were living in poverty, and he examined the factors responsible for the existence of this deprivation amidst general prosperity. Other authors began to call attention to the continuing divisions between middle- and working-class Americans (e.g., Berger, 1960; Lemasters, 1975; Rubin, 1976). More recently, the disturbing trend toward increasing inequality has been noted (Skolnick, 1987:155). Since the late 1970s the distribution of income has begun to resemble an hourglass, with a shrinking middle and expanding upper and lower section, rather than a diamond, with a large and expanding middle group. Debate exists about the sources and eventual outcome of this development, but clearly disparities in wealth are at least temporarily increasing.

A central concept in the study of inequality is social class. Although sociologists disagree about the precise definition of social class, generally it refers to the hierarchical division of societies into groups sharing similar life conditions. Sociologists have focused on three interdependent dimensions of inequality in their discussions of social class—economic, prestige, and power (Vanfossen, 1979:13–15). The economic dimension of inequality refers to the distribution of wealth and income as a result of the roles of groups in the economic system. For many sociologists, economic inequality is the most important component of social class. The prestige dimension refers to the respect which groups are granted by others. Prestige has many sources, including occupation, lifestyle, and group affiliations. The power dimension refers to the ability of a group to achieve its goals despite opposition from other groups. The examination of inequalities of power focuses on access to the political decision-making process and the distribution of authority in the workplace and community.

Groups that share benefits (or lack benefits) across these dimensions compose social classes (Rossides, 1976:23). Sociologists commonly distinguish five social classes in the United States (Robertson, 1987:271). At the top is a small upper class, perhaps 2 to 3 percent of the population, composed of individuals of great wealth. These are the owners and executives of large businesses and corporations. Below this elite group is the upper-middle class, comprising 10 to 15 percent of the population, made up of professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, upper-level managers, and high government officials. The lower-middle class is composed of lower-level professionals, such as teachers and nurses, office workers, farmers, and small business owners. This group comprises 30 to 35 percent of the population. The largest group is the working class, 40 to 45 percent of the population, composed of factory workers, skilled craftspeople, and service workers. At the bottom is a lower class composed of the unemployed and very poorly paid workers, such as domestic, restaurant, and hospital workers. Twenty to twenty-five percent of the population is in this group.

In general, movement from one of these five social classes to another involves simultaneous movement on the three dimensions of inequality. However, the lines between social classes are blurred because a segment of a social class may be higher on one dimension of inequality than a segment of the class immediately above it. For example, many members of the working class have higher annual incomes than members of the lower-middle class, although their



occupations do not carry the same degree of prestige as do middle-class occupations. Variations on these dimensions also create differences within social classes. For example, among the upper class, the newly rich do not have the same prestige as do those with inherited wealth.

Although the lines between social classes are not hard and fast, important differences do exist between groups variously placed in the stratification system. Groups with similar occupations, education levels, and incomes develop distinctive attitudes, values, and lifestyles (Duberman, 1976:116). Collectively, these characteristics define class cultures that divide Americans into distinctive subgroups (Collins, 1988:39). Class cultures are evident in the realm of the family. Research has shown class differences in virtually all areas of family life, including child-rearing patterns, husband/wife relationships, and relationships with extended kin, to name just a few. As a result, Americans experience the family in different ways, depending on their location in the class structure.

The study of the impact of social class on the family has been complicated in recent years by the increase in the percentage of women working outside the home. The increase has been most dramatic for married women, more than half of whom are now employed. In the past, studies of social class have ignored the occupations of married women, focusing instead on the class position of husbands. However, subsuming the class position of women under that of their husbands is inadequate, particularly when the occupations of husbands and wives differ significantly in prestige and pay. Research suggests, for example, that when one spouse holds a working-class job and the other holds a middle-class job, couples frequently disagree on the identification of their class position (Hiller and Philliber, 1986). Other research suggests that husbands and wives in mixed-class marriages have conflicts over the values and norms of family life (Lemasters, 1975; Halle, 1984). Although sociologists are just beginning to take these issues into account, the differing class positions of husbands and wives are likely to become of increasing importance in the future. As Randall Collins (1988:29) asserts, "it is foolish to assume males are directly affected by class conditions where they work, but women are affected only indirectly through their male relatives." Therefore, social class will continue to be an important, although increasingly complex, perspective on the family.

## **Feminism**

The feminist movement in the United States had its beginning in the social-reform movements of the nineteenth century. American women played active, although often subordinate, roles in the campaign to abolish slavery, the temperance movement, and many other crusades to improve the lot of the exploited and downtrodden. Galvanized by their participation in these movements, women started to organize to improve their own status, beginning with the Seneca Falls Declaration of Rights of Women in 1848, which called for a comprehensive extension of equal economic, legal, and political rights to women (Degler, 1980:190). However, the early feminist movement was consumed with



a prolonged and exhausting campaign for women's suffrage. The right to vote was finally won in 1920 after seven decades of struggle against intense opposition.

Although feminism certainly did not disappear following the suffrage victory, the organized feminist movement temporarily collapsed after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Several factors explain this collapse, among them the length of the struggle for the vote itself and the fragility of the coalition that eventually secured the victory. Another important factor was the high hopes that supporters of suffrage held for change once the vote was won. Many expected dramatic improvements in the status of women, seeing suffrage as the means to political power women had lacked. In fact, few advances in the status of women occurred in the 1920s, and then the Depression and World War II drew attention away from the continuing subordination of women.

The reemergence of the feminist movement followed in the wake of the civil rights movement and student protests of the 1960s. Like their sisters in the nineteenth century, women again played important roles in these liberation movements, and in the process they began to rediscover the injustice of their own situation (Skolnick, 1987:403). The second stage of feminism did not concentrate its energies on a single issue but instead began a wide-ranging struggle against women's subordination in all phases of contemporary life. Occupational segregation, wage discrimination, reproductive rights, violence against women, sexual harassment, pornography, and discriminatory marriage and divorce laws were all subjects of attention and action in the 1970s and 1980s. The vigorous, although unsuccessful, struggle for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have eliminated all laws that discriminated on the basis of sex, symbolized the broad scope of contemporary feminism.

The resurgence of feminism has also had an impact on all academic disciplines, from political science to physics, from literature to sociology. Encouraged by the rapidly expanding women's movement, scholars began to search their disciplines for answers to questions about the status and experiences of women. In doing so, they discovered that women had been all but invisible in the academic world, both as producers of knowledge and as subjects of study. In fact, most knowledge has been produced by men, who have dominated most fields of intellectual endeavor. Because the experiences of men and women differ, it is not surprising that men have asked questions that reflect their own concerns and points of view. As a result scholarship in all disciplines produced knowledge that was incomplete because it omitted the interests of women and examined the experiences of women from the vantage point of men (Spender, 1981:15).

Feminist scholarship seeks to bring what women know and what women are into all forms of intellectual inquiry (Gould, 1980:459). One result of this inclusion has been attention to many neglected aspects of women's experience and the gradual filling in of the huge gaps in our knowledge created by the myopia of the past. Another result has been the demonstration of the importance of "gender" as a category of analysis. *Gender* does not refer to the biological differences between males and females but to the differences between men and



women created and sustained by the organization of particular societies (Gould, 1980:462; Stacey and Thorne, 1985:307). Feminist scholars have begun to explore the fundamental ways in which gender, as a socially constructed category, shapes our experience and behavior.

The reorienting effect of feminism is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the sociology of the family. Feminist scholars have asked new questions, opened up new areas of inquiry, and developed new ways of thinking about family experience. Unlike many other fields, family sociology has in the past given considerable attention to the lives of women. In fact, women became so closely identified with the family that the study of women was basically contained within this subfield of the discipline. However, as Evelyn Glenn (1987:349) points out, equating women and the family is quite different from making women's experience a central focus in the analysis of the family or from understanding how gender organizes family experience. According to Glenn, the sociological study of the family traditionally defined as inevitable and immutable, the position of women as housewives and mothers, the outcome of both biological characteristics and unchanging social needs. Further, in this view, the family was not a collection of individuals with different experiences, resources, and needs, but a group based on unitary interests and consensus. As a result, women's roles were not analyzed as outcomes of specific historical developments and social arrangements, and women's experience of these roles was not deemed worthy of analysis.

In contrast, a feminist perspective requires that women's (and men's) position in the family and the impact of specific family arrangements on the lives of women and men be made the focus of analysis. This approach has many and far-reaching consequences. For example, conceptualizing men's and women's roles in the family as the product of specific social arrangements allows one to discover the diversity of family forms and opens the way for including cohabiting couples, childlessness, and single-parent households in the study of the family. This approach also allows one to see the roles of men and women in the family as social constructions rather than as unchanging or natural and opens the way to an examination of variation in these roles. Similarly, focusing on family members as individuals allows one to discover the different ways in which men and women have experienced the family and allows one to consider such previously ignored topics as housework, widowhood, and power and inequality in family relationships (Komarovsky, 1988:590; Glenn, 1987:362).

An extended example may help clarify the reorienting effect of feminist scholarship on the study of the family. Prior to the 1960s, many sociologists considered the division of labor in the family between men as breadwinners and women as child rearers and homemakers to be ideally suited for a society in which paid work and the family had become largely differentiated. Although some gave passing recognition to the strains created for women by a division of labor that isolated them from the occupational world, the experiences of women in the family were basically ignored because of the presumed functionality of these gender roles (Komarovsky, 1988:586). However, when feminist scholars began to examine the lives of women as wives and mothers, many important discoveries