

Preface

You'd have a hard time finding a topic as emotionally compelling and as personally interesting to people as family. Tell folks you're writing a book about families and you're bound to hear some anecdote ("My family's nuts! You should write about them."), an opinion about a family-related social problem ("See how out-of-control kids are today? It's because parents aren't disciplining them enough. You should write about something useful like *that!*"), or a request for advice ("I hope this book of yours will tell me how I can get my son to help with the dishes without me having to ask all the time.").

Everybody, it seems, has something to say or some strong feeling about families. Whether spoken of reverently as the moral foundation of society or referred to disparagingly as the greatest obstacle to happiness and freedom by some rebellious teenager, "family" permeates our lives and defines who we are as a culture like no other institution.

Type the word "families" into an Internet search engine and you'll discover hundreds of categories and thousands of sites devoted to some component of families, whether it's academic research on some feature of family life (marriage, divorce, children, and so on), the positions of political interest groups devoted to some family issue, or services provided by nonprofit family organizations. Move beyond these organizational sites and you'll find something even more interesting: thousands of *personal* family Web sites—individual families simply presenting information about . . . well . . . themselves.

Many of these sites present the sort of personal information you typically see in those letters some people stuff in their Christmas cards each year. You know, "Fred finally got his real estate license and we couldn't be prouder"; "Suzie loves her new position as goalkeeper on the travel soccer team"; "Our trip to Disneyworld was a dream come true." Some contain elaborate digital family photo albums with pictures of weddings, christenings, bar mitzvahs, children's softball games, prom night, beloved pets, summer vacations, and so on. Others offer even deeper peeks into people's private lives by providing detailed family trees, religious testimonials, political opinions, downloadable copies of wedding vows, or favorite cookie recipes.

What do you suppose would motivate people to open up the intimate details of their families to the vast, anonymous world of the Internet? It's not as if there are all these people out there dying to know about Joe and Martha Klotzman's fondness for Tupperware parties. Instead, the Klotzmans and others are taking this technological opportunity to make a public statement about their commitment to and pride in their families.

Highlighting the importance of family in people's lives is nothing new. For as long as there have been people pondering the human condition, there have been scholars, poets, novelists, musicians, and clergy examining, studying, celebrating, bemoaning, and making predictions and writing about every conceivable aspect of family life. Open a newspaper or turn on a television and you'll find no shortage of contemporary "experts"—from Dear Abby to Dr. Phil—who are more than willing to offer their two cents about the joys and sorrows of families. So how does one write about something so eternally important without treading over well-worn ground?

THE STORY

I knew from the start that I didn't want this book simply to be an encyclopedia of information that would be useful only in the context of a college course and thus easily discarded at the end of the semester. I wanted it to be a sort of intellectual guidebook—not only *informative* in terms of current sociological knowledge of families, but *meaningful* in terms of contemporary family debates and *applicable* to students' own family experiences. In other words, I wanted to write a book that would connect to people's personal lives while, at the same time, showing how sociologists understand and explain families.

That may sound simple, but it turned out to be a formidable task. One of the challenges I faced is that a student's first college textbook on family—or first course on family, for that matter—is never his or her introduction to the topic of family. Everybody has grown up in one type of family or another. Consequently, all students bring with them a lifetime's worth of personal information, data, values, expectations, and assumptions. Most have some experience with siblings or grandparents or cousins. Many have seen their parents divorce and remarry. Some have even formed their own families. Indeed, when it comes to a topic like family, everyone is a potential expert.

With such direct knowledge come some deeply held beliefs about what a family is and how it should work. These preconceived notions pose an interesting dilemma to instructors—and, by extension, to textbook authors. Certainly we want our students to see their own experiences in the material we present. I've found in my own classes that students are more engaged and learn more when they find the subject matter immediately relevant to their lives.

But at the same time we all want our classes and our textbooks to be more than just an album of personally familiar snippets of family life. That "it-happens-to-me-therefore-it-must-be-true-for-everyone" approach to family-related topics can be a serious obstacle to learning. Classroom discussions that stay at this level become merely exchanges of personal yarns, and little is learned about understanding the subject sociologically.

A textbook on family must go beyond simply telling stories that students can relate to. It must show how professional scholars go about understanding the social patterns that underlie those family matters that everyone seems to have some experience with or some opinion about. A textbook should provide the intellectual tools needed to *understand* the broader social implications of family experiences, *appreciate* the applicability of the sociological perspective to people's everyday lives, and critically *evaluate* the social information about families that bombards us every day. In short, it must strike a balance between the personal and emotional relevance of the material on one hand and scholarly analysis of it on the other.

THE PHILOSOPHY

Sociologists may have many things in common, but our assumptions, perspectives, and attitudes can be quite different. Some sociologists focus on broad demographic information about large groups of people; others concentrate on the everyday interpersonal experiences of individuals. Some write from a specific political position or theoretical perspective; others are more pluralistic in the ideologies and theories they use.

This book reflects my sociological perspective—one that draws heavily on the interrelationship between the everyday experiences of individuals and the society in which they live. I believe family is both an individually lived experience and a systematic social institution. Our private lives are always a combination of the idiosyncrasies of the family to which we belong and the broader social rules and expectations associated with families in general. In that sense, our families are strongly influenced by large-scale social forces like culture, history, economics, politics, religion, the media, and so on.

However, we, as individuals, are also vital contributors to structural forces that influence our lives. I will argue that much of what we experience in our families is a product of negotiation, whether at the cultural/political level or the level of individuals. Sociologists refer to this approach as a *constructionist* perspective. Whether we're talking about whom we consider our relatives, how to start (or end) an intimate relationship, how to give birth, what it means to be a child or an adolescent, how to balance the demands of work and family, or what we take for granted as "appropriate" family behavior, we actively give meaning to "family" in our everyday experiences. Moreover, as individuals, couples, or groups, we can, through our actions, change, modify, or reinforce existing elements of family.

THE DESIGN

I have organized this book into five parts, each with a unique theme and purpose. Part I, *Families and Society*, contains three chapters that provide a broad foundation for examining the specific aspects of family life that will come later in the book. In these chapters, I explore important questions such as "What is a family?" "What is the current health of families?" and "How do sociologists study families?" Part II, *Families and Social Inequalities*, looks at the impact that race, gender, and social class have on family life, both as sources of personal and group identity and as sources of inequality. Part III, *Families and Relationships*, focuses on how people establish intimate relationships, how they live within them, and how they balance their demands with the demands of work. Part IV, *Families Over the Life Course*, examines some of the important developmental stages that people face: the entry into parenthood, the experiences of childhood and adolescence, and the strains of adulthood and later life. Finally, Part V, *Families and Challenges*, looks at the problems and difficulties many families face (violence and divorce). The closing chapter peers ahead and examines the challenges families will likely face in the future.

Despite the five-part organization of this book, you will quickly notice that all the parts are interrelated. One of the difficulties in writing a book on family is that family matters don't align neatly in distinct and conceptually independent chapters. For instance, you can't talk about relationship formation, the dynamics of marriage, the balance of work and family, children and child rearing, and so on without taking gender, race, and social class into consideration. A topic like divorce is closely related to

economics, child rearing, work, social policy, perhaps even intimate violence. Hence you'll notice that within a particular chapter I often reference similar material found in other chapters. Rather than calling attention to my redundancy, these references reinforce the interconnectedness of family experiences.

A few common stylistic elements can be found in all of the chapters. For instance, each begins with an anecdote—sometimes from current events and sometimes from my own life—that illustrates the key theme of that chapter. Throughout the book, key terms are highlighted in the margin. In addition, all of the chapters include a summary of key points at the end, to clarify important concepts, ideas, or theories. Finally, each concludes with a section, called *What Does It All Mean?* This section is designed not just to summarize what students read in the chapter but to get them to think critically about the material. I envision these sections as sources of classroom conversations and discussions.

The Special Features

The trend in textbooks these days is to stuff them with as many special features as is possible. Often these components are visually distinct from the main text. But with so many of them, it can be difficult to determine where the main text ends the special section begins. I've designed the special features in this book to be less conspicuous and intrusive while at the same time providing additional useful information or opportunities for active learning:

- *Taking a Closer Look* features provide an in-depth look at a specific example of information presented in the chapter or a discussion of an important piece of research.
- *Going Global* features explore family-related phenomena as experienced in other cultures.
- Most of the carefully selected photographs in the book convey important information by painting provocative sociological portraits of family life. In some chapters, I have included multipage photographic essays—extended treatments of an issue raised in the chapter. Other photographs briefly illustrate the connections between family life and legal or policy issues. As students study these visual features, they will be practicing the skills of observation that can make them more astute participants in their own families and in the social world at large.
- Each chapter ends with an exercise called *See for Yourself* that encourages students to study the “real world,” much as professional sociologists do, to get a better understanding of the similarities and differences among families. These exercises—akin to mini-data-gathering ventures—give students an opportunity to actively engage information from the chapter. They range from systematic observational exercises to content analyses to brief interviews. Some of these exercises require more of a time investment than others, and instructors can condense, modify, or otherwise tailor the exercises to suit their interests, needs, and goals.

Words

As sociologists, we know the power of language in shaping ideas, values, and attitudes. I have tried to be very careful in my choice of terminology. Consider, for instance, the title of this book: *Families: A Sociological Perspective*. You will notice that I use the

word *Families* and not *The Family*. One of the key themes of this book is that families are extremely diverse in form and function. No single family structure can serve as a prototype for everyone. Hence in the title and throughout the book I have opted for the more inclusive (and I think more accurate) term “families.” Only when referring to the *institution* of family or referring to a specific family (for example, “When she became the head of the family . . .”) do I use “the family.”

RESOURCES FOR INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS

An array of electronic resources is available for extending the concepts and pedagogical methods of the book. The Web site for this book (www.mhhe.com/newman1) contains a variety of resources for instructors and students, including chapter quizzes with feedback, key terms, Powerpoint slides, and the instructor’s manual and test bank.