

≈ Introduction

Analyzing Families with a Feminist Sociological Imagination

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Imagine a family photo—of a wedding, of a holiday gathering, of a picnic at the beach. Who are these people? What is their relationship to one another? How do they feel about one another? Where were they the day before the photo was taken? Although a snapshot may provide a lot of information, the “Big Family Picture” lies outside the frame. What is the income of this family? How does their income influence the size of the wedding? Or where and how do they spend their summer vacation, if indeed they have one at all? We need to know the immediate circumstances in which the photograph was taken as well as the larger political, economic, and cultural worlds in which these people live. What would we see if we turned a page in the family album? Do some people disappear from the photographs? Has divorce, death, or separation removed someone from the family constellation? What new faces appear? Births, deaths, weddings, and family feuds change the particular picture of family but are evident only when looking at the collectivity of photographs over time. And we can only understand that visual collection

by placing it within a historical moment, an economic system, a political process that shape what is possible in family life.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959:3) once wrote: “Neither the life of an individual, nor the history of a society, can be understood without understanding both.” In this collection of readings, we apply Mills’s insight to the study of families in the United States. To understand families we place them in their social and historical context—and to understand this society, we study the families within it. This moves us toward answers to the questions we posed about the snapshot. Mills called this approach “the sociological imagination.” We expand his approach by analyzing the differing relationship of men and women to work, privilege, and power both inside and outside the family. We posit a feminist sociological imagination as the most illuminating way to study families.

Using rich ethnographic field work, in-depth interviews, historical analyses, and nuanced quantitative analyses, the authors in this book trace the interconnections of fami-

lies and social structure. Our collective analysis begins with the knowledge that the organization of work influences the possibilities for finding employment, for earning a living wage, for advancing in a career, for affording education, and in turn, for making a satisfying family life. But despite the power of economic processes and social institutions to shape the parameters of what is possible, individuals engage in relationships and take action. They strategize to find resources for their families; they seek satisfaction for their souls; they make decisions that have consequences in the marketplace and in the political arena. In addition to anchoring families in a larger context, the articles in this reader analyze the complexity of kin relationships and chart the peaks and valleys of emotional life.

This collection is about families in the United States. While there is much to be learned from looking at families internationally, we have chosen to concentrate on presenting a textured portrait of family life in one country. There are three advantages to our focus on families in the United States: (1) we investigate fully the influence of the dominant *culture and social structure* within shared geographical, political, and social boundaries; (2) we explore the direct relationship between the *privileged circumstances* of some families and the *disadvantaged positions* of other families; and (3) we deepen our understanding of the *experiences of individuals* within families as they differ by race-ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, gender, or culture.

To study families with a feminist sociological imagination, we integrate the following analyses: (1) of structural inequality within society, (2) of power within the family, (3) of the connections between families and kinship systems, and (4) of change over time. These four analytic fields run through each of the six parts of the book. Below, we briefly elaborate on each of these areas of analysis.

Structural Inequalities

All families do not share equal opportunities or equal conditions of living. Families, like individuals, occupy particular social locations in regard to race-ethnicity,¹ social class, and place in the life cycle. Therefore, the structure of everyday life within families, the meaning of relationships, and the effect of economic and social changes will vary with a family's social location.

The belief that the United States is a relatively class-less society and that most people are "middle class" camouflages a system of structural inequities that shapes family life. The assumption that upward mobility is possible for everyone in the "land of opportunity" leads some people to claim that those who do not succeed are not trying—they must be lazy, or stupid, or in some way unworthy. The ideology of equal opportunity portrays children who are born into poverty and those who are born into affluence as if they competed on a level playing field. A structure of opportunity in which children from poor families receive less education and African Americans earn a lower income than whites with the same education affects their respective families differently (U.S. Bureau of Census 1995). The ideology of equal opportunity ignores Mills's (1959) distinction between "private problems" and "public issues of social structure" because it locates social issues and their solutions *within* families. So, for example, poverty gets framed as a private problem caused by teenage mothers, divorce, or "dead-beat dads" rather than as a public issue caused by changes in government tax policies to favor the wealthy, or shifts in the economy, such as the export of jobs, corporate downsizing, and massive unemployment in some sectors of the population. Attention to patterned structural inequalities makes visible the connection between families and the society as a whole.

Domestic Politics: Power Within Families

Feminist scholarship launched a renaissance in family studies. Since the 1970s, scholars have taken a critical stance in investigating families, questioning the taken-for-granted and sparing no relationship from assessment. They have uncovered the painful underside of an institution popularly regarded as a "haven in a heartless world" (Lasch 1977). An inquiry into American history reveals that the greatest culprits of the mistreatment of children are their parents. And according to several authors in this volume (Barrett and McIntosh, Chapter 16; Demos, Chapter 49; and Straus, Chapter 48), this abuse and its toleration result from the misconception that children are private property. In heated debates about the nature of family violence, researchers may disagree about whether physical violence in the family amounts to "mutual combat," but they do not debate the statistics that show women, not men, as the vast majority of those who end up in emergency rooms with broken bones, lacerations, and serious injuries.

Feminist scholarship has explored the many ways that family life is gendered. That is, family processes often have asymmetrical outcomes for women and for men. Jessie Bernard writes that there are two marriages within every marriage: "his marriage" and "her marriage" (see Chapter 33). For example, no surprise to any working mother, studies have found that even women who work full time outside the home continue to do most of the housework. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1989) says this means that women work an extra month of twenty-four hour days every year.

In terms of parents and children, there may be a "child's family," a "mother's family," and a "father's family." Even siblings in the same household may experience and interpret their

For this reason, we must also link structures of racial inequality to those of economic opportunity. Attempts to represent the racial-ethnic and class diversity of families in this country have often taken a pluralistic approach. Studies of Korean American, African American, Mexican American, and immigrant families, to name a few, are often represented as alternatives to "The Family," which is presented as white, Euro-American, middle-class. In the best instances, they are celebrated as "different." In the worst instances, they are judged inadequate by the standards set for "The Family."

This pluralist approach to the racial-ethnic and class diversity of families has several key limitations. First, consistent with American pluralist politics, it is presented as a smorgasbord of different experiences and cultures. This focus on "difference" obscures the relationships between the social locations of families and ignores the problem of race and class privilege. The economically and socially privileged position of the upper-middle-class dual-earner couple is linked to the economic and social disadvantages of the immigrant woman who is paid to care for their children.

Second, the pluralist approach does not question the importance of middle-class status or whiteness in defining the "normative" family. White middle-class families are not just the norm from which all others depart. They too have a racial identity and occupy a class position.

Third, it does not challenge the idea that the most typical family form is a "breadwinning father" and "stay-at-home mother." All other families are then seen as somehow lacking and less than adequate when compared to this "norm."

Looking at all families with attention to their race-ethnicity and class emphasizes the connection between social structure and the organization of everyday life.

upbringing in very different ways. These differences are not simply products of individual variation. They are patterned differences, related both to power and authority within families and to larger economic, legal, and social structures.

The insight that families are gendered leads feminist scholars to examine women's and men's concrete experiences in families. In so doing, researchers have shifted the focus away from seeing women's family activities as the result of their "natural" expressiveness and nurturance. Instead, scholars investigate child rearing, feeding the family, organizing holiday celebrations, and the like, using the analytical category of "work." To describe these activities as "work" does not imply that they are necessarily unrewarding chores. On the contrary, people can take great pride in and reap meaningful rewards from their work. What the concept of "work" does imply is that women expend a great deal of effort in thinking about and executing these tasks. Further, analyzing what women do within the family as "work" enables scholars to conceptualize men's family activities also as "work." Men's labor force participation has been portrayed as the only thing men do for their families, overshadowing their other contributions.

Much is gained from applying the concept of "work" to family members' activities. The focus shifts from a description of activities to an analysis of the product of those activities. Much of this family "work" reproduces the family as a social institution. As di Leonardo illustrates in Chapter 31, keeping in touch with relatives by making telephone calls, sending birthday cards, visiting, and planning holiday gatherings constitutes "kin work," which reinforces family ties and maintains family networks. Monitoring one's marriage and "working" to keep the relationship strong is "marital work," as Hackstaff argues in Chapter 34. Approaching women's and men's family activities as "work" makes

visible the connections between individual actions and social institutions.

While it is important to analyze a family as a group, with its own identity and interests, it is also necessary to understand that families are made up of individuals. Within a family, individuals occupy distinct positions and may want dissimilar things. Not only do positions vary by gender, but they also vary by generation. As a result, the interests of various family members often conflict. For example, if a young woman born to a farming family in the mid-nineteenth century wanted to continue her education beyond the sixth grade, her desires may have conflicted with the household imperative. Her parents could see her labor as essential to the family economy and therefore deny her further schooling. The existence of conflict points to an important issue in our analysis: family life is not the same for each member of a family.

Families and Larger Kinship Systems

Families are not isolated units but exist as part of webs of kinship relations. "Kinship" is a system of rights and responsibilities between particular categories of people, for example, fathers and children, wives and husbands, and maternal aunts and their nephews and nieces. It is important to note that "kinship" refers not only to biological or legal connections between people but also to particular positions in a network of relationships.

Anthropologists distinguish between two kinds of kin: consanguineal kin, who are related by descent or "blood" (children, grandparents, siblings), and affinal kin, who are related by marriage (husband and wife, parents-in-law). Families and cultures differ in the importance they give to these different kinds of kin. Some families are organized around relationships of descent: for instance,

a man, his sons, and their sons; or adult sisters and brothers living together. Others organize kinship around relationships of marriage, a husband and a wife.

Most adults will eventually belong to both the families they were born into and the families they create as adults. Cultural groups vary, however, by how they organize the rights and responsibilities of family members along these two lines. In many African cultures, for example, the rights and responsibilities between generations are more central than those between wives and husbands (see Sudarkasa, Chapter 8).

Different cultures have various implicit and explicit rules and understandings about the rights and obligations between members of kinship groups. All cultures recognize that each person must have a place within a network of kin relations (see Stack and Burton, Chapter 30). In some cultures, for example, a woman's brother has important obligations toward his nieces and nephews. If the mother has no brother, someone else must step into that kinship position and take on the rights and obligations that come with it. The term "fictive kin" refers to the practice of including nonbiologically related people as kin in the web of rights and responsibilities (Stack 1974). For example, people in the United States often refer to friends of their parents as "uncles" and "aunts."

In the United States, however, the dominant cultural image of "The Family" is of a conjugal unit organized around the husband and wife and of a nuclear family in which husband, wife, and their children live together in their own household. Even our terminology reflects the centrality of the conjugal unit: Calling some relationships "premarital" implies that marriage is the inevitable end point; and calling some children "illegitimate" implies that the only "legitimate" children (those that count) are those born of a legal marriage. The nuclear family is the image pre-

sented in the popular media, the ideal embedded in most discussions of family policy, and the starting point in the majority of textbooks on the subject of families in the United States. But the increase in single-parent households, people living alone, and multiple-generation households makes the nuclear family household one form among many. And although many families may pass through a nuclear phase, households expand and contract with life-course changes and economic fluctuations. Individual families change over time; and the structure and content of families has changed historically. It is therefore inaccurate to limit research and discussion to nuclear family forms.

Because the conjugal nuclear family has been used as the social norm for describing "The Family," other family forms and other ways of organizing familial rights and responsibilities are described as failing to meet this norm and are often labeled as "deviant." Therefore, family stability has become equated with marital stability; adult children who live with their parents are described as having failed in the transition to adulthood; and in most states same-sex parents, unlike heterosexual couples, are denied the legal right to adopt.

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Historical Context: Change over Time

While the family must be understood in the context of kinship, structures of inequality, and internal inequities, none of these intersecting forces is static. The family is not universal; nor is it unchanging. The family must be culturally situated and placed within a historical moment. All societies and cultures have webs of kinship relationships, and the design of these webs changes over time and differs across cultures. And even if, looking backward in time, we see dimensions of eighteenth-century family life

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that seem familiar, we cannot assume that those features held the same meaning in 1776 as they do at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Studying change over time within a culture can uncover striking differences in human kinship arrangements. The meaning of childhood, even the ages that define childhood, has profoundly changed in the past two hundred years. Farm families of the early nineteenth century constituted an economic unit whose members were expected to work. Children made economic contributions to their household. An eight-year-old child was expected to gather eggs or weed in the garden or take care of an infant while his or her parents worked in the field. In a dramatic transformation from the economically productive child, the twentieth century witnessed the arrival of the "priceless child," who elicits deep emotional satisfaction and "costs" a great deal (Zelizer 1985). While the priceless child may occasionally take out the garbage, family well-being does not rise or fall on his or her reliability in doing chores. When we read about children in the eighteenth century, we must remember that their experience was very different from that of children today. Sensitivity to historical change challenges many assumptions about what seems "natural" or inevitable. Historical studies have taught us about changes over time in household composition, sexual behavior, the organization of motherhood, the rights and responsibilities of fatherhood, and the roles of siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. Families and kinship networks exist in a historical and social context; that is, they exist in a constant state of flux.

Defining a Critical Feminist Perspective

This anthology celebrates the renaissance of scholarship on families and embraces an ex-

plicitly feminist perspective on families. It does not intend to incorporate all feminist perspectives, but, rather, feminisms that recognize structural inequalities and that situate their analyses in historical context. Our feminist approach does not accept existing inequalities as inevitable. We apply a critical analysis to racial hierarchies and the unequal distribution of wealth and income, and to how these shape families.

Scholars and citizens alike have reacted to feminist criticism: "The Family," they say angrily, "Love it or leave it." But our critical perspective on the family does not translate into a rejection of the family. Despite some popular misconceptions, feminists neither hate men nor reject out-of-hand those characteristics—nurturing, caretaking, kinkeeping—associated with traditional femininity. Feminists care passionately about families. We believe that families can be satisfying places for people to live, grow, and love. But we acknowledge that families can simultaneously be arenas of conflict and exploitation. In the quest to overturn oppression and eliminate inequality, the goals of feminism include developing a full range of emotional capacities in all people and sharing the work of family life.

Not all the authors in *Families in the U.S.* subscribe to this kind of critical feminist perspective. In our judgment, however, their scholarship contributes to an important reconceptualizing of families and significantly advances the analysis of kinship and domestic politics.

NOTE

1. According to Baca Zinn, Chapter 3 in this volume, the use of race and ethnicity together points to the ways that groups of people are "labeled as races in the context of certain historical, social, and material conditions. Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans are racial groups that are formed, defined, and given meaning by a variety of

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1989. *The Second Shift*
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social forces in the wider society, most notably distinctive forms of labor exploitation. Each group is also bound together by ethnicity, that is, common ancestry and emergent cultural characteristics that are often used for coping with racial oppression. The concept racial-ethnic underscores the social construction of race and ethnicity for people of color in the United States" (note 1).

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