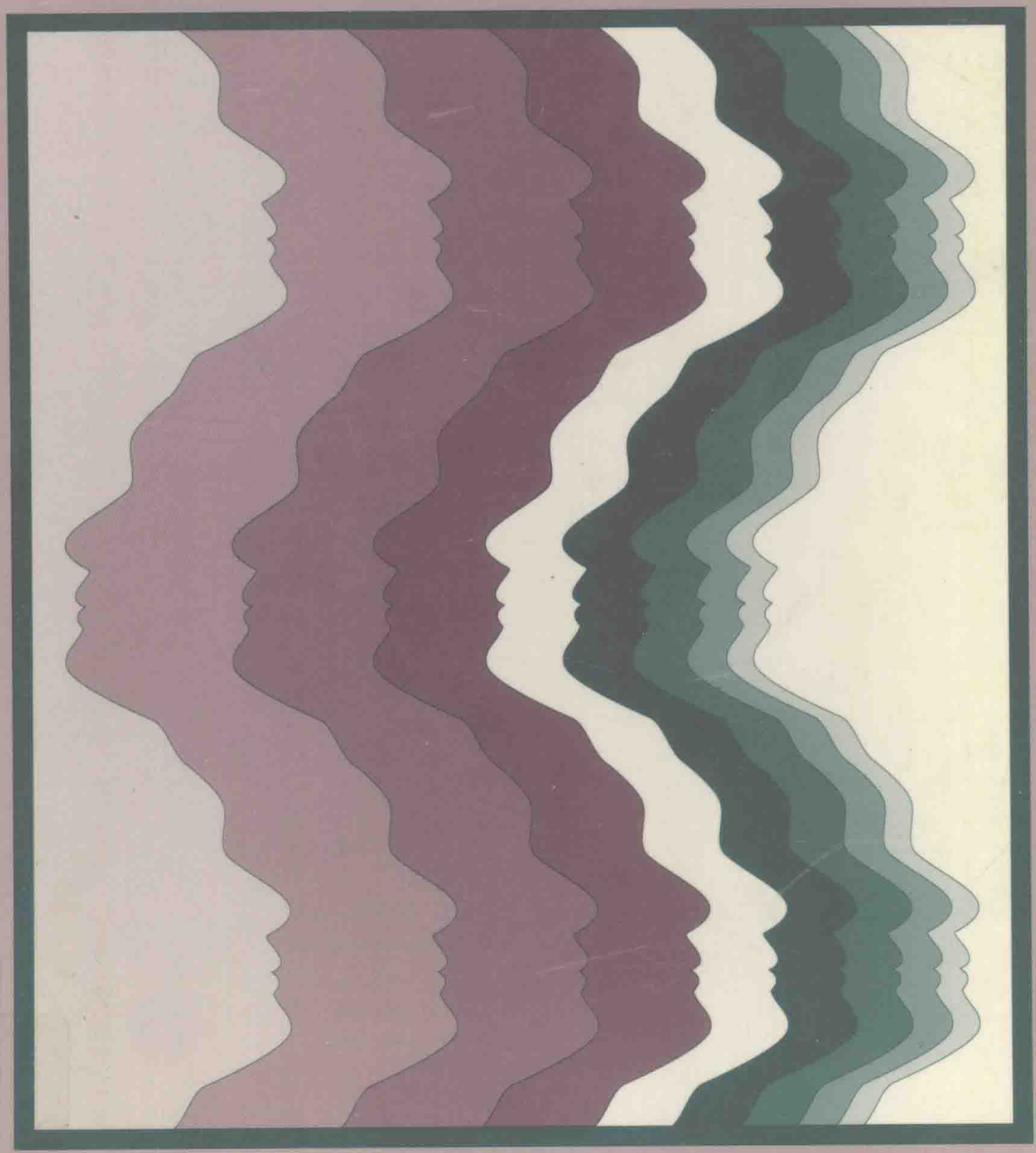
Marriage and Family

in Transition



Marriage and Family in Transition

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—J. N. E.

For Mom, Leslie, Michael, and Brian
—D. H. D.

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Foreword

AS A STUDENT enrolled in a marriage or family course, you will find between the covers of this book a set of articles that is both interesting and unique. You will find the book interesting because the articles commence by focusing on premarital relations and then proceed on to marriage itself as it changes over the life course. Divorce and remarriage have become the norm in Western society, and this fact is reflected in the contents of the book.

I know that great care has gone into the selection of the materials. Not only are the selections from some of the leading social science publications, but they were chosen because they are well written, thorough, and imaginative.

In the editors' comments that introduce each section, comparative and historical research have been summarized and brought to bear on the topic. This increases the scope of the book and fills in important areas you will find of interest.

From your own experience, you know that the family changes in some ways and remains remarkably consistent in others as people progress through the life cycle. These changes and consistencies are amply covered in the readings. It should be easy for you to relate these materials to your own experience.

The final section of this anthology offers a glimpse of the future. The institutions of marriage and family are going through a number of profound changes. As a result, family policy has become the center of much debate. Legislators, lobbyists, and citizens alike have a stake in the decisions and their consequences. The contents of this volume should aid you in understanding the source of the debate and the possible outcomes of legislative action.

Whether you are planning to work in human services where families are a key component, or you want to become informed about marriage and family for personal reasons, you will find the materials in this book helpful in preparing for the future.

Alan Booth

Preface

THIS BOOK GROWS out of our many years of collective experience in teaching undergraduate courses on marriage and the family, subjects of infinite fascination to us. Marriage and the family provide the most important relationships in most people's lives, and understanding how these relationships are affected by the social context—and how they in turn affect that context—is a fundamental issue.

One of the most obvious, but least understood, aspects of family life today is its changing character. For this reason, we have selected articles that emphasize the nature of the many transitions people are experiencing today in their marriages and family relations. These changes are affecting not only the ways in which people go about finding a mate but are altering the nature of the relationships formed in marrying and becoming parents. While there are many historical continuities in marriage and the family, it is change that people find most problematic in their daily lives.

Our understanding of marriage and the family is enriched by viewing these relationships in a life-cycle or life-course perspective. This perspective, which we hope most instructors will find compatible with their own approach to teaching about marriage and the family, makes explicit the transitional character of intimate relationships.

Following from the life-course perspective, we have divided the book into four major parts. Part One deals with the formation of intimate relationships, and the articles in this section discuss various aspects of dating. Part Two contains selections on marriage and parent-child relations over the life cycle. In Part Three, we provide several selections concerning divorce and its aftermath, including remarriage and the formation of stepfamilies. In devoting equal space to marital dissolution and its consequences, we provide students with a broad range of materials on events that increasingly touch their lives and are an ever more prevalent part of the typical family life cycle. The final section of the book, Part Four, deals with alternatives to monogamous marriage and a few of the impending issues bearing on future families. Throughout the book, we have deliberately included selections that discuss the "darker side" of dating, marriage, and divorce to provide some balance to what we view as the rather saccharine treatments that some textbooks give to contemporary family life. In order to facilitate use of the selections, a correlation chart appears at the end of the anthology keying each reading to the relevant chapters of some of the most widely used texts.

Preceding each major section, there is a brief editors' introduction, which attempts to give a broad overview of the topics discussed in the articles to follow. Especially in the first three parts, we have tried to provide an historical and cultural perspective to marriage and family relationships in the United States. Diversity in dating, marriage, and divorce is also emphasized, particularly in terms of how these phenomena vary by race, social class, and gender. Instructors may wish to elaborate

on these introductions, for we believe that only by understanding the historical and cultural context in which we live can we begin to grasp the meaning of the marital and family transitions taking place around us.

In compiling these readings, we have incurred several debts. We are grateful to the authors and their publishers who permitted us to include their works. We thank Elaine David, Barbara Peters, Paula DuPrey, Carolyn Vaughan, and Anna Zajicek-Wagemann for their invaluable assistance in collecting and preparing the materials for this book. We are grateful for the constructive comments and suggestions of the reviewers: Barbara Risman at North Carolina State University, Rita Phylliss Sakitt at Suffolk County Community College, and Constance Sheehan at the University of Florida. Annette Joseph ably guided the production of the manuscript, and we wish to express our appreciation to Karen Hanson, sociology editor of Allyn and Bacon, for her enthusiastic support throughout the project.

J. N. E.
D. H. D.

Contents

Marriage over the Life Cycle

Parent-Child Relations over the Life Cycle

PART THREE DISSOLUTION AND ITS AFTERMATH

Divorce: Its Causes and Consequences

The Second Time Around: Remarriage and Stepfamilies

PART FOUR INTIMATE ALTERNATIVES AND ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

Introduction: Dating, Marriage, and Divorce in the 1990s

VALUES AND ATTITUDES concerning marriage and family life changed dramatically in the three decades from the late 1950s to the late 1980s. In the United States, opposition to abortion and divorce weakened, while singlehood, cohabitation, childlessness, premarital and extramarital sexual relations, and egalitarian gender roles became widely endorsed (Thornton, 1989). The reasons for these changes are many, and the consequences are profound. We briefly discuss some of the major reasons why our ideas about family life have changed so dramatically, and we then highlight some of the consequences for individuals and families moving through the family life cycle in the 1990s and beyond.

An important dimension of the changing social fabric is the increasing emphasis on individual interests and aspirations. Through the 1960s and 1970s, several countercultural movements generated national awareness of hedonistic values and self-fulfillment, facilitating what social psychologists refer to as a "me" orientation. One of the ramifications of individualism is that people can lose sight of social commitments and responsibilities, in a sense detaching themselves from social relationships and institutions, such as marriage and family. While people continue to value and to derive satisfaction from marriage, parenthood, and family life, today there is greater tolerance of individual choice in deciding whether and when to marry, whether and when to have children, and whether to remain married or divorce. In a penetrating analysis of modern American society, Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985) conclude that there are at least two ways of viewing this more tolerant atmosphere:

> To the extent that this new atmosphere creates more sensitive, more open, more intense, more loving relationships, as it seems to have done, it is an achievement of which

> Americans can justly be proud. To the extent that the new atmosphere renders those same relationships fragile and vulnerable, it threatens to undermine those very achievements. (p. 110)

Marriage and family life have been influenced by a number of other social changes as well. The women's movement focused attention on women's rights to educational and occupational equality, and dual-earner marriages replaced traditional male-breadwinner families as the norm in American society. Abortion and divorce laws were liberalized, the birth rate fell to 1.8 children for every married woman, and religion became much less important in the lives of many Americans.

What does all this mean? What are the consequences of rapidly changing values, social expectations, and household composition? History tells us that the importance of the family as a source of social integration and social support waxes and wanes over time, and as we enter the 1990s there is every indication that marriage and parenthood will continue to be highly valued. There is also reason to believe that people will continue to have very high expectations for passionate and romantic marriages and for harmonious families that provide a nostalgic and peaceful haven of love and tenderness. At the same time, however, most people are not willing to invest substantial amounts of time and energy in pursuit of meaningful and rewarding intimate relationships, the consequences of which include marital conflict, dissatisfaction, instability, and divorce.

The guiding assumption of this book is that dating, marriage, and divorce are life-cycle phenomena; that is, marriage and family relationships can be understood by examining the trajectories of these relationships and by examining families in their social context. The family life-cycle perspective emphasizes that families change over time as individuals and families progress through a sequence of developmental stages. At each stage there are developmental tasks that must be accomplished before making the transition to the next stage. The transition to parenthood, for example, is smoother for couples who are able to make the adjustments to marriage successfully. As children and adults mature, develop, and age, their relationships change. It is also important to note that developmental processes unfold in a social context complete with socially constructed timetables for appropriate behavior.

Many of the idealistic and overly romanticized notions of marriage and family life are learned in early socialization experiences and are crystallized in the dating process, thereby influencing dating relationships and mate-selection decisions. To better understand how these processes are set in motion, let's consider the social context of dating in the 1990s.

DATING

During adolescence and young adulthood, ideas of marriage and family life are molded by parents, peers, television sitcoms, soap operas, and love stories, as well as rock and roll lyrics. Although definitions of gender-appropriate behavior have

broadened in the past three decades, one of the most pervasive messages delivered through the popular culture is that there are separate roles for males and females. Males are expected to be in control, strong, dominant, assertive, and sexually active, while females are expected to be passive, submissive, physically and interpersonally attractive, nurturant, thoughtful, and understanding. For females, especially, the importance of romantic attachments is communicated in Hollywood movies, romance novels, and rock lyrics, such as "I can't live without you," and "I can't get over you." For males, the corresponding message in the popular culture is that love is desirable but not essential, that a real man doesn't need a woman, at least he doesn't need a *relationship* with a woman.

Norms regarding premarital sexual behavior became much more permissive in the 1960s and 1970s, with high rates of premarital sexual intercourse continuing in the 1980s. By age eighteen, two out of three boys and two out of five girls have experienced sexual intercourse (Dornbusch, 1989). Black adolescents become sexually active earlier than their white counterparts, and sporadic use of contraceptives among both groups leads to alarming rates of teenage pregnancy and childbearing.

The contradiction for most adolescents and young adults involved in heterosexual relationships is that males and females bring different expectations to their relationships: Males are encouraged to seek sex but not necessarily a relationship and females are encouraged to seek relationships, preferably without sex. Although many males and females do not conform exactly or entirely to these stereotypes, there are numerous situations in which dating partners act out these expectations, with a definite power imbalance to the males' advantage. Different expectations and priorities strain communication in dating relationships, and when expectations are not fulfilled, violence often results. Contrary to the stereotype of romantic and pleasure-oriented dating relationships, approximately one out of four college women report that they have experienced some form of physical violence or sexual assault, often date or acquaintance rape.

Males and females also take different approaches in evaluating relationships and deciding whether to continue dating or to dissolve the relationship. Again our stereotypes are misleading: Females are depicted as emotional and capable of being "swept away" by their suitors; males are portrayed as strong, rational, and realistic. However, research demonstrates that females are more cautious and practical in making commitments, and males are more romantic in the sense of wanting to keep the relationship together. As we illustrate in Part One of this book, the unrealistic and idealistic expectations that dating partners and cohabiting couples bring to relationships have profound consequences for decisions regarding mate selection. Moreover, these expectations also have long-term implications for the dynamics of marital relationships themselves.

MARRIAGE

Marriage has changed dramatically over the last few decades. The cohort of young men and women who married in the 1980s waited longer to marry and waited longer

to have children than their predecessors. They are having fewer children, more of the wives are working outside the home, and both men and women can expect to live longer than previous generations. The rapid pace of social, demographic, and technological change has profoundly altered the family life cycle, creating discontinuities between the values, life styles, and social expectations of the succeeding generations.

Compared to couples who married for the first time during the 1950s and 1960s, couples who began their marriages in the 1970s and 1980s devote much less time to raising children, and they spend significantly greater amounts of time looking after their elderly parents. Despite changing gender roles, women are still expected to do most of the caregiving, for both their children and their parents. Research evidence clearly demonstrates that wives still do most of the caregiving, even though there are increased demands on their time because of employment outside the home. Changing gender roles have influenced our expectations regarding what men should do as fathers. But even as fathers engage in a wider range of parenting behaviors than previously, in most contemporary families it is the mothers who are more directly involved in childrearing responsibilities.

Changing gender roles have led to greater flexibility, but these changes have not uniformly permeated the society. The movement from traditional to more egalitarian gender roles is largely a white, middle-class phenomenon. Among working-class whites, and among blacks and Hispanics, traditional gender roles prevail. Even in the segment of society where the most change has occurred—white, middle-class, dual-earner families—there are strong reminders of a patriarchal society in which males are dominant and females are subordinate. Husbands are expected to fulfill instrumental roles: They exert the most power in the family, make the important decisions, and serve as financial providers. Wives, even those who work outside the home, are generally expected to be the social-emotional leaders of the family, to be nurturant and passive. As these arrangements are challenged, there are profound consequences for marriage and family relations, as well as for the wider society.

There are also important consequences associated with the new norm of dual-earner marriages. Both husbands and wives invest substantial amounts of time and energy in work-related activities, draining resources that could otherwise be devoted to the marital relationship. The time that marriage partners do spend together is disrupted by negotiations over household tasks and childrearing responsibilities. Marital communication is strained, leisure time and "quality time" are rare, sexual frequency declines after the initial years of marriage, and marital conflict is common. Dissatisfaction with marriage and with sexual relations also may lead spouses to look beyond the marriage for stimulation in the form of extramarital sex. Another consequence of strained marital and family relations is the alarming incidence of family violence, most notably wife abuse and child abuse.

In studying the family life cycle, we find that relationships among family members are strongly influenced by age-graded social expectations and developmental processes. In the early years of marriage, when romantic feelings are normally intense, spouses are required to make a series of adjustments associated with living together on a daily basis. Routines and procedures are established for a wide range of behaviors, including family decision-making, work schedules, a domestic division

of labor, recreational activities, and sexual relations. Nine out of ten couples decide to have children, creating additional stresses on the couple's intimate relationship. Although children provide meaningful sources of happiness and social support, the emotional and financial resources required to raise children in modern society means that there are fewer resources available to invest in the marital relationship. Many young, dual-earner (mostly middle-class) couples opt to send their children to daycare, further reducing the amount of time children spend with their parents and sparking national concern about the effects daycare has on children's development during the "formative years."

First marriages that endure beyond a decade encounter a fresh set of challenges and transitions. Often, varying degrees of stability, momentum, and inertia characterize marriage during this stage. Children become involved in a variety of extrafamilial contexts—especially during adolescence—spending most of their time in school, with peers, and enjoying extracurricular activities. But for adults during the midlife years, the freedom they gain from the growing independence of their teenage children is accompanied by the increasing dependence of their aging parents. Middle-aged women, especially, often feel obligated to reverse parent-child roles and do whatever they can to provide personal care and emotional support for their aging parents. Once dependent-aged children leave home and parents enjoy an "empty nest," the marital relationship typically regains some of its privacy and spontaneity, and couples at this stage report increasing levels of marital satisfaction through the retirement years.

Grandparenthood has emerged as a major family role in the late twentieth century. Usually spanning the middle-adult and late-adult years, grandparenting can be a very gratifying social role. Although many grandparents are unable to spend as much time with their children and grandchildren as they would like—largely as a result of social and geographical mobility—other grandparents are actively involved. Many grandparents find that the time they spend with the younger generations is pleasurable. They can play with young children or watch their grandchildren in recreational activities and leave the disciplining to the children's parents! However, contrary to myth, older adults also derive satisfaction from many other activities, notably leisure time spent with each other and sexual relations.

A high percentage of marriages are terminated by death (as opposed to separation or divorce), with most postmarital families headed by widows aged sixty-five and over. Widowhood is a difficult transition that often presents severe emotional and financial difficulties. Widows and widowers commonly experience loneliness, social isolation and depression. At the same time, they must make numerous adjustments to restructure their social networks and their lives. For a small minority, widowhood, as a major social status, ends with remarriage, marking the beginning of another family life cycle.

DIVORCE

The divorce rate in the United States accelerated rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, then stabilized in the 1980s. At the current rate, however, one of every two marriages

initiated in the 1990s will end in divorce. Because many people view divorce as a serious threat to the American family, it is important to address several questions: What kinds of marriages are most prone to divorce, how are men and women affected as they dissolve their marriages, how does divorce affect children, how are remarriages different from first marriages, and what kinds of relationships exist in stepfamilies?

In terms of proneness to divorce, couples who marry very young (especially teenagers, but also couples who marry in their early twenties) are more vulnerable than couples who marry in their mid- to late twenties. Marrying at a later age allows individuals to mature, learn about themselves, make more realistic judgments of their partners, complete their education, and prepare themselves occupationally. Further, couples who have been married a long time are less vulnerable to divorce than couples who only have been married a few years. Research on marital instability and divorce indicates that accumulation of assets (e.g., home, cars, savings) is an important factor in keeping marriages together.

When divorce occurs, the experience is usually an unpleasant and stressful one for spouses and children alike. Interpersonal problems and tensions in the nuclear family broaden, even intensify, as friends and relatives are drawn into a typically conflictual situation and are themselves divided along various lines. Emotional wounds are compounded by legal complexities and financial considerations involving custody, visitation, and the division of assets. Emotional adjustments are typically easier for the spouse who initiates the divorce than for his or her partner, and older children typically have an easier time adjusting than younger children. Unhappily, the financial consequences suffered by women and children in single-parent families can be both severe and longlasting.

Because divorce terminates the marital relationship, in many ways it signifies the end of the family life cycle. But, in other ways, divorce can be viewed as reorganizing old relationships and setting the stage for new relationships. Currently, five out of six divorced men and three out of four divorced women remarry, with most remarriages involving young children. Blended or reconstituted families are formed, creating new family life cycles. Research indicates that marital quality is quite comparable in remarriages as compared to first marriages, but stepfamily life presents a fresh set of challenges. The norms are unclear for stepparents and stepchildren, stepsiblings and half-siblings, straining interaction and contributing to higher divorce rates for remarriages than for first marriages.

In sum, dating, marriage, and divorce are social processes embedded in the family life cycle. As individuals engage in these processes, they simultaneously progress through periods of social and historical change, individual and family development. Lifelong socialization processes accompany the acquisition of new roles, while long-held roles are transformed or lost, generating continuities and discontinuities, transitions and disruptions through the life course. Parts One through Three of this book are organized to illustrate the dynamics of dating, marriage, and divorce. They highlight the intricate ways in which these three processes are interrelated. In Part Four, we address some of the commonly practiced alternatives

to traditional marriage and family arrangements and explore the possible consequences and implications of emerging patterns of family life as we approach the twenty-first century.

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