

## *Families in Context* Project Description

### **Project History and Goal**

I first thought about writing this book almost twenty years ago when I began teaching a marriage and family course in the sociology department. I had trouble finding a text that provided the kind of sociological approach I wanted, but that was well written and maintained student interest. In 1990 I sent a prospectus and two sample chapters to a few publishers. Both Dushkin and West offered a contract, and I elected to sign with the latter.

After a few years of writing and re-writing, the project was about to go into production. Then Wadsworth bought West. After another year or so, a new editor at Wadsworth decided they did not need another family text, and my project was dropped. After a cooling out period, I began revising the book for another company. After about a year, the editor I had been working with went away, and a new editor decided they did not want the book. I think my book is good, but may be hazardous to editors. I am quite pleased that Harcourt has agreed to help me produce the quality book I have been wanting to do for so long. Since I have benefited from the review process of more than one company, the manuscript is considerably better than the effort first accepted by West.

The major goal of the book is to introduce students to a sociological perspective of the institutions of marriage and the family. Diversity is not simply an insert gimmick in this text; *Families in Context* puts that diversity into social, historical, cultural, and theoretical context. Diverse family forms are not simply random variations, but occur in societies that also include economic, political, religious, and educational

institutions. The interconnections among the family and other institutions are the focus of much of the early part of the book, but are integrated throughout.

### **Plan of the Book**

Part One is a two-chapter introduction to the social-science of the family. Courses for which this text will be used have students with a variety of exposures to sociology and other social sciences. For students with no previous exposure, these two chapters provide an introduction to key concepts, theories, and methods used in social science. Students with a strong sociology background will benefit from the review of concepts provided here, since the theoretical and methodological perspectives are applied to the field of family sociology.

Part Two is a two-chapter historical analysis, using modes of production as the unifying analytic tool. These chapters emphasize the theme that the family institution is part of a larger society, and must be understood in that context. The relationship between the institution of the family and the institutions of religion, politics, and economics, is explored.

Part Three includes a three-chapter overview of contemporary families. The post-industrial work-family context, and the way families adjust to that institutional interaction, is the focus of Chapter Five. Chapter Six explores the concepts of social class and stratification, then puts the American family into that context. Chapter Seven provides the same kind of analysis of race and ethnicity.

Part Four provides more micro-level analysis of couple-formation. Chapter Eight explores the process of forming intimate relationships, while Chapter Nine looks more closely at the mate selection process. Chapter Ten puts the scripting model to its original use in an analysis of human sexuality.

Part Five considers issues involving construction of families. Chapter Eleven provides both macro- and micro-level analysis of reproduction, along with some biological coverage. Chapter Twelve covers marital adjustment and power, while Chapter Fourteen explores parent-child interactions.

Part Six concludes the text. Chapter Fourteen focuses on problems in families, especially those involving violence. A social-movements framework is used to analysis family violence. A similar approach is then partly used in Chapter Fifteen to look at divorce, remarriage, and step parenting. Finally, Chapter Sixteen uses projections into the future and policy issues as a way of summarizing the textbook.

### **Market Comparison**

Textbooks in the topical area of marriage and the family tend to fall toward one of two ends of a continuum. At one end are the sociology of the family texts that are heavily sociological, theoretical, and methodological. At the other are relationship, or “marriage and family” books, some of which focus on application and advise-giving. I think of *Families in Context* as a “sociology of marriage and family” textbook. It will thus be used in courses all along the continuum, but will more commonly be adopted for the “sociology of family” kinds of courses.

The “marriage and family” market is larger. Popular authors in this genre are Lamanna and Reidman (5th ed., Thomson/Wadsworth), Strong and Devault (6th ed., Thompson/West), Benokraitis (2nd ed., Prentice Hall), Bird and Melville (McGraw-Hill), Knox/Schacht (5th ed., Prentice Hall) and Schwartz and Scott (Prentice-Hall).

The text most similar to mine is Eshleman (Allyn & Bacon), now in its eighth edition. Like *Families in Context*, Eshleman crosses the two major markets, but is closer to the sociology of family end of the

continuum. I have used Eshleman most of the years I have taught in the field. I think my book is similar in coverage and content, but will be easier to read. I include some content, such as human sexuality, not extensively found in Eshleman. My text also incorporates more anthropological diversity than does Eshleman, and does a better job of applying the theoretical perspectives throughout the text.

A number of other texts are available at the “family sociology” end of the continuum. Notable among these are Collins and Coltrane ( Nelson Hall), Baca Zinn/Eitzen (Harper-Collins), Cherlin (McGraw-Hill) and Hutter (Allyn and Bacon).

Some texts are written from one particular theoretical perspective. In today’s market, this is most commonly the Marxist/conflict/feminist side of sociology. Such is the approach in Collins/Coltrane, Baca Zinn/Eitzen, Benokraitis, Yorburg, Aulette (Thomson/Wadsworth), Shehan/Kammeyer (Allyn Bacon) and several other texts. My text strives for a balanced presentation of perspectives. The text provides the groundwork upon which students and instructors can build their own opinions on such matters as the “Family Decline” debate.

In *Families in Context*, I attempt to combine the interest and writing style of many of the relationships kinds of books with the analytical and theoretical power of the more sociological texts. Some sociological concepts, admittedly, are sufficiently abstract that students will struggle with them regardless of how well they are presented. The understanding, however, should be worth the struggle.

### **Features of *Families in Context***

To paraphrase C. Wright Mills, sociology should invite students to think about their lives in a much broader context than they are used to, or than they expect when they enroll in a course. A good text should

do this. The sociological enterprise fascinates me as much today as it did twenty five years ago. I hope this book can convey that interest to this generation's college students.

I have added a new feature to this manuscript draft. In order to help connect the student's life to the chapter contents, I begin each chapter with a "Prelude." It will be a reference to popular culture or some other connection designed to help them understand the relevance of the chapter. Some chapters, such as Chapter Two about theory, are difficult to make "relevant" to students' lives. Perhaps this new feature will help.

Theoretical understanding is an important part of the book. One chapter is almost entirely devoted to sociological theory and methods, and topical coverage in other chapters is interwoven with theory. Methodological discussions are also spread throughout the text. Most chapters have a **Methods Study**, which is a discussion of a particular study or research approach that applies to the chapter at hand. Some of these compare the different conclusions that might be reached by studying a particular topic from different methodological approaches. One example is the comparison of the image of spouse abuse provided by Gelles, Steinmetz and Straus's work using the Conflict Tactics Scale, on the one hand, with the image portrayed by the work of Lenore Walker and others in the Battered Women's Movement.

The important topics of race/ethnicity and social class each have their own chapter, as well as being integrated into the other chapters where appropriate. Gender issues are discussed, from a variety of perspectives, throughout the text.

As a way of illustrating diversity, *Marriages and Families in Context* contains discussion of a number of groups. These include the Nayar, the Kibbutz, Sioux kinship patterns, the Roman Gens, Colonial America, the slave family, the Oneida community, and Mormons.

I am something of a logophile, and hope to share this interest with the students who read my book. Important word derivations will appear in the glossary and occasionally in the text. Putting the words in a context makes them easier to remember; it also introduces students to sociolinguistic analysis. Where key terms are first used, they are in bold type. Each term is also defined at the bottom of the page where it is introduced. In addition, there is an extensive glossary.

Another feature of *Families in Context* is the "Student Pre-Involvement" section. At the beginning of each chapter, a question is asked that engages the students in thinking about the topic as they read. Perhaps they will be defending their point of view as they read, or argue with the text, or recognize things they had not thought of had they not thought about the question ahead of time. In any case they are being more active as they read, which increases understanding and retention. At the end of the chapter, they are asked a "Student Post-Involvement" question, inviting them to go back and consider their original statement in light of the information they have just read. If the students actually engage in the suggested process, it should help them learn.

In addition to the extensive reference section at the end of the book, each chapter concludes with suggested readings. These references assist students in investigation the chapter topics in more depth, or from different perspectives.

Textbook lengths vary widely from fewer than 400 pages (Ishwaran) to well over 700 (Knox/Schacht). *Families in Context* will be somewhere toward the upper end of the continuum, perhaps 600 pages plus indexes, glossary, and references. This is sufficiently comprehensive to use as the sole text for the course, but can also accommodate a book of readings or other assignments, especially for courses taught at the upper division level.

I would like to personally be involved in creation of an instructor's manual and test item file. One of the items in the instructor's manual will be a survey questionnaire designed for students to take early in the course. I have compiled national results of the surveys, which the students could compare to the responses from their own class. For example, NORC results compare life satisfaction scores for married vs. single respondents, men vs. women, blacks vs. whites, and for adults with and without children. These findings, compared with the students' own, provide an excellent basis for discussion and introduction to the course material. Instructors will of course be free to edit the surveys to fit the demographics of their classes.

Too many test banks are prepared by authors who are not experienced in construction of good questions. I have many years experience in the art, as well as an intimate knowledge of the text material. My involvement in the instructor's manual should be useful.

I have made Power Point slides for use in my own classes. They roughly parallel my manuscript, and could serve as the starting point for more professionally produced presentational aides. For ongoing interaction with students, I would be willing to put my e-mail and web page address in the text, or perhaps monitor a listserv of students and instructors using the text.

### **Production Schedule**

The complete manuscript has already been written and thoroughly revised. Photograph suggestions have been prepared for each chapter. In the fall of 1996, a small group of honors students used the manuscript for class. Part of their assignment was to make suggestions for improvement. They had some marvelous ideas that were incorporated into the most recent revision of the manuscript.

Some data and references would have to be updated, but a production-ready manuscript could be

submitted within a few months of signing a contract. After several years of work, I am anxious to see this book in print.

## Summary

Remarkable features of *Families in Context* are:

- \*Sociological coverage with a well-written, interesting style.
- \*"Preludes" precede each chapter.
- \*"Student involvement" exercises introduce and conclude each chapter.
- \*Comprehensive and balanced theoretical coverage that applies the common theoretical perspectives to a variety of topics.
- \*Extensive historical and cross-cultural coverage.
- \*Methods studies illustrate how sociologists define and research a variety of topics.
- \*Word definitions appear in footnotes, as well as in the glossary at the back of the book.
- \*Suggested readings conclude each chapter.
- \*An instructor's manual with lecture suggestions and chapter and unit exam questions.
- \*Power-Point slides and Listserv or web-based communication with students, instructors, and me.